INTERVIEW VII

DATE: April 17, 1990

INTERVIEWEE: DONALD J. CRONIN

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. Cronin's office, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: Let's start today with a discussion of some of the legislative issues in 1967. The Republicans had big gains in the 1966 off-year election. How did this affect the make-up or orientation in the Congress? Was Congress in 1967 inclined to be more resistant to the administration's proposals than it had been the year before?

C: It's difficult to pinpoint that particular year of course because we're going back nearly twenty-five years in general. And the short answer is, I don't specifically recall whether they were or were not more resistant, but in my own opinion this was not a period, as I recall, of heavy traffic legislatively. And I'm not really sure that during this period it would have made a whole lot of difference if there was more resistance because, as I remember them, these were not the great LBJ years insofar as activity. Civil rights, all these things you just enumerated--minimum wage and the whole nine yards--these really didn't come up in that period of time. So while I don't remember--which is the honest answer to the question you've asked--I doubt that it would have made a whole lot of difference.

G: By 1967 the Vietnam War had grown dramatically since mid-1965. Tell me about your perspective of the Vietnam policy during this period.

C: Well, this probably was another reason there wasn't a great deal of other legislative activity, because Vietnam was consuming just about everything and everybody, including LBJ. Insofar as a perspective on policy at that time, I'm not sure without going back and doing some homework that anybody could really make a very intelligent comment in that regard, because the main criticism then as I remember it was that there really wasn't a firm, fixed policy. Lyndon Johnson, I believe at Johns Hopkins--I believe it was Johns Hopkins in Baltimore--had said in effect that American troops will never be sent to Vietnam, wherein at that very time something like 25,000 had already been committed or whatever. So generally speaking I think there was a feeling that there was not a firm fixed policy on Vietnam but that it changed and perhaps it had to day by day depending on what happened the day before.

G: Did you notice by 1967 a change of attitude in the country with regard to the Vietnam War?

C: Definitely. Very definitely.

G: Describe that.

C: Well, I think the general attitude in the country was that Vietnam was a waste both of men and of effort, and I think by and large that the country was against the Vietnam War. I don't think there's much doubt about that. I'm not sure that's right or wrong, or was at that time right or wrong. But as I remember the attitude at that time, it was very definitely anti-Vietnam War effort. I remember--I may have told you--I think it was

maybe in this year, in this particular year--of going to the White House. We had our Administrative Assistants' Association and I had taken over as president of that during those particular years you're talking about. I don't remember which one that was. And we went to the White House, and there, Republicans or Democrats, I had to literally go up and nudge them to go up and shake hands with and be seen with the President of the United States, which I thought was wrong. After all, I think the office itself is due a certain amount of respect. You may not agree with the fellow, or his policies, but the office itself I think should be respected. As a matter of fact this is the picture over here with Lyndon Johnson that was taken that particular night.

But we had a briefing with [Secretary of State] Dean Rusk, [Robert] McNamara--the Secretary of Defense--to tell us about Vietnam policies, the very thing you're asking about. And we walked away from there feeling that there wasn't much policy, and I'm not sure there could have been much policy. But we walked away feeling that there was not much policy, and this was all within the confines of the White House and was supposed to be very much confidential and I'm sure it was so treated. Our impression was there wasn't a whole lot of policy; whether you were Democrat or Republican, that there just wasn't much firm policy. And again, maybe it was at a given time--and I'm sure there were a lot of things we didn't know--maybe there couldn't have been any more policy than there was, but there was very little.

G: Did Senator [Lister] Hill's view of Vietnam evolve during this period, or--?

C: I don't recall his getting involved much with the Vietnam question. Of course he left in 1968 along the same time Lyndon Johnson did. But I don't recall during those years that

he really evolved--I think at that time probably because of his age and probably because of the years I had been there, probably I paid more attention to that kind of thing than he did. When he left I think he was like seventy-two. I think by that time he was having a lot of personal problems, health-wise and so on. I just don't think he was up, is what I'm saying. I don't think he was up to grabbing hold of a Vietnam-type situation.

G: Did your own views evolve during this period? Did your own views go through a transition or--?

C: Not really. Not really, because as always I pretty much relied on the commander-in-chief in any situation. While I haven't always agreed with the action taken, whether it be Roosevelt or whomever, I've always felt that they had information I didn't have and I had to go ahead and salute and say, "Sir," and hope for the best. So that looking back, I don't believe that my views really went through a transition, and I wasn't necessarily against anything Lyndon Johnson was doing. I frankly didn't know whether it was right or wrong. I was not anti-Vietnam or anti-this or anti-that. I was ignorant of what the facts were, and I think there's a difference in the two. I mean, there are people who are going to be against whatever it is. That wasn't my case; I just simply did not know.

Let me add to that. That year, being president of the Administrative Assistants' Association and so on, I came in contact with both Republicans and Democrats and a lot of both. And I think what I just said was the general prevailing view.

G: In retrospect, how should the administration have handled the Vietnam situation?

C: Again, I don't know that it could have been handled any differently and I don't know that it should have been handled any differently.

G: It sounds like a more clearly enunciated policy with a--

C: Very definitely. But again, I interject that, insofar as definite policy recitation, I understand being at the White House at that particular time and going through these briefings by the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense and so on, you're not going to hear everything--and you can't! You can't hear everything. I don't think in a congressional briefing with closed doors they hear everything. They hear more than I do, but I don't think they hear everything and I'm not sure they can. I think at some given point you've got to have faith in the leader. You've got to trust that he's calling the right shots. And maybe in history later on you regret that trust, but I think you have to at the time pretty much trust or throw the guy out.

G: The administration ultimately in 1967 requested a tax surcharge to pay for the increased expenditures of the war.

C: That wasn't popular.

G: Tell me about that.

C: Well, I remember that surcharge and as I remember it passed.

G: Ultimately. It was 1968 before it passed.

C: Right. That wasn't popular, because Vietnam daily became more unpopular, and then people were starting to ask the rhetorical question, which really made sense: "Why are we paying for something we don't believe in? Just stop it all and let's bring the boys home and forget the whole thing." So it was not popular. It did, because somewhere the money had to flow--you corrected me when I said I thought it had passed--it had passed,

and you said it did, but I remember at the time that was not popular. That wasn't permanent, though, as I recall.

G: Was some of the unpopularity due to a desire on the part of the Congress or at least people in Congress to trim domestic expenditures?

C: I don't recall that. I don't recall that. I worked up there a number of years. I really don't recall a period in time where there was too awfully much concern over domestic expenditures and the printing presses. I remember it was not popular, and it wouldn't have been.

G: In 1967 Senator Dodd--Tom Dodd--was censured for misuse of his office and public funds. Tell me about that from your perspective.

C: Well, from my perspective I remember the Dodd censure. My recollection is that this got into, as I recall, construction work or improvements he had made on his house and so on in Connecticut or wherever. And I don't think that was really taken as political. I think that was accepted as--it was wrong. I remember the Dodd--at least insofar as Senator Hill and insofar as my memory serves me, it was a wrongful act.

G: Had Dodd been popular in the Senate?

C: Dodd didn't have great popularity. Dodd was not--I'm going to say, on a scale of ten, maybe five. He was not unpopular but he really had no group around him of senators who tried to pull him out of that. As I remember that, most of them just took the attitude that he's on his own and he did wrong and let him take the consequences. I don't think anybody rushed to his side, as they would have a good many other senators. Again, it's like that book over there--

G: The Caro book?

C: Yes. I just didn't shock easily at the Thomas Dodd thing and maybe I should have.

G: In general do you think that there was a higher standard of ethical performance then in the 1960s than there is now?

C: No. I would say that it was probably not more lax, but there probably was not the same degree there is now, because I think there is much more visibility now. I think everything is much more under the microscope largely because of TV. Of course you had TV then but not like you have it now. You have TV in both houses now, which you didn't have then. I think right now that--and because over the years a lot of these scandals evolved, different rules of ethics and so on had to be enacted and I think by now it's a lot tighter than it was. I sure do.

G: There was also a move to change the campaign election procedures and to create public funding through the Presidential Campaign Fund Act and then the election reform bill. Any insights or recollections on the presidential election campaign--you know, the check-off that was passed? I think it was the last day of the 1966 session.

C: That's right. No, I don't have any direct comments on that. Tommy Corcoran, my partner, was a great advocate of elections, public elections being sponsored and paid for by the federal government. And he worked, I think, with Lyndon Johnson. He worked hard on that issue, and this included the check-off business, or it never got really to the public financing that they both envisioned. The check-off was a part, but that was just a start and not much. Insofar as any particular insight into it, Tommy Corcoran would be the closest I'd have and nothing really--I know there was a lot of conversation back and

forth between the White House and Lyndon Johnson and Tommy and Jim Rowe and so on and so forth. And how much may have really been accomplished there, I don't know.

G: Russell Long seems to have been the leading exponent of this on the Hill.

C: Russell Long would have been, because this would have been in the image of Russell Long, pretty much. But I don't remember--and again this goes back a number of years--I don't remember Russell Long really champing at the bit to get this bill passed or anything. I think he was a supporter. I think he was a leader in it, and not passively so but not as active as it would have taken to accomplish much.

G: Was there an issue regarding the formula for divisions between the two parties, whether it would be equally divided or whether it would be based on election outcomes [inaudible]?

C: No. As I recall, that was always determined at the beginning of each Congress. And I don't know that there's still any fixed formula on that. These are a lot of years later; there may be, but I'm not sure there is today.

G: The election reform bill was also sponsored that year. This was an effort to have tighter regulations with regard to the way elections were conducted, and there was an effort to even build in disclosure of where funds were coming from. Any recollection of that?

C: Not really.

G: The southerners' concern seems to have been the inclusion of primary elections, which were more applicable to the then-one-party South than they were to the North.

C: Right.

G: Any insights on that?

C: No, I don't have any real recollection of that.

I remember what you're talking about but not details that would be of interest here and now.

G: In 1967 the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was greatly expanded to the largest school aid bill in history and it was passed an hour before the adjournment. Any recollections of that?

C: Well, the only recollection I have of that hour before adjournment, we still had problems with separation of church and state. And we still had problems generally with federal aid to education. Even though it was underneath the table perhaps, it was the old civil rights. That was the whole problem with any of that at that time. And as I recall, that hour was pretty much determined to hold down and contain any uproar that might have flowed out of the effort to pass the legislation. And here, as I recall, Lyndon Johnson I think did a lot of work on this one, because I think part of it being left to the tail end was not only what I just stated, but I think also involved there was the allowance of time, floor time, for Lyndon Johnson and some of the administration people to work on the votes and to line it up to where when they took one last shot there'd be a much better chance of passage. And I think that worked.

(Interruption)

G: Any insights on the issue of whether to provide block grants to state education agencies or categorical grants to qualifying individual school districts?

C: Well, we had problems there. And I know the difference between the two. At that time we had a division--there's no question about it--between the two. And there were those

who felt that the separate grants--and most of the southerners did--provided the best vehicle because they didn't encompass a lot of other things that would be in the block grant. So that the block versus the separate was always an issue insofar as legislation goes, but I don't recall any particular hang-up on that in 1967. Was there a hang-up?

G: Well, it was debated.

C: It was debated, I know that. But we passed a bill that year. Was that with the block grants?

G: No, it was the--

C: Yes, that's what I would have to figure, because here again--the filibuster had been beaten down pretty well by that time. But here again you had people who could activate that sort of thing and, when you talk about an hour before adjournment, could have for that one hour kept any legislation off the books. My guess is--and I'd have to go back and take a look, but my guess is that that debate on the block grants was pretty much reconciled so that a bill of some kind would be passed. And then worry about, as you frequently do with any legislation, changing it or worry about whatever the following session. Just get something in place, something on the books and then take it from there.

G: There was also the issue of whether to apply the withholding of funds from segregated schools to the North as well as to the South. Do you recall that?

C: I don't specifically recall that in 1967, but that had come up and almost by that time rhetorically, because we had been shown several times that the votes weren't there. I think as I remember that coming up, I think that was brought up more as an effort to indicate that it's not always us who are screaming this, it works both ways. But that

really wasn't the climate for that sort of thing, because here you still had the days of a pretty hard-core division, and even though it made sense--I remember that argument being brought up. It made sense, but the other side wasn't willing to listen to that. "We got the votes in our back pocket and we'll let you talk a while and we're going to cut it off." That was pretty much the attitude. And I think folks like--of course Dick Russell got sick. But people like Russell and [John] Stennis and Hill and so on, I think by that time they pretty well recognized that--"We can drag this on and on, but the votes are there to eventually cut it off." I think they had learned by that time that there was no win.

G: Was there, to some extent however, an alliance between the Republicans and the southern Democrats during this?

C: Well, there was, but that broke down, you see, under Dirksen. Sure there was. We started out with that alliance and we relied on that alliance very heavily on this civil rights. We really thought at the outset that we were going to win on all these civil rights issues because of that alignment you're talking about. But the guy who came in and almost overnight changed it--and, history claims, at the collusion of and at the urging and suggestion of Lyndon Johnson. I know at that time the southerners thought there was a lot of that involved. Almost overnight that alignment broke down, and once it broke down, once Dirksen--and as I remember Dirksen had a particular price that he wanted that had to do with Chicago, that he wanted something put in that civil rights bill that would take care of some situation, I'm going to say, in Chicago, or Illinois anyway. I think there was something like that involved. But once we thought we had Dirksen. Once we found for sure that we didn't have Dirksen, then it was a whole new ball game,

because Dirksen went around and he got a lot of what I considered the on-the-wall type Republicans who were from states where it didn't matter how they voted either way. And he lined them up, and I think Everett Dirksen had an awful lot to do with a civil rights bill of any kind passing. And that goes for education, because the fallout was up and down the line. Once you had that vote established you were pretty much at the mercy of the opponent, whether it be education or whether it be directly aligned with civil rights or whatever. But Ev Dirksen was the guy who in my opinion had more to do, or as much to do--I think Lyndon Johnson had a lot to do with passage of a bill, but without Everett Dirksen I question whether he would have ever had a bill. That's what I guess I'm trying to say.

G: On this particular legislation he offered and then subsequently withdrew an anti-busing amendment. Do you recall the background of that?

C: No, I don't. That, it seems, is what the Chicago or the Illinois connection was. I think that was it. When you mention anti-busing I believe that was it. That rings a bell.

G: Dirksen also seems to have routinely received consideration when minority appointments came up to the regulatory boards and agencies.

C: I don't know about those. There may be a connection. That's what you're asking. I don't know. I know that Tommy Corcoran and Dirksen were very close. As a matter of fact, when Dirksen died Tommy spent a lot of time with the widow and the estate. He did a lot of work. I don't know what it was because I was not involved, but he did a lot of work with the estate. So they had gotten close over the years, but that would figure, you see, because Tommy fell out with FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt]; that's when he came

into town. As I think I've told you, he wanted to be solicitor general and he claims that Elliot and FDR were the ones who blocked it. Of course he claims that Eleanor had more clout than the President because the President was pretty sick, and Eleanor was running the White House, according to Tommy.

In any event, he didn't get solicitor general and he fell out with the White House and left the White House. That's when he came into town here and started this law firm. Then Jim Rowe, who followed Tommy into the White House, was here a year later, because he was that year in the White House. So there was a very strong LBJ connection between the three of them, and there are pictures--I don't have [them] here but there are pictures in Junior's office of LBJ and Jim Rowe and Tommy Corcoran together at the Ranch on many occasions. So they had quite a rapport.

G: There was also as part of this legislation, this ESEA legislation, a provision for changing the Title I funding formula to give poorer states more consideration than they had received before. Any recollection of that?

C: Well, vaguely I recall that. That came out of the formula in the Hill-Burton Act which up until that time--and as I recall this never passed, this formula you're talking about. But this was borrowing, if I may, the formula that was in the Hospital Survey and Construction Act of 1946, the Hill-Burton Act. And there for the first and only time in the history of legislation was a formula that treated the poorer states better than the richer states. This formula was only passed, only, because of the efforts and the hard work of one Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, and you would think the opposite. But this is the guy who came forward and this is the guy who made it possible for the Hill-Burton Act to

become law. To the best of my knowledge that's never been duplicated since and I think my knowledge is right. I would have heard somewhere around town. But this was an effort in connection with that legislation to invoke and insert the Hill-Burton formula, but you confirm that that never got off the ground really. I remember the effort there but I don't recall that ever passing.

And then I'll give you an interesting aside and this is a fast aside. But many years later on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Hill-Burton Act, Senator Hill and [Harold] Burton, who was then a Supreme Court justice, agreed that they would speak to the--I believe it was the American Hospital Association or whatever. Anyway, they were commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of this act in Atlantic City, and then lo and behold the civil rights fight broke out. So at the last minute Senator Hill called Justice Burton over at the Supreme Court like the day before and said, "I cannot go but I'm going to have my assistant go"--that was me--"and he's going to give my speech. He's going to read my speech for me," and so on and so forth. I went, and I went on the train with Justice Burton. We went up together, because he had Parkinson's, and I don't remember how long he lived after that but he was not in good condition then. I remember the train trip was difficult. But we got there all right.

So I was going to speak for the both of them because he told me on the train he could not speak. He could just speak just a few words here and there and he said "My condition is such that you're going to, so here's mine," and he gave it to me. So I worked on both of them that night, got up the next morning with laryngitis. (Laughter) I thought that was interesting. I gave the speeches and I came back with--secretary of the army

was Elvis Stahr and he invited me. I sat next to him at the head table and he invited me to fly back with him. But anyway, that's neither here nor there so far as legislation.

G: Okay. Another issue that came before the Congress that year--1967--was the railroad strike settlement, the legislation.

C: That would have come before our committee but frankly I don't remember much about it. I wasn't involved. I've said to you previously, the labor people were always welcome at our door because they were always as decent as they could be in general. But the railroad strike I just frankly was not involved with.

G: Wayne Morse I think was the senator.

C: Wayne Morse who was on our committee was the main guy who was involved in that. And I think Senator Hill had turned that over pretty much to Wayne Morse that particular year. I believe it was a Wayne Morse show. But I wasn't involved in that staff wise or otherwise. I remember some of it but not a whole lot, not enough to do you any good.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview VII

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