INTERVIEW VIII

DATE: May 16, 1990

INTERVIEWEE: DONALD J. CRONIN

INTERVIEWER: Michae l L. Gillette

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

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: Let's begin with a discussion about the question of whether Senator [Lister] Hill would run or not in 1968. He had had a tough race in 1962, is that right?

C: He had a tough race in 1962, and then we came along. Of course then we had an Alabama primary in March, I believe, which is different now; it's later in the year. So that we had to be deciding pretty fast--like in 1967--whether you're going to run in 1968. Here I think there were a series of factors. George Wallace gets credit for a good bit of the factors. I'm not so sure that that was a vital factor. I think it was a consideration, but I'm not so sure that that was really the factor as such. George Wallace was riding pretty high and with all this civil rights business he had challenged the Senator, not so far as the race but he had challenged him in many other regards, and I think the Senator respected George's position politically in the state; he had to. I did. Everybody knowledgeable politically would have respected that; and George was riding high.

So that we had to decide and had to decide--like we started in the summer and fall of 1967, because we had to announce by, as I remember, the first Tuesday in March or whatever it was. And I think there were a lot of factors there, including George Wallace,

but not solely George Wallace. I think there were a lot of factors. A fellow named Jim Allen, who is now dead, and [was a] senator announced against Senator Hill. After the fact Jim Allen got me to one side and told me after he was elected that he merely stepped in there to block other entries into the race, but that if Lister Hill had decided to run he, Jim Allen, would have withdrawn. That may well be. That was not said to anybody before the filing deadline and he properly filed and was a candidate against Lister Hill.

Another factor there was the fact that Jim Allen was very strongly aligned with George Wallace and so a good many people took that entry to be George Wallace's man running against Lister Hill. I used the word "gargantuan" for the Senator. Continually it was on his mind back [during] the summer before [the] announcement date deadline and so on. And I continually said that, "You can run and I think you can win but it will take a gargantuan effort. You can't travel on the proposition that the people are going to reward you for forty-five years in Congress. That's out. You've got to go out there and win it. And I got to leave right now and get back to Alabama and start the campaign organization. We can forget all this business that they love you for what you did. That just doesn't work politically"--or at least it didn't in Alabama in that day in time. And the more we talked, and we talked an awful lot about it, I kept using that word, "It will take a gargantuan effort. You can do it but I would have had to have left out of here a week ago now." Then two weeks ago now, and so on and so forth.

I think somewhere along the line because of Mrs. Hill's condition--and I think that was a big, big factor--because of the senator's age, and because he was starting to feel some of this palsy bit, I think all of these factors combined more so than George Wallace's Jim Allen in the race. I really do. I'll never know because the man is dead who could tell us.

But I really believed his health was not the greatest, not only the palsy but he had had prostate and all these various things. He was just getting older and everything was coming at one time. Everything was hitting him. And I think with all of that, plus Mrs. Hill's health which was going down, down rapidly--I think all of that combined just made it sensible for him to get back where the children were--back to Alabama, back to Montgomery where the son and the daughter were--and then at least they would have somebody to rely on, somebody to turn to. And I really believe that's what happened there more so than Jim Allen's entrance into the race. Whether or not he would have withdrawn is moot, because Lister Hill on Robert E. Lee's birthday, January 19, in 1968 announced that he would not be a candidate for reelection.

G: Was he urged to seek reelection by the White House or by any other Washington powers?

C: There were those who primarily, as I remember at the time, were aligned with the health effort who encouraged Lister Hill to run. Senator Hill was extremely closed-mouthed in that regard, and I was too. I could pretty well read, I felt, the signs that he was not going to run. Then it became pretty evident once we got through the first of the year and nothing had been started, nothing organized, that he wasn't going to run. I was convinced by that time that he absolutely was not. But I never discouraged him in running. However, I think it would have been tough, real, real tough, and I think at that time I could have gone the twenty hours a day and contributed everything possible. Whether or not that would have been enough, I don't know. It would have been close.

G: Do you think that George Wallace's presidential effort would have had an effect on it at all?

C: I don't think so. You're talking about if he had become a candidate for president and really got in that mode to where he couldn't throw it off and so on.

G: Yes.

C: I don't really think so. I don't think that would have made any difference because--I say that again because I think it was a combination of factors. I don't think it was George Wallace solely. I'm one of the very few who don't think it is. I don't think it was. I don't think it was. I think Mrs. Hill's health played an extremely vital role in that decision, and her health was not good at all. The Senator had had her around the country on this L-dopa and so on and so forth, and she kept going down, down, down. She was close to a basket case when they left here. I think all of that had much more to do with his decision, plus the fact that his own health was not the greatest. He had been extremely healthy all these years and all of a sudden that started to deteriorate. I think the combination of all these things--I really don't think that it was solely George Wallace's entry. I'm going to say George Wallace because Jim Allen was pretty much his man. But I don't think it was that entry into the race. I just don't.

G: Lyndon Johnson also announced that he was not going to seek reelection in March 1968, the end of March. Tell me how you viewed that move from your perspective on the Hill.

C: You mean Lyndon Johnson's?

G: Yes.

C: How do I view that?

G: Yes. How did you at the time?

C: At the time, Vietnam. That was the overriding sentiment around here: that he wasn't running--the sentiment was that he wasn't running because of Vietnam, and secondly that he waited too long insofar as Hubert Humphrey.

G: To help Humphrey?

C: Yes.

G: Now tell me a little bit more about the first element of that. Because Vietnam was becoming such an albatross for him?

C: Yes, exactly.

G: Tell me more about that.

C: Well, here I don't know about polls and so on at that time, but my guess would be that in the polls his popularity slipped tremendously. It would have had to because Vietnam was not popular at all. I'll never know why LBJ hung on to Vietnam as long as he did, and I'm not passing judgment one way or the other, but it was not popular. He became less popular because of it and it really got to a point where, as I recall--I'm not so very sure that if he had gone ahead and run that he could have made it. I don't think he felt he could. I don't know Lyndon Johnson in the way that you've had an opportunity to, but generally speaking, I don't think any politician of that caliber--if he thinks he can win, I don't think he intentionally backs off of any race. It gets in his blood stream. He's got to run.

G: Was your mail from Alabama--the Senator's mail--running against the war in Vietnam?

C: Yes, it was.

G: Tell me about that.

C: Well, what I recall generally [is] then we had what we called a robo-type--we had to go to a robo-type answer, a reply which is much more impersonal than a regular letter, because we were getting that kind of volume at that time. And it was running I'm going to guess nine to one against the war in Vietnam.

G: Was Senator Hill's position on the war changing during this period?

C: I don't think his position really changed because I think here he pretty much relied on the Commander-in-Chief even though they weren't the closest right then for obvious reasons--the civil rights and all that kind of business. Yet I think he respected the office. He had gone through the FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] days. He had been up to the White House many times. He used to go up to FDR's bedroom there and negotiate this and that with him and so on and so forth, who nicknamed him Listerine. So I think he pretty much then captured a feeling of the chief executive and unless things really got bad, I think he would have stayed with the chief executive, in this case Lyndon Johnson. He might not have totally agreed with the executive policy but I think he would have stayed with him as chief executive. And I think he did. I don't recall individual votes, on any of this Vietnam. There may have been some. [Senator J. William] Fulbright's resolution and so on I suppose came up to a vote, but generally speaking I think he would have stayed with the administration. He would have defended it.

G: Four or five days after this announcement, the March 31 speech that LBJ would not run, you have the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the riots here in Washington. Tell me about that. Is that a vivid memory in your--?

C: Well, the riots are a vivid memory in that at that time--of course, working in the legislative branch, we were entitled to keep our home state plates, and the Senator had on his car Alabama plates. We evacuated the Senate Office Building because of the fire threats and scares and left about noon because the word had been moved around the building there that it was going to be torched or whatever. So we got out, and I know in coming up Pennsylvania Avenue--he was riding with me at the time. And coming up Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capitol we locked the doors because blacks were violent. I can

understand right at that given point in time why they would have been, but they were stirred up, and it was questionable whether or not we would make it all the way home at that time. It was that questionable. We held our breaths and locked the doors and said go through a red light or whatever but just keep moving. Don't stop anywhere for anything. Just keep on moving. And he was right, and we did--or I may have said it, I don't know, but we kept going.

G: Did you have Alabama plates on your car?

C: Yes, I did.

G: Was anything thrown at your car or was it just--

C: No.

G: --the general atmosphere?

C: No, it was the general atmosphere. There was a lot of shouting and a lot of cursing and so on, and I can't even remember what was said when by whom. But there was a lot of that. We kept going, and then we had a curfew here and all the roads were blocked off. We were in town--Mary and I, my wife and I--having dinner with some people from Alabama, from Montgomery. They were staying in that hotel right over here, at the Holiday Inn. And we went on from there home, and we couldn't get through to get into Maryland because the National Guard had been called out and everything, every circle, every entrance was barricaded and blocked off. I finally showed them identification and said I worked up in the Senate and we were with our constituents and we're going home, and they let me on through. But it was touch-and-go. It was bad.

I don't remember, but I don't think--for a couple days I don't think we went in to the office. I think I probably did; I don't remember ever being off a day. But I know the

Senator did not, and wisely not, because at his age then he--being a senator from Alabama, he was a target.

G: Later in June you had the assassination of Robert Kennedy out in Los Angeles. Do you remember that?

C: I do. I remember the assassination of Robert Kennedy. Kennedy was not popular in Alabama at all. In addition thereto, Kennedy was not very popular in general, and I remember the assassination well because Senator Hill by invitation decided to ride on the train to New York and back. And he asked me what I thought. I said, "If you're going back to Alabama and you're going to live there, you don't need this trip." He went, and I give him good for it, but I still think I told him right. But he ruled otherwise and he went on the train.

G: Was Kennedy unpopular in Alabama because of his civil rights views?

C: Primarily in my opinion that was the basis for it. Kennedy's style was not the same as Jack's or Teddy's. He was a different animal. And I remember at Jack Kennedy's inauguration--because all three of the Kennedys were on our committee at one time or the other. I remember him going to the one at the Mayflower here. Bobby Kennedy arrived; I had known him staff-wise up there and I went up and said, "I want to be sure when the President comes in to have my wife and my brother-in-law and sister meet him here." He says, "You can meet him anytime. Don't bother us tonight. See me next week in the Senate," or something to that effect, which ordinarily is understandable if it's put in a little different way. But it was rather embarrassing. It was absolutely embarrassing.

But this was the nature of the guy. He was not a popular guy staff-wise in the Senate Office Building. He was not popular as a senator in the Senate Office Building. Of the three Kennedys, he was the least popular of all.

G: Kennedy' s assassination gave [Hubert] Humphrey a clearer shot at the nomination. Any insights or recollections on the Humphrey campaign?

C: Not really. Humphrey, who was a very likable guy--I've got a picture of him somewhere; here he is, right here--was *persona non grata* in Alabama. I think it started with the 1948 convention or whatever. I happen to like the guy. I still like the guy. I still see his sister around town. And Humphrey in my opinion will always be a friend. But he was not popular politically in Alabama. He couldn't be. There's no way he could be. Alabama was on fire then. A whole lot has subsided since then; a lot of things have not changed, but a good many by way of evolution are different and eventually I think they will change. But it takes time and he was the kind of guy who was not popular there but he was not an unpopular fellow, whereas Bobby Kennedy was an unpopular fellow.

G: Did you or Senator Hill play a role in the 1968 presidential campaign?

C: No.

G: Just sat out. Did you go to the convention in Chicago?

C: No. It was all over by that time. I still have somewhere in one of these drawers the badge from that convention but no, we did not.

G: You didn't go. It was during this period that [inaudible] nominated Abe Fortas to succeed Earl Warren as Chief Justice. Do you recall that issue?

C: I do recall it very well. Insofar as the issue itself, I don't know any more than maybe the press has reported but I had had occasion to meet Abe Fortas and I liked Abe Fortas. I

thought he was an extremely well qualified lawyer and I think, as I remember the history of Abe Fortas, he pretty much--I think it was Abe Fortas who was instrumental in helping Lyndon Johnson with some of his legal problems in connection with running at the time. But Abe was a good legal mind. I thought he was extremely well-qualified for the job. Of course I've been around Washington too long so these kind of things don't shock me for whatever reason. He was shot down. There had to be a reason behind it in my opinion. But I thought he was extremely well-qualified. I had met him and I liked the guy.

G: Senator Russell is normally considered the southern senator that sort of led the break away from support of Fortas. Do you recall that?

C: No, I don't. And if you would ask me, I don't know how Lister Hill would have voted on that, but I don't remember the Dick Russell participation.

G: Was the administration doing everything it could to get Fortas approved?

C: I think it was. I think it was. And again, I don't know that that ever came to a vote. He may have withdrawn before it ever came to a vote. If it had come to a vote, I think Lister Hill would have voted for Abe Fortas. And a lot of that would have gone to the proposition that unless there's something blatantly wrong--if the guy withdraws himself, that's one thing. But unless there's something blatantly wrong with the fellow, the chief executive--he has a right to appoint whoever he wants. I think that would have been the Senator's position. In Abe Fortas' case I don't think there was anything blatantly wrong. As I recall, he withdrew before that came to a vote, didn't he?

G: Well, there were some questions with regard to lectures at American University.

C: Sure. There were questions about Abe Fortas. I happen to think in this town that it's next to impossible, having been in the practice of law, having been in politics at the level he was at

for the number of years he was, I don't think it was possible if you were anything at all to come out of that unscathed. There's just no way. And that's why it just doesn't disturb me as much as it does some people that this is the air you breathe in Washington. I think you breathe a different air here than you would breathe in Montgomery, Alabama. It's charged with politics and different things that don't happen, that people there just don't breathe or care about. And I think as long as you're here, that's part of it. That's not to say I condone all these things but I do think I recognize the human frailty in every person and I think this goes to that same question.

(Interruption)

G: Anything on the 1968 presidential race between [Richard] Nixon, Humphrey with George Wallace as a third-party candidate?

C: Let me ask you this. What year did George Wallace receive the bullet out here in Maryland?

(Interruption)

C: Okay. What was the question?

G: Any recollections of that race?

C: Well, yes, the recollections I have of that particular race would be that insofar as Alabama was concerned there was no question that it was for George Wallace, no question whatsoever. And this was all part of the same ball of wax that we discussed earlier, the Lister Hill thing and so on, wherein I stated that I didn't think it was solely the George Wallace candidacy. I don't think that at all. There were too many other factors surrounding all that. The public may have then thought and continue to think [so] insofar as history, but I don't believe that was strictly that way. I don't think so at all.

Insofar as George Wallace, he was magic in Alabama. To oppose George Wallace then would have been political suicide; literally it would have been. I think a lot of this also entered into that decision through the back door insofar as the earlier question about Senator Hill's candidacy in 1968. I think a lot of this came into it. But again, I repeat, I don't think it was the sole factor by a long shot, but I think some of that entered into it. It had to. But George Wallace was magical then in the state of Alabama--and I'm going to say this, not only in the state of Alabama. If he hadn't been shot at Laurel, Maryland, we'll never know but I'm not so sure in my own mind that the temper of the people was such at that time that he wouldn't have gotten a spot of some kind either as a vice presidential candidate or as an appointed position or whatever. I think George was on the roll; that's what I'm saying. And I'm not sure that that would have been good or bad for the country, but I think he was on the roll at the time, and I'm not so very sure that he could have been stopped. I think the momentum was going very much--he was saying everything by that time that the people wanted to hear.

G: Did Nixon have significant popularity in Alabama in 1968?

C: Not significant because Lister Hill took an awful lot of shots at Dick Nixon and the one that he replayed the most was "Tricky Dick." And it caught on in Alabama to where there was a good bit of the population for the Republican Party, not for Dick Nixon individually. Alabama was starting to move to the Republican Party because of civil rights and all these other things we talked about over a period of time, but I don't think Nixon's popularity was such that Dick Nixon really accentuated that very much.

G: A couple of health items in 1968. You had the reorganization of the Public Health Service. Do you remember that?

C: Not vividly. I remember the reorganization at the Public Health Service, but I think some that came to pass because during the years of Senator Hill there we had gone forward with so many health programs and so much health legislation that somewhere all this had to be pulled together and sorted out. And as I remember this was sort of a pulling-together thing more so than an actual reorganization as such.

G: How about the appointment of Robert Marston to be the director of [National Institutes of Health]?

C: Well, the only recollection I have of that was Bob Marston. I knew Bob Marston pretty well. He was popular. He was qualified, as I remember, and unless you correct me, I don't remember any real problems with Bob Marston being appointed.

G: Was he Senator Hill's choice?

C: I don't specifically recall that, but I would say yes. I don't remember that precisely but I would say yes.

G: In the summer of 1968 Warren Magnuson and Mathilde Krim proposed to the President the creation of a commission on disease prevention and health protection. Do you remember that?

C: Not really.

G: How about the surtax, an issue that--a question of whether a tax increase was needed and whether it should be coupled with a budget reduction?

C: In what year?

G: 1968. That's when it finally passed. It was introduced in 1967 but it ultimately [passed in 1968].

C: That's why I ask. I remember a surtax going a couple, three years there. I don't remember specifically on the surtax and I don't remember how Senator Hill would have voted on that. Generally speaking, unless you had a war going on at the time, including Vietnam, tax measures were not popular. They just were not popular. Nobody wants to be taxed. Senator Long, he had the favorite cliché on that.

G: Which was?

C: Which was, "We won't tax you and don't tax me. Tax that nigger behind the tree." And that was pretty much the sentiment. That's a broader concept of it but that was pretty much the sentiment. Unless you had specifically a war going on or whatever that needed revenue you just didn't increase taxes for the sake of reducing the deficit. You know, in all the years that I spent up there I never really until recently recall any serious effort to worry about the deficit. I think now it's grown to such a point that people have to or they're going to get turned out of office. But for a number of years there, the years I'm talking about of my participation up there, I don't think that was the prevailing mood. So if we didn't enact a surtax and we went another twelve billion in the hole, so what? I think it got to the point where somebody had to wrestle with it, Gramm-Rudman and all this and that sort of thing. But I think up until then, it was pretty much *laissez-faire*.

But I don't specifically recall the surtax, in answer to your question. I remember some tax measures. Tax measures were never popular, I'll repeat that. They passed, as I remember. There was a surtax enacted. I'm not so sure that--I guess that was Lyndon Johnson's surtax, wasn't it?

G: Did you leave the Hill when Senator Hill retired?

C: I did. I came down here with a fellow named Tommy the Cork, Tommy Corcoran. And then he died on me. We had a firm upstairs. We had the entire eleventh floor. [We had] a firm of around sixty members and then one by one they started getting older and died. So I'm here in these offices.

(Interruption)

C: Okay. We're up to 1968 and what we're talking about here is the Senator had on January 19, Robert E. Lee's birthday, made the announcement he wasn't going to run again. So then came the tremendous job of trying to clear out and clean out forty-five years' worth in the Congress, including the Senate. And in the meantime, as the fall campaigns began to organize, Ernie Cuneo asked Senator Hill to loan me to him to help out in the [Edmund] Muskie campaign. And I came down, physically came down--I kept an office in the Senate Office Building, but went off the payroll there and physically came down here and worked through that campaign period. In the process I had occasion to go to different places with Ernie Cuneo. My job primarily was at that time, because of the effort I had--rather, because of the interest I had had in the Congress there, my job with Ernie was by and large to take the health, education, welfare and that sort of thing, those areas in which the Senator was chairman of the legislative and appropriations committees, to take all of that and put it in some kind of viable form so it could be used by a candidate, in this case, Muskie.

So largely I was putting a lot of numbers together and then I was trying to transpose those numbers so it said something rather than 38.2 per cent, that kind of stuff. And that's what I did through the November elections with Ernie Cuneo, the gentleman to whom you refer.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview VIII

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