INTERVIEWEE: Everett M. Dirksen

INTERVIEWER: William S. White

DATE: May 8, 1968

W: This is the conversation between Senator Everett McKinley Dirksen of Illinois, the Republican leader of the Senate, and William S. White. It's being made on May 8, 1968.

Senator, you've known President Johnson both as a senator and as President, and of course you've had a great deal to do with him over the years. I wonder if you'd mind first going into your recollections of him in the Senate days. In effect, say what you thought of his leadership, where it was strong, if it was; where he had short-comings, if he had--in other words, a sort of historical analysis of him as United States Senator.

D: Bill, to make it chronological I fancy we ought to start with the House days, don't you believe?

W: Fine, you're quite right. I forgot that you were both in the House together. Sure you were. Start as you please.

D: One of my good friends in the House was Dick Kleberg, who belonged to that King family that has the ranch down in Texas. Lyndon Johnson was something of a secretary to Dick Kleberg. That's when I first met him. I had a great affection for Kleberg. He was a very interesting person.

But the time came when a vacancy developed in Texas; and Lyndon Johnson went back, announced his candidacy for Congress, and he was elected. So I began to see him then on the floor of the House and had a chance to appraise in a small way, what he was doing.

I can't say that at that time we were very intimate. There were reasons for that, You see, in the New Deal days, there was such an outpouring of Democrats. At one time that we were reduced to a handful. There weren't many Republicans for awhile. At one point we had only ninety-seven Republicans out of four hundred and thirty-five members in the House.

W: You were a little lost at that period, weren't you?

D: Yes, a little bit.

W: How did you see him develop, if you had any particular notion--perhaps you didn't of him in his early days--in the House? Did you have a notion then that, as the expression goes, he'd go a long way? Or did you have any particular estimate of him one way or the other?

D: I have to put that this way. First of all, physically, Lyndon Johnson is a very impressive person. You put him in an everage group and he shows up exceedingly well. Also, he handles himself well. Now and then when you heard him on the floor, you began to appraise him and think of him in terms of somebody who had real stature and would develop. And so he did develop in those days when we were in the House.

You'll remember at that time there was an interlude in his House service when he donned a Navy uniform and, I think, was either lieutenant senior grade or lieutenant commander. I've forgotten which.

W: Lieutenant commander I believe it was.

D: But the President then did not look too kindly upon members of Congress dropping out to go into the service. He thought that their duty was here. So in due course Lyndon Johnson came back to service in the House.

The time came when he looked rather longingly at the senatorship from Texas and decided to become a candidate, and then did win. I think that race was between he and Coke Stevenson, as I recall.

W: I believe it was, Senator.

D: It went off by a rather narrow margin, but he won. And so he came to the Senate.

Now, I looked rather longingly at the Senate too in a fashion. But in 1948 I developed this eye trouble and after consultation with a good many doctors I decided to quit.

W: Altogether.

D: Yes, so my tenure after sixteen years ended on the 3rd of January, 1949. I went back home to work at the business of resting and to see whether or not this danger of a malignancy on first one eye and then the other would clear up. It did.

But in 1948 our party took a tremendous licking. We lost the governor and the senatorship by half a million votes. And so in due course, when the time came to make up a ticket, the delegations came down to my house and said, "You've got to run. You're all we've got."

"But," I said, "I don't want to run. I don't want to go back to Washington."

"Well, you're going to have to." And they kept working away. Finally I left it to the family. We had a meeting one night in my study and we voted--my wife, my daughter,

and I. The vote was two to one, and I said, "Kids, we run for the Senate." That precisely was a majority.

And so we did run.

W: Senator, that was what year?

D: That was 1950.

W: Isn't that the year he came to the Senate?

D: No, didn't he--?

W: He came in 1948, that's right. He came two years ahead of you.

D: I ran against Scott Lucas, who was then majority leader of the Senate, who so very recently passed away.

Well, I was successful, and there was Lyndon so we simply picked up our friendship where we left off before. Then in due course the party thought that perhaps I might serve usefully as leader, so this is actually my tenth year as the leader on the minority side.

Now, when the two leaders sit opposite each other and each has responsibilities for legislation and the conduct of the operation of the Senate, there has to be some kind of a code, a working formula. I used to sit in his office and he used to come over here and sit in my office.

We started from this general premise: the Senate is a public insitution; it must work; it's a two-way street; and that requires the efforts of both parties. One party cannot do it on its own because if the opposition, or minority party, wanted to be completely obstructionist you could tie up the Senate in a minute, even with a handful of people. So we fully understood each other, that that's the way it had to be. And that's the reason I got along exceptionally well with Senator Johnson.

W: If I may interrupt a minute, in watching that I think both of you were regarding the Senate as an institution primarily, were you not? On many of these matters I noticed that neither of you showed any particular party feeling. In the conduct of the Senate I don't think either of you were concerned much about parties, were you?

D: No, there are so many things that simply transcend party. You have to put it in that frame and not try to draw the partisan line because the national interest is deeply involved. And I think I must say for him that he kept his eye on that ideal and that goal pretty well.

There are times, of course, when we disagreed, but we disagreed as gentlemen. Then you'd assign the reasons why you could not go along with a certain proposition. On other occasions you cooperated and you gave it support.

W: In the Eisenhower Administration--during that time when he was leader on one side and you were leader on the other side--it has been commented many times--as you know, since Lyndon Johnson has been President--on foreign affairs President Eisenhower had been very good to him and he's aware of that, and he has said it many times. As an observer, I thought Lyndon Johnson's conduct in foreign matters toward that administration, that is, the Eisenhower Administration, had been quite comparable to your own conduct as the Republican leader in his administration.

D: I think that's right.

W: I never saw on either side any effort to embarrass the country overseas because some other fellow had the White House. I wonder if you, in reflecting back on that--now as far as he's concerned, it's obvious in his career it did him no harm politically. Do you think it has done you any harm?

D: I do not.

W: Has it caused you any difficulty?

D: I don't believe so. You might have to put it in a sort of a time frame. But you'll remember George Marshall made that speech some twenty-three years ago, stating, in effect, that Europe was going to collapse unless we had a foreign aid program. Well, I parted company with it on occasions, not because of the principle that was involved, but rather because of the way they operated; and it fell in hands that, in my judgment, were simply not too competent. But I didn't quarrel with the basic principle.

W: You were objecting to the implementation of it, not the policy of it.

D: That's correct. And that's true even today, as a matter of fact. That would be true also in matters that related to the United Nations, or our relationships with most any other country. So he saw through the same pair of specs as I did what the problem was and that you had to look at it as a citizen with that larger goal in view. And we always did.

W: I thought so too. Going away for a moment, Senator, from the purely foreign policy aspects of it and looking back again at the Senate as a kind of institution in itself, or a separate entity, and him as the leader of the majority party, as it was most of the time, how would you assay his conduct as a leader? I ask that because, as you know, on the test of party performance at least he had an enormous record. But as you also know some people thought he was too tough, as they said, and pushed people too hard. In what way,

if any, would you depart yourself from his concept of how one runs the party in the Senate?

D: First, you must remember that as the leader of the majority he had a very distinct problem of his own. You see, you had those from the Southland who always didn't see eye-to-eye, then you had a more liberal group, and then you had perhaps a few ultraliberals. So his problem, in trying to put through a program was to see what he could do to command the necessary votes, because he would always lose some and might have to pick up a little on our side.

W: He often had to as a matter of fact, didn't he? He had to get some Republican help on many occasions?

D: Yes, he did, in order to squeak through with some program. But that was a test of his metal, and obviously he had to be aggressive. He had to be militant; he had to know also what he was talking about.

W: That was your reply to this sort of cliché about arm-twisting and so on--that is, that the arm-twisting was a part of the necessary process of getting this thing done?

D: Oh, that phrase is easy to use, but it takes a good deal more than that.

W: They're really referring there--that's a synonym for strong leadership, isn't it?

D: Oh, yes, and quite aggressive. But he did a good job in that respect.

W: Again, as an observer, I never thought that he had the hostility of the Republicans much in the Senate, did he?

D: No.

W: I don't remember ever hearing a Republican complain about his so-called arm-twisting. That was, I think, mostly in some parts of his own party, was it not?

D: I think mainly, so. If and when we ever did it, it was mainly to give it a little political character, as you well know.

W: Yes, I know that. Incidentally, in that period when you were both here in the Senate I think you must have had the experience, and it is an experience I thought, of going to his ranch down in Texas. Have you been down there as a senator with him as a senator?

D: Let's see. Did I get down there at that time!

W: I know you've been since he has been President.

D: Yes. No, actually I don't believe I was there when he was in the Senate.

W: I was going to ask you that because he pretty often made some pretty big medicine down there at that ranch, as he has done in the presidency too.

D: I used to guy him a little about that because on one occasion he said: "I'll tell you what I'll do. If you'll come down and be my guest, I'll give you a bull calf."

"Well," I said, "you send the bull calf up here. I got a place to keep him out in Virginia." But I never got the bull calf.

When I finally got down there, when I landed at the ranch, I said, "All right, now, where is the bull calf."

"I'll see that you get it."

I said, "You get the best butcher in Johnson City and you cut him up and put him in the deepfreeze, and you send him to me in that fashion, and I'll settle for it."

W: Did he ever send it to you?

D: Never got the bull calf, although I'm still hoping that one day I'll get that bull calf.

W: Well, you've still got a chance because they way he's talking now, he's more or less retiring down there, you know, to the ranch.

Oh, by the way, in that connection, here's something I wanted to ask you about. As you know, Senator, the President is now talking about after he retires here, going down to the University of Texas and teaching.

D: So I understand.

W: Obviously, it'll be political science. I wondered if you ever observed in his days here in the Senate a strong feeling he has about teaching people. Did you ever run into that? Did he ever talk to you about that?

D: Oh, yes. It goes back to the fact that he was a teacher, and I think a person who has an instinct for teaching never quite loses it. Now, I'm the only one of four brothers who never married a school teacher.

W: Is that right!

D: Yes, I had three brothers who married school teachers, so I know a little something about the cast of their minds. So he, having been a teacher, obviously would one day get back to it. But it does something else, It keeps you in a teaching frame of mind as you pursue any other duties, and you feel that you're teaching actually when you're persuading somebody to a course of action in order to get a vote.

W: As a matter of fact, you could say that the art of politics has got an awful lot of teaching in it just in itself.

D: Indeed it does.

W: On the point of his presidency now, I know that you had a very, very close association with him, certainly in foreign matters--I've observed that. I'm sure that you've been down there on many occasions when things were pretty critical and had some pretty critical conversations with him on foreign matters. I wonder if you'd mind reminiscing a little bit on some of those, if you can recall some, or describe some of the circumstances? For example, it wouldn't be any harm, would it, to go back to his vice presidency in the Cuban crisis. I know you were consulted a great deal in that.

D: I remember that quite well. He certainly was a good missionary when he was Vice President, and obviously carried the flag for the President to every corner of the country, but also everywhere that he went abroad. And I think he made a very deep impression on people.

W: You mean foreign people? Abroad?

D: Yes, that's right. It couldn't be otherwise because he speaks rather positively and affirmatively, something I think that leaders elsewhere always like. But when finally the whole power came into his hands, then of course he had his work cut out for him in the sense that ultimate judgments were finally his. And that's notably true with respect to the problems we have in Southeast Asia.

Everybody rationalizes it for himself, and I had to think of him constantly not merely in the role of the President, but in the role of Commander-in-Chief, because the Constitution makes him that. And I know of no decision by the high court that ever delivered the power of the Commander-in-Chief in deploying and giving directions to our military and where they must go.

W: You're applying that now directly to Viet Nam, I take it--to the problem there.

D: Oh, definitely so. And when this issue came up, of course you recall the divisive feeling that existed in the country--probably not in proportion that you have it today, but it was there. I kept saying constantly, "There is no other place to go except to stand in the

Commander-in-Chief's corner."

You don't dare demean him anymore than a Britisher would ever demean his king or his queen. He may want to get after the Prime Minister, but never after the chief of state. It goes so easily, you know. Just think of what happened to cut under his influence and his prestige if and when we are to take that kind of a course here at home.

So as Commander-in-Chief I felt it was our duty to support him. We had our people abroad, and obviously you can't let them down. You know that mistakes will be made. They're always made, but mistakes or no mistakes, when a policy has been laid out you follow it until it's established beyond all doubt that it's the wrong policy.

W: I have heard people say--in fact I have said it myself and I believe it completely--that in connection with Viet Nam in particular that the Republican leadership of the Senate, meaning yourself, has been almost a God-send to him in these last two or three years, because of course it's a matter of record that many of the leading Democrats have been making it very difficult for him here on this matter. Without going into any personal thing particularly about it, why do you suppose that you obviously have so different a view of this Commander-in-Chief concept, or the necessity to support a country in the middle of a war, even if the policy is debatable, why do you think you have so much different view than these Democratic fellows have had?

D: Well, I go back to the Eisenhower days when Lyndon Johnson was the leader of the Senate and Sam Rayburn of Texas was the speaker of the House. You may recall the trouble we had over in Lebanon.

W: I do indeed.

D: I recall very vividly today that President Eisenhower called us all down, the joint leadership. After giving us a briefing by John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State, and by Allen Dulles his brother, who was the head of Central Intelligence, the President made a statement and then said, "Nobody leaves this room until I get an expression from him as to whether or not what we now contemplate puts us on the wrong road or the right road." And Sam Rayburn was sitting in the first seat and the President went right down the line and then back to the next line, and we had a pretty good delegation down there. And, of course, Sam Rayburn stood up for what the President was doing, and so did Lyndon Johnson.

There, you see, you had a Commander-in-Chief concept, and he was supporting the Commander-in-Chief although they were on opposite sides of the political fence.

W: I believe, if I'm not mistaken, that when the U-2 plane, the so-called spy plane was shot down over the Soviet Union--you remember there was a big uproar here about this, that,

and the other--if I'm not mistaken, the then-Senator Johnson very much supported him about that matter.

D: I think he did.

W: And you'll remember there was a good deal of criticism in the Senate then, and that relates to the same concept, doesn't it, that once we're in trouble, we're in trouble abroad, and that's that.

D: Yes.

W: I wonder if in this connection, again talking about Viet Nam, would you, looking at it now more or less in hindsight and retrospect and calmly, do you think that President Johnson in all these critical matters abroad gave adequate consultation to the Congress? In your judgment? Would you say that he did not, or that there was anything wrong with how he operated it?

D: I must say that as this matter unfolded I don't know how many times the joint leadership was invited to the White House, either in the daytime or in the evening, and even on a Sunday. There he was always flanked by the Secretary of State, his Secretary of Defense, maybe the head of the CIA and others. Then, after the necessary briefings, of course everybody had a chance to criticize, take exception, to do anything or say anything that he wanted. Out of it all, what they were trying to get, obviously, was a consensus view to make sure that it found favor with everybody. So it was easy to come by that Commander-in-Chief concept, obviously.

W: Senator, before we close this conversation I would like to ask you this--I think it's sort of a critical question for history. What was your reaction, or what was your feeling, when, I think at the end of April [March 31] of this year, you heard the President on TV announce that he would not seek or accept the Democratic renomination in respect to his desire to restore national unity in this country? How did you feel about it? What was your own private reaction?

D: I must give you at least this much background. The President and I are actually intimate friends.

W: Yes, I know that.

D: And have been for nearly a third of a century. The President told me many times at the White House, he would get his face up rather close when he was about to make a point, said: "Now, you know that I'm not a candidate for anything." He may have said that to me a score or more times.

I remember one day I said, "The first thing you know I'm going to believe it!" Whether or not he was really conditioning me for it, I can't say, although I doubt it very much. But it did come a bit as a surprise. I presume he and all others and Lady Bird must have evaluated this thing in terms of his future, his health, any other conditions that had to be taken into account, and then decided that this was the course to pursue.

And I have to feel that he did it in the interest of the country.

W: I do certainly. A final question, if I may. As you know, one of the stated reasons he gave for this extraordinary course was that in effect he wanted to still clamor and dissent within his own party, as well as the country. Is it your present estimate that he has considerably succeeded in that, or not at all, or how much?

D: Oh, I think he has.

W: In the Democratic side.

D: That's right.

W: Thank you very much, Senator. I certainly appreciate it.

D: My pleasure.

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