INTERVIEWEE: SENATOR PAUL H. DOUGLAS

INTERVIEWER: MIKE GILLETTE

WITH COMMENTS BY: EMILY TAFT DOUGLAS

PLACE: SENATOR DOUGLAS' HOME IN WASHINGTON D. C.

November 1, 1974

D: It has now been eight years since I served in the Senate and about six years since I finished my autobiography. I've had a chance to think still further over my dealings in the Senate and perhaps slightly to modify my views and opinions.

When Johnson was Majority Leader, my relations with him were, to put it mildly, not happy. He was an intensely ambitious man, anxious to get power and hold onto it, a rather curious mixture of pragmatism and idealism. His father had been, I guess, a Texas Populist and had served progressive causes in the Texas legislature. He himself had a touch of the High Plains, rather than the Deep South. He was active under Roosevelt in getting rural electrification through and in helping the small farmer. He had a progressive background, and I think this had entered into his spirit and was a fundamental feature of his character.

But Texas after Roosevelt was a very different place than what it had been. Gas and oil came to the fore. The gas was tapped instead of running wild, and there were still large native deposits of oil. The

men who owned these resources were the economic barons of Texas, and they were supported by the cattle owners of the big ranches and the sugar planters of the more tropical sections of the state. They had become intensely anti-Roosevelt and anti-progressive, and yet they were the dominant characters in the state and in the Democratic Party. These were interests which profited greatly from the activities of the Federal government in taxation. They had put through, at an earlier period, the depletion allowance, which gave them relative immunity from taxation, even though their profits had been large. They were powerful and strong, and no one could rise in Texas politics, apparently, if they opposed them. Johnson, therefore, had this struggle within himself of his native tendencies, his Roosevelt idealism, faced with the hard facts of power politics and economic power. He wanted to get ahead, and he could not get ahead if he took an opposition point of view to the big gas-oil-cattle-sugar interests.

So I, who believed in the more adequate system of taxation without any loopholes or truckholes, as I call them, who believed that special privilege in taxation should be eliminated, clashed with him, and I also clashed with him on civil rights for Negroes and Mexican-Americans. The Mexican-Americans so seldom are mentioned, but are are a very powerful element in my thought. The number of Mexican-Americans runs well into the many millions, and they were an almost forgotten group.

So, since Johnson represented the dominant interests in his state, we came into open conflict. It began in nineteen hundred and fifty, when we needed to raise revenue to finance the Korean War, and I wanted to close the loopholes and finance the war, in part, from those who had illicitly gained power and spared themselves. This brought me into conflict with Johnson. Then, also, the Negroes in the North were stirring, and Roosevelt had helped them somewhat. He had tried to help them. Truman had done even more, integrating the armed services even down to the platoon level. I had been dubious as to whether that could be done, because the Marine Corps was the most tightly segregated unit in our armed services, and I was a loyal Marine. But I realized the time had come when American citizens should not be divided on the basis of color or previous condition of servitude. The Consitution, in the words of Mr. Justice Harlan, was colorblind, and its rights, as granted under the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments, were to all Americans, regardless of color. That had been ignored, and those amendments to the Constitution had become inoperative. To try to put them into effect would change the domestic habits and institutions of the whole South. They also would change the habits of those states where the Mexican-Americans were an appreciable factor.

I think it is fair to say that when Johnson was in the Senate, he opposed all methods and all attempts to liberalize the position of

Negroes and other minorities. Therefore, we came into bitter conflict, and he was, I thought, somewhat rough in his treatment. I knew his situation, but I did not appreciate it emotionally. I had enough troubles of my own, so that I could not fully take his situation into account, and indeed ought not to have taken it into account. The number who would stick up in public for the civil rights of Negroes was relatively limited. The mountain states and the Pacific coast at that time had few Negroes, and the Southwest was in sympathy with the South, and the Northwest found that it was not a pressing issue. They would help if it came to a roll call, but they would not take the initiative. The Southwest, as I say, was in sympathy with the South. They had gone early to California over the Overland and Santa Fe routes, and had left behind them little enclaves of Democratic sentiment, pro-South, pro-slavery, and these continued in such states as New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah.

We had many clashes. The South, in order to prevent a vote, carried on interminable filibusters, talking for days and weeks, in one case, I think, for months. You could only break a filibuster by a two-thirds vote, which was tightened in 1949 to two-thirds of the membership, so that those who did not vote were counted as voting against aye vote and counted as against breaking the filibuster. The filibuster was powerful and strong, protected by the leaders and the

Democratic Policy Committee, which was largely composed of Southerners. We had to fight against it. The Republicans did not want to change the rules which protected the filibuster, because they wanted to be able to prevent a popular movement from acquiring strength and ultimately becoming dominant. So, in these battles, Johnson and I were on opposite sides. I felt it my duty--and it was also, I thought at that time, in my interest--to advocate the majority vote as a means of breaking a filibuster. Clinton Anderson thought 60 percent or 60 members instead of 51 could break a filibuster. The two-thirds rule required 67 when Alaska and Hawaii were brought in.

Suffice it to say Johnson won all the open battles, but the fights which we made so aroused public opinion that in general their position in the country and at the Democratic conventions became more and more precarious. I'm told that Richard Russell, the able leader of the Southern conservatives, has said that they could win battles, but that they were losing the war. This is perhaps enough, but it needs to be stated in order that the later change in Johnson should be emphasized. An indication of what was happening came in 1960. A Southern friend of mine, who was himself a liberal, came to me and said, "Douglas, are you sincere? I don't know whether you are or not. You have within your hands the power to really put these fellows on the spot. You can provide the Federal elections--Federal government would have the power to name voting registrars and

and deputize assistant United States Marshals to enforce the Constitution, and thus you would take over the control of the elections, and you could also limit the legal tests of voting."

I stared at him in amazement. He was a Southerner, but he was a secret supporter of civil rights! He said, "Now, I'm pretty sure that you will not use my name in connection with this, and if you do, I'll deny it, and I think that people will believe me rather than you. But I put the question to you, are you sincere, or are you just putting on a sham battle?" I was startled, but the more I thought it over, the more I thought he was correct. We had failed to provide for the direct use of force in Federal elections to insure free voting. So in 1960, we put that provision into effect in our bill. Then Johnson and Dirksen moved to strike it out, and they carried the day. Four years later, in 1964, as the fight for voting rights continued, Johnson and Dirksen put this same provision, in almost identical language, in their bill without any reference to their action in 1960.

What had produced the change? Kennedy had been assassinated in 1963, after less than three years in office, and Johnson, as the Vice President, had become President. As President he followed a much different course from what he had followed as Majority Leader. I had lamented his becoming President because I could not see how

he would change rapidly enough, so I hadn't counted on Johnson. As President, he was a progressive. No one could have been more vigorous than he, both on civil rights and on the position of the poor and the much abused. I asked Mrs. Johnson once; I took up my courage and asked her how she could account for this change. She said, "The President has to take into consideration many things that a senator does not." And that was that. In any event, as President, I found myself in general hearty accord. We did not agree on the Depletion Allowance and the other items of favoritism to oil and gas, which I have narrated in my autobiography in two chapters, but on everything else, we were in hearty sympathy. No one could have worked more vigorously for Negro voting rights than he, and I'm proud to say that our progressive group in both the House and the Senate forgot old sores and wounds and turned around and helped him without questioning his motives. I don't like to question men's motives; I judge them by their acts rather than questioning why they acted. I can say this, that it was a very happy period from '60 to '66, when I retired from the Senate by mandate of the voters.

The greatest shift in American politics occurred under Johnson. Public opinion had been moving, perhaps because, in part, we had stirred up the conscience of the country, and the political leaders of the country thought it wise to carry out as much reform as possible.

I think that's enough for the moment. You can ask questions now.

G: Senator, as you've narrated in your book, there were some areas of cooperation during those Senate years. Perhaps you would like to mention several of those--I think on the McCarthy censure--

D: I'll be very glad to. Johnson was splendid on McCarthy. He got every single Democrat, excluding Jim Eastland, to vote for, not censure, but disapproval of McCarthy, and combined with one-half of the Republicans, that gave a three-quarters vote for censure of McCarthy and was the beginning of his downfall. And he did this before he made the change.

G: How was he able to get a unanimous vote from the Democrats?

D: Well of course, it's clear how he got the Northerners. They believed in it. I never knew how he got the others. He had an uncanny ability of knowing their weaknesses and their strengths, and he played on their weakness and their strength.

G: Well now, didn't he also help you with aid to depressed areas?

D: Oh, yes!

G: Can you recall how he did this?

D: It was not openly stated, but he got the Senate majority to support it. That same majority raised the minimum wage to ninety cents and then to a dollar, and finally to $1.25 an hour.

G: Senator, I've heard here that you were seeking recognition once to make a speech, and he thought it was time to vote and that he had

the votes to pass the measure you were interested in, so he pulled you down by the coattails. Is that--?

D: I don't think that's true. It was not literally true. I think he may have wanted to.

G: But I think that you once wrote, "--with my programs and your legislative skill, we could make a great team."

D: Yes, I told him that, and he didn't disavow it.

G: Do you think he was sensitive about opposition from liberals? He seemed to have wanted to be as liberal--

D: Yes. Yes, I think he was sensitive.

G: He didn't seem to mind attacks from conservatives, but he seemed to resent being opposed by those more liberal than he.

D: Yes.

ETD: Was some of that because he started under FDR and with a liberal stance, and that was inherited from his father?

D: He operated through control of the committees, and through the control of the Democratic Policy Committee, he controlled what bills should be brought up for action and how. These committees were controlled by conservative Southerners. Has someone--has Richard Russell given an account similar to mine?

G: Well, we weren't able to talk to Senator Russell before his death. We tried, but, you know, he was in and out of the hospital.

D: That would be very interesting.

G: Well, an associate of his indicated that Senator Russell was responsible for drafting one of the civil rights bills, the '57 measure that was ultimately passed. He decided which parts would be acceptable to the South. Do you recall that?

D: I remember the bill very well, and the changes which were made in it, I think they were Russell changes. Jury trial. We were not opposed to the jury trial in severe conflict cases. We had no desire to be punitive toward the South; we simply wanted the law enforced.

G: Did you feel that that bill was "half a loaf?"

D: The bill of '57?

G: Yes.

D: I welcomed it as a step forward at the time it was passed, and it turned out not to be very acceptable. It didn't permit the Federal government to launch measures on its own, but merely to join in private suits which had been started by others, and the resources of the NAACP were not adequate to deal with the tremendous number of violations which were occurring. So in practice, despite our efforts to strengthen it in 1960, nothing was done, and it was not until 1964 and 1965 that progress was made. I would say it turned out to be a pretty weak instrument; Russell had accomplished his purpose.

G: Senator, do you think a stronger bill could have passed if Johnson had supported it more?

D: Maybe not. Maybe not, although I've often raised the question in my own mind: if we had passed civil rights measures thoroughly and loyally, would the later troubles have occurred with the same intensity? If the Negroes had really felt that the whites were sincere, they might not have rebelled as they did, and scenes of violence might have been less. But I think it's probable that they had learned from experience, not from argument, maybe that it would not have been accepted.

G: In your book, you indicated that Senator Humphrey was a good influence on Lyndon Johnson back during the Senate years, that he moderated his position somewhat. Can you recall any examples of this?

D: Yes, I think he was. On roll calls, Humphrey always voted with us, but he did not initiate measures after 1952, I think. Humphrey is a man whom I like personally better than anyone in the Senate, so I don't want to be thought unduly critical of him. But I think he made up his mind that he would not push the South too far. He'd vote with us and then keep quiet publicly, and I think it was a dual influence with Johnson. Johnson influenced him, to this effect, to that effect, and he, in turn, influenced Johnson.

G: Senator, there's been a lot of discussion over the years of classes of Senators. Every now and then, a very powerful, prominent group of senators gets elected at the same time, and it's often been said that the class of '48 was one of the rarest in this sense.

D: I think it was. It had Kefauver, whom I always thought was a splendid Senator, Humphrey, Johnson, and several others--

ETD: Lehman?

D: Lehman? He may have come in '50, I'm not certain.

G: Are there any other areas of cooperation? I think, possibly, housing measures?

D: Johnson was always an advocate of good housing and-Federal aid to good housing.

G: How about farm programs?

D: And on farm programs, he was for aid to all farmers, particularly the small farmers. We found a happy means of cooperation with him on those measures, even during the time that we were in conflict on civil rights and taxation.

G: Senator, you were always viewed as the economist of the Senate. Did Lyndon Johnson rely on your--?

D: Not in the slightest. No. I didn't offer advice, he didn't ask advice. I had no influence on him, I could assume.

G: Do you think that his economic policies as President were wise?

D: He should have started taxation earlier in the Vietnamese war. I supported the war because I was opposed to Communist domination, which suppressed freedom of speech and was really brutal in its treatment of individual dissenters and minorities. I had been attacked

as a Communist or Communist sympathizer, and I resented that. I was in fundamental opposition to their attempt to dominate the world. I supported the Korean War and the Vietnamese war, but they needed to be financed, and Johnson attempted to finance the Vietnamese war by inaction--didn't want to stir people up too much. So, we ran big deficits, which had to be met by bond issues and an increase in the supply of money, and this has been part of the cause of the inflation which started then and has continued.

G: Senator, I think one of the real landmark pieces of legislation in his administration was Truth in Lending, which you were, for many years, a proponent of. Can you tell us the story of--

D: Oh, yes! Do you know anything about that?

G: Well, I've read parts of it in your book, and I've talked to Esther Peterson about it. She indicates that you were a father of it many years before.

D: Yes. You read the story of that. My attention was really drawn to it by William T. Foster, who had been president of Reed College, who was a dear friend of mine, and who got Waddill Catchings to finance him on a foundation. Catchings occupied an ambiguous position. He was the leader of the bull market, but he also was author, with Foster, of books indicating that there was an internal contradiction in capitalism which, unless resolved, would undermine it. Foster advocated what he called "model lending" bills which would give the real rate of interest.

It was a common practice to charge on the principal originally loaned, even though it was being repaid, like putting a rent on a house and then having that so much a month on the basis of the original rooms, then cutting off a room every year so that at the end, you have only a small amount owed, but paid as though you owed for the whole lot. I took that up, and for eight years worked for it. First we had only, I think, five members of the Senate who were willing to go in with me, but I kept at it. We finally, with the aid of Senator Proxmire and Congresswoman Sullivan of Missouri, got Congress to agree after I had been defeated, and it was one of the happiest events in my life that it became a law. Johnson signed it in the East Room of the White House. All the people who had opposed it said what a great law it was. I've always been very curious to know what the Nixon Administration has done in enforcing it.

G· Now Senator, you also worked on the National Commission on Urban Problems.

D· Yes. Operating through Joseph Califano, I was offered the chairmanship of the Commission on Urban Problems right after my defeat in '66. After definitely clearing with Johnson that I was to have freedom of speech and freedom of utterance, I accepted finally. I had given a tentative acceptance first, but this was the final.

G· Did he readily agree to this, or did you have to persuade him?

D· I would say he didn't disagree. He wasn't enthusiastic about it, but he didn't disagree. I dealt mostly with Califano, and he was not a

constructive influence, and in the showdown, Johnson backed him up rather than supporting me. But we went ahead and made our report anyway, and I got a unanimous vote from the committee, which included a strong Republican in favor of it. It's been heralded by others as the best report on urban housing and rural housing that we've yet had from a national organization. But I'm sorry to say that I think some of Johnson's old animosities came to the surface, and he thought of me as the objector.

G. I think what happened on that report--and correct me if I'm wrong, Senator--Califano indicated that the report should be delayed and given to President Nixon when he came in and--

D. Yes. I pointed out that we specifically provided that we were to report before January 1, 1969, and that we would therefore be nonexistent. This was where Johnson reverted to his earlier type dealing.

We should have built 830,000 units in seven years; we built much less than that in 23 years. We were building at the rate of about 20 or 30 thousand units a year and were not meeting the need. There were other difficulties, too. Public housing developed weaknesses that congregate people living together, which were not good. Weaver had made a poor record, and he didn't want to be criticized.

G. Senator, on the subject of campaigns, President Johnson came to Illinois a number of times. I believe he campaigned for you in that last election, didn't he, in '66?

D: No. No, he could not. He was taken sick and operated on, so he did not campaign for me or for Pat Brown out in California. Both of the Kennedys came and campaigned for me.

ETD: He had told you when we visited the ranch that you were his first priority for reelection for the Senate, isn't that right?

D: I don't remember that.

ETD: Remember his taking you on a walk alone?

D: I don't remember that.

G: Senator, do you feel that your defeat was, in part, caused by your support of civil rights legislation?

D: Yes, in part. People felt that while they were for civil rights, they didn't want too aggressive and active a part, and the battle had turned from the South to the North. We had practiced segregation in the North--and wouldn't admit it--by keeping people in small districts. I supported legislation to have housing desegregated; this was too intimate for the North to take. Yes, by 1966, the attitude on civil rights, which had been popular earlier, was highly unpopular, and it hurt me. My years--I was then 74--also a factor, much more strong than I realized. I had a handsome opponent who was on all sides of every question, and in no sense a conservative or a liberal person.

G: Senator, didn't you accompany President Johnson to Mexico City for that Lincoln statue? Can you tell us about that?

D: Yes. It was so hurried, that I got so exhausted on the trip that I didn't have a very clear impression.

ETD: Marvelous crowds, do you remember, as we came in?

D: Yes. Yes, I accompanied him.

G: What about his relations with Senator Dirksen?

D: What?

G: Did he and Senator Dirksen work well together?

D: Yes.

G: Do you think his desire to, say, keep Senator Dirksen supporting him on pieces of legislation might have undermined your position in Congress?

D: Yes, I do.

G: How so?

D: Yes, that's true

G: Can you recall any examples, say patronage matters?

D: No, he never double-crossed me on patronage. I recommended good candidates, and he appointed them. He didn't double-cross me in that respect.

G: Can you recall any areas where his closeness to Senator Dirksen did impair your position?

D: There was one election--I can't quite remember whether it was '64 or not, I think '64. I was not a candidate, but we had a candidate against Dirksen. Step after step, Johnson gave Dirksen prominence and I think Kennedy did too.

G: Senator, I read in the files that Senator Johnson once wrote to you that there was no liberal since Harold Ickes that he admired as much as you. Could you comment on that?

D: I don't remember receiving the letter.

ETD: But at the ranch, he did take you aside and, don't you remember, and saying that you'd often had disputes in the past, and he believed now that the fault was mostly his.

D: Yes, he said that--

G: Can you recall that conversation?

D: Yes, that's true. I never gave it publicity, because I never believed in using it, a private conversation of the President, to uphold my position. But he did say that. That's true, and that's the first time anyone has ever mentioned it.

G: Can you recall how he said it, his words?

D: He said we'd had many disputes, but in looking back he felt that it was mostly his own fault--which I thought was very handsome of him, but I never used it to uphold my position because I thought it was confidential. It would hurt him.

G: Was this after you retired from the Senate.

D: No it was--

ETD: It was before your campaign--

D: --before the campaign. Yes, that was very handsome. No one has ever mentioned that before.

ETD: Nobody knew but you and he.

G: Can you recall anything else during that visit to the ranch that might be--?

D: Well, a good, prosperous, middle-class dinner, a trip around the ranch in a jeep. I can't drive; he drives very well.

ETD: We were in Florida--

D: Mexico, dear.

ETD: Mexico, was it? Yes. Oh, yes. And Lady Bird's brother flew a plane in, didn't he? He said he was going there anyway, and he took us back to the ranch.

D: We took Cantinflas, the Mexican comedian, with us whose wife was dying. She was hurriedly taken to Austin after we landed, where she died in a day or so. But it was a kind gesture.

G: Well, Senator, is there anything else you would like to add?

D: I don't know of anything. Do you know--?

ETD: Offhand, I can't think--

G: It's been very kind of you--

D: Not at all. I'm interested in Texans. I lectured in Texas for a man by the name of Elmer Scott, who had been head of Sears, Roebuck and who became converted to progressivism. He resigned from Sears, Roebuck, although it was not an illiberal institution, and set up a lecture bureau with about eight or nine places in Texas. In the Thirties I went down there two or three times and loved the state. It was

before gas and oil had become dominant. Have you ever read Edna Ferber's Giant?

G: No, sir.

D: When you have time, do so.

G: Did you recall Maury Maverick?

D: Yes!

G: How did he fit into this?

D: He was a rebel, and won in San Antonio by getting the help of the Mexican-Americans.

Ralph Yarborough was my friend; he was not a friend of Lyndon's, but I thought him a sincere man.

ETD: Lyndon tried to help him at the end, though, didn't he?

D: I wouldn't say so.

ETD: Oh, I thought he had. He told Connally that if he could bear to get along with him, Connally had better try, too.

D: Well, I don't know.

G: Well, Senator, we certainly appreciate it.

D: Well I'm very glad to do it.

G: I'll send you a copy of the transcript for you to--

D: Good. In large type, please.

G: Will do, yes. We have a speech typewriter that types for speech cards, so--

ETD: Oh, that would be just perfect for him.

(End of Tape and Interview)

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By PAUL H. DOUGLAS

to the

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