INTERVIEWEE: ALLEN J. ELLENDER

INTERVIEWER: T. HARRISON BAKER

July 30, 1969

B: This is an interview with Senator Allen Ellender of Louisiana. Sir, we were just chatting about this before the machine was on, but you came to the Senate the same year Mr. Johnson came to the House, in 1937. I believe you said that you just don't really recall when you first met him.

E: That's correct.

B: Do you remember hearing anything about him?

E: Oh, yes, I remember hearing when he first was appointed by President Roosevelt to do some work in Texas.

B: This was the Youth Administration?

E: Youth Administration, yes, and of course I heard of his connections with Congressman Kleberg and later, of course, I learned of his activities in the House where he was a great favorite of Speaker Rayburn.

B: Was this uncommon for Mr. Rayburn to single out people like that, or were there other favorites, too?

E: Well, I don't know of any favorite of his who was as close to him as was President Johnson. They were like peas in a pod when it came to being close to each other, and I believe that Senator Johnson leaned a good deal on Rayburn and I think it was mutual, vice versa as it were.

B: That kind of thing must make a young congressman stand out among all the others, too.

E: Well, of course, it's true. They knew each other so well since both of them hailed from Texas. And I'm sure that while President Johnson was a

member of the House that he worked very closely with Mr. Rayburn, and that Mr. Rayburn himself, of course, sought the advice of this young leader and probably used his talents in trying to het laws through the House because it was a close relationship between Mr. Johnson and the President. And, of course, Rayburn was also close to the President.

B: That would be President Roosevelt.

E: President Roosevelt, that's right, and both were consulted as I understand very much by the President, particularly the Speaker.

B: Then, sir, when Mr. Johnson entered the Senate in 1948, of course you had been there for some time by that time, did he immediately begin to move into the influential group in the Senate?

E: I think an hour after he was sworn in he began to do that, he was very active and one thing about President Johnson, he knew whom to talk to. He knew who had a little influence among various members of Congress. And I can well remember that among the first he tackled for assistance was Richard Russell from Georgia, who was very prominent at the time. And then, of course, other prominent Senators, such as Senator McClellan and many others, and he had a knack for learning who were the key men to see on any proposal that he intended to get through the Congress or the Senate.

B: Did he ever come to you for advice?

E: Oh, yes, oh, yes. Quite often. He came for advice only, that is on matters, particularly public works as well as agriculture. I found him very reasonable, but he was most anxious to see that Texas got its just share plus on the public works. He was very adamant on many occasions in having certain projects in Texas treated respectfully.

B: Does that kind of thing ever seem pushy or inappropriate?

E: Well, no, it's common in the Senate for Senators--to contact me often about projects that are in the offing or some that may be on the verge of being authorized and I'm even consulted there. Because my work in the Senate as head of the Public Works subcommittee is simply to provide the money after the projects are authorized. But I'm often consulted about authorization. Well, President Johnson, in my book, was a great conservationist and he felt, I belive, that, as I did, our two most important resources were land and water, and that we should take very good care of those two great resources. And his aim, of course, was to--as mine was--take whatever available funds there were and see to it that this program was carried on throughout the country. And I worked with him very closely in that respect, particularly after he became floor leader--Majority Leader-and we consulted quite a bit as to certain projects. Now in agriculture, of course, he didn't have to see me too often because my chief aim in the Senate was to work for the farmers. I worked with them all my life before I came to the Senate and he was very helpful in helping me to guide through the Senate measures that had to do with agriculture.

B: His ideas and yours about the same agricultural problems?

E: Well, yes, I would say so. Of course, he didn't know as much about agriculture in particular as I did, because I made a study of it from way back. But he knew a good deal about it and of course he was persuaded by, the same as I am I presume, by a call from home and calls from various agencies in government as well as out of government. We have, as you know, quite a few large farm organizations, and he was very responsive to their requests.

B: Did the relationship between Senator Russell and Mr. Johnson become like that he had with Mr. Rayburn?

E: Yes, but probably not quite as close. I believe President Johnson thought of Rayburn as a father and adviser, which he was. And insofar as Russell

is concerned, as you may know, for a long time Russell was the leader of the Southern Senators who fought these Civil Rights bills. And at the time that Russell was acting as such, of course we were able to get the assistance of President Johnson--that is when he was a Senator--but later on after he became President he kind of reversed himself, and I don't think he was as close, let's say, to Russell as he was prior to his election as President.

B: Was it just assumed that Mr. Johnson would move into the leadership position?

E: Well, he was a natural-born leader. He was very intense in whatever he did; he was adamant at times, but President Johnson had the knack of getting good men around him, good people who would attend to chores that he himself didn't have time to, and he was kept informed of all moves by Senators and their attitude towards this measure or that, and he had a knack of being able to send people to find out how Senator so and so stood, or this other Senator, and after he found what differences were between him and the Senator spoken to, why he would try to adjust matters to suit as many Senators as were necessary in order to enact legislation, which was something--he had something there, he was possessed of it, and he was very powerful when it came to the enactment of laws in which he thought should be passed and in getting proper support for enactment.

B: Did you ever get involved in that yourself, sir? Did he ever have to adjust to you?

E: Oh, sure, oftentimes in agriculture. Of course it was not necessarily President Johnson that made suggestions, but the Presidents did. With the assists of Johnson--President Johnson, while in the Senate--we were able to iron out quite a lot of differences that might have meant the passage or nonpassage of important legislation.

B: How does this go? Do you just adjust a bill to take care of people?

E: No. There may be some portion in a bill that was not acceptable to certain groups; for instance, in price support. Some thought they were too high, others too low, and things of that kind. And then the change of the formula for parity and all of that, and all of that was discussed, and President Johnson was pretty well versed on most of the legislation that he handled, that came before the Senate while he was Majority Leader. And when the word came from the White House after consultation that the White House desired to pass this or that bill, why I'm sure that he studied it very carefully and found out ways and means of obtaining support for it. He'd first find out who was for and who was against it. And he did that by having good subordinates, people working under him.

B: Like Walter Jenkins and Bobby Baker and that group?

E: That's correct. He was what I would term a draggle. Anybody that worked under Johnson had to work hard. He felt that "if I work hard, he can do as well as I can," and that was one thing that caused me to often say that I don't believe I'd like to work under him, because he was accused many times of being more or less a slave driver, you know. He didn't know when to stop and he felt that everybody had the same drive as he had and that if he sat up ten hours on a subject or studied it fourteen hours, he felt that the others he talked to should do the same thing, particularly with the people around him.

B: Did that ever get rough on the other Senators, too? Did anyone ever balk against that kind of--

E: Oh, yes, oh, yes. But he knew who to talk to. We had a few arguments now and then. I can remember on several occasions when I was speaking on the subject, he'd come and ask to please stop so that we could vote. Of course I'd send him back to his seat--he didn't mind that. But he was very warm

hearted, and when you first met Johnson, why you thought he was just a brute, that he was a driver, which of course he was. He had good manners when it came to trying to work with the people, and in my book that's why he succeeded so well.

B: Does any of this kind of thing ever involve just blatant trading of votes--log rolling. For example--I hope this isn't impertinent--but for example if Mr. Johnson wanted a Senator to vote for such and such a bill, would he promise him support for a public works appropriation in his area and come to you to get your help?

E: Well, all I can say is that I heard of such bargaining, but I'm not personally acquainted with it. I can't recall an instance where he came to me and asked me to put certain things in a bill so as to help anybody except probably public work, you know, to assist a Senator who either was up for reelection or was having a hard time to get something done for his state--but it wasn't anything unusual in a legislative body, the leadership sometimes takes things for granted but in order to check to get around to do a lot of personal work. And he often called Senators, that is, sent for them, and discussed matters with them in his office. I had quite a few rounds with him. Although we differed on many occasions, we remained staunch friends as far as I know.

B: What sort of things would you differ on?

E: Well, I would say the things we differed most on was after he became President the matter of civil rights.

B: Before we get into that, what was your opinion of Mr. Johnson's part in passing the 1957 Civil Rights Bill?

E: Well, without his help it wouldn't have passed. He was the driving spirit.

B: How did he avoid a filibuster on it?

E: Well, I don't know, but you know Mr. Johnson became very powerful, I would say, as a leader, and it's my belief that he was looking at stars far away; that is, he was probably thinking of getting into national politics at the time. I sensed that he was getting a little bit more liberal in certain areas, and later on, of course, I realized the reason for it, that he had political ambitions beyond the Senate, and of course it's natural for him to try to please as many people as he can throughout the country, and there's no doubt in my own mind that had he been a staunch supporter of civil rights at the time when he first came to the Senate he wouldn't have climbed as fast as he did, because of southern opposition. You see, the southern Senators--

B: You mean the southern Senators just would not have allowed it.

E: That's right. The Southern Senators stood back of him, as one, and, of course, later on I, myself, in debate quoted things that he had said one way, then changed his mind on the other; but then, as I say, it's natural for a man to do that who had political ambitions as he had.

B: Did his part in the '57 civil rights bill cause much resentment among southern Senators, like yourself?

E: Yes, it did. We just thought that he--well, some of them accused him of being a traitor to the South by making an about-face, because he was with us at all times and as a matter of fact he took part in many of the debates and later on many of us quoted some of his speeches wherein he said certain things which afterwards he reversed himself.

B: Did he attempt in '57 to explain what he was doing to you?

E: No, no. He simply felt, or argued, that the time had come when the Negro must be given his chance. Now, of course, we from the South agree to that from an economic standpoint. I myself fought against many of these civil

rights, but when it came to giving the Negro an equal opportunity for work, I never objected to that, and I didn't feel that we should have much complaint if the freedom of choice was left to the individual to do what he pleased. It was only when the laws proposed and later enacted that wherein the minority races, particularly the Negroes, were forced--that is, the Senate was asked by law to do things that should have been done in a normal course of events. And President Johnson, of course, as I said, changed his pattern before he was elected Vice President, and, as I said, I have no doubt what caused him to do that, and the measure was the fact that he had strong political intentions.

B: What did you think of his campaign for the nomination in 1960?

E: Well, he had great odds to fight, particularly--even though this '57 bill was enacted. We mustn't forget that it is only in the early days of our history that southerners were elected to office--I mean to national office such as President or Vice President--and when he started out a few people felt that he could gain enough support at the convention to obtain the nomination. And personally I don't believe he was very, very serious in his efforts, maybe he was, but I couldn't see it because he of all people knew of the fact that it would be hard to get northern supporters--I mean northern members of the convention--to draft a southerner for the presidency. Even with this new turn of his in the civil rights field the opposition could have always turned back on what he said in previous years, and, of course, that's what I concluded when he first announced, that he had little chance to get the nomination for the presidency.

B: Did he ask you for help in getting delegates lined up from Louisiana?

E: Well, I can't say that he did. No. But he expected it, I presume, because of our relationship. We were very close, and we worked together, and we had very little dissension.

B: You sound like you might not have been too surprised when Mr. Johnson accepted the vice presidential position.

E: No, I wasn't, and personally I think that's the goal he was working towards, and once he got on that ticket, why I was confident that he'd make progress in the future.

B: In other words, you think he might have been angling for the vice presidential position as an introduction into national politics?

E: Well, it was a stepping stone at any rate, and I think he realized that with a good running mate it was easy, particularly during the period of time that he ran, to be elected on a national ticket with the man he ran with.

B: Then you think Mr. Johnson felt pretty highly of John Kennedy?

E: Well, I don't think he thought very highly of him as a politician, you know, as a vote getter or anything like that, but men change their views depending on the circumstances in which they're confronted with people. I don't believe that President Johnson thought, at one time, that Kennedy had a chance to win, but later on as the campaign proceeded, when President Kennedy made such a fine showing on TV against now President Nixon, well it was then that the Democrats got together in a way that won the presidency for Mr. Kennedy as well as Mr. Johnson.

B: There's been some talk that Mr. Rayburn and Mr. Johnson may have thought that the issue of Roman Catholicism still was a powerful political liability.

E: Well, I do believe this. There were quite a few people who felt that President Kennedy had no chance to be elected because of his religious views. Now I'm no bigot; it didn't affect me any, but I do know that many former supporters of President Kennedy I believe voted against him because of his religious beliefs--there's no doubt about that, but the fact that

President Johnson got on the ticket kind of helped a lot.

B: Did it help in Louisiana--Kennedy got a pretty narrow plurality.

E: Well, he did, but North Louisiana went against him. That's where all the Protestants are in my state mostly--there's quite a few scattered all over the country, and, of course, at that time the Republicans had quite a bit of strength.

B: You also had that year the unpledged electors slate.

E: Yes.

B: Did Mr. Johnson talk to you about whether or not that could be headed off?

E: Well, to be frank with you, I didn't participate very much in that phase of politics; as far as I was concerned, I always kept out of national politics--that is, for the presidency. I was selected one time as national committeeman, and I was there for a while, but somehow I wasn't much interested for some reason or other, and I want to say that one of the main reasons was that I didn't think our southern friends had a chance to be selected. For instance, I think Senator Richard Russell would have made a wonderful President had he been able to get the nomination and then be elected.

B: He tried once.

E: He tried, yes, but he was a died-in-the-wool anti- --he was against integration by force, the same as I am. But except for the fact that he was from the South I think that he would have probably been President some day, but many felt that way. I think President Johnson felt that way at times a lot, as I said, because of the place of his birth and the people he represented. Well, he didn't get a fair chance, in fact he got very few if any votes from northern states. I do know a few shouted out for him, such as Senator Young from North Dakota. He was openly for Russell, but that was only one out of maybe a million.

B: Did you see much of Mr. Johnson while he was Vice President?

E: Yes, quite a bit, particularly when President Kennedy made efforts to enact his program. But I don't know, President Johnson didn't appear as strong as the Vice President as he did as a floor leader, because he couldn't exert himself; he couldn't do a thing of his own choosing as he did when he was Majority Leader.

B: Did he seem restive or unhappy?

E: Oh, yes, very, very, very--he was tamed down some, he was kind of held down, and he realized, I believe, like all the Vice Presidents, he had to go along with the President if he expected to climb the ladder higher. But all in all, though, he was of great assistance to the President. Somehow President Kennedy didn't have the push or didn't have the relationship with the Senators that President Johnson had, because Johnson served in the House for quite some time and then in the Senate for quite some time, and he knew everybody by their first name and he was a charmer, too.

B: During the years when he was Vice President, did Mr. Johnson work hard for the Kennedy legislative program?

E: Oh, yes, he did. But he didn't have the same powers or influence, or he didn't exercise it, as he had when he was floor leader.

B: After the assassination of President Kennedy, when Mr. Johnson became President, did you have any idea that the Kennedy policies might not be carried through in areas of civil rights?

E: I surely did. I didn't think they had a chance, but I soon realized that with the wave of emotionalism that spread all over the country at the time, that Johnson would get assistance from that condition. For instance, I had a lot of people write me from various parts in my state and even the

country--"Now, Senator, I know you're against this, that, or the other, but won't you please vote for this in memory of the late John F. Kennedy." And it's my sincere belief, and I expressed it on some occasions, that this wave of emotionalism assisted President Johnson in carrying out the platform which the Congress refused to adhere to while President Kennedy was President. And Kennedy's untimely death, why I'm sure that a lot of Congressmen and Senators voted more or less in memory of this great leader.

B: Did you have any idea that maybe Mr. Johnson, because of his southern background, might not push so hard in things like civil rights?

E: I surely did. All of us were disappointed.

B: When did you first realize that it was not going to be that way?

E: Well, as soon as I saw he was promoting all this legislation which we from the South, including himself, voted against so vigorously.

B: You mentioned earlier that you had talked to him during the years that he was President, argued with him, I think you said. What kind of arguments would he give you for his side?

E: Well, all I could get out of him after that was a smile or just a brush-off--

B: You mean he'd listen but just not say anything?

E: Well, yes. All of us, all members of the Senate who worked with him previously when he was part of us in the fight against civil rights, why this sudden change was quite a hard blow to us, and when he became President and more or less, I won't say forced the legislation through, but he took advantage of every opportunity to put this legislation through, and I repeat he was aided by the wave of emotionalism that spread all over the country. And that wave remained pretty high for quite some time.

B: I was going to say, not only were there Civil Rights Bills in '64 but again in '65 and as late as '68 in the Fair Housing law.

E: Yes. Those are subjects in which I myself and many Southerners are very much interested. For your information I was the first member of the Senate who passed the Public Housing Bill. I had a little difficulty in doing it, being from the South. It was thought a little on the liberal side, and I also fostered and had enacted, with others, a Minimum Wage Bill. That was not received too highly with people from the South. And then the first bill in aid of education, I was a part of it. And, of course, I was able to get quite a bit of help from President Johnson, particularly from the Education Bill, and things of that kind so as to improve the peoples of the country.

B: What did you think of Mr. Johnson's agricultural policies, or would it be better to say Mr. Freeman's agricultural policies?

E: Well, I was at the forefront in the advocacy of such bills. I've been on the Agricultural Committee since first I came to the Senate, and I favored any improvement on legislation that would give to the farmer a better way of life, and I felt that the 1965 act was a good step in the right direction. Certainly it was a great improvement on what we had in the past. And I think that Mr. Freeman was very, very liked by the farmers as well as the consuming public because prior to the time he was made Secretary of Agriculture his predecessors tried to get the consumer against the farmer arguing that the farmer got it all, and the prices of things the consumer bought were high and his predecessors really, instead of bringing the consumer close to the farmer, why it was just the contrary, and Mr. Freeman had a great chance to act in the opposite direction, and he did. And it was through him and other leaders, and of course President Johnson, that we were able to enact this 1965 act which is still on the statute books and it's working very well except that the cost of it is a little higher than I anticipated.

B: Did Mr. Freeman get along pretty well with you and the other members of the committee?

E: Oh, yes, excellent.

B: I seem to recall once he took the unusual step of going over your committee. Your committee rejected the cotton program in the '65 bill and he took it to the floor.

E: Well, to be frank with you, the first bill that Mr. Freeman submitted, I opposed quite a few of its provisions. And I told him what I thought should be in the bill. Well, he said, "I'd like to have it the way I submitted it." I didn't introduce the bill as Chairman of Agriculture, but the House through its chairman put the bill in as it was sent from the President's desk, and it was enacted almost in the same language as proposed. But when it came to the Senate we drafted a bill of our own which changed some, not materially, but I think made a better bill. Now when you mention my opposition to the cotton bill, of course I did this as a member of the Senate. I was licked badly in the committee, and it was only later that those who voted for this proposal saw the evils of it as I had proposed and tried to point out in Senate debate. And all of the things I'd said came to pass. Today cotton is in bad shape, as you probably know, and for the first time in our history, beginning two years ago, there was greater percentage of man-made fiber used in manufacture than was cotton. And instead of the production of cotton increasing, as was promised if we went to the one-priced system, it didn't materialize. On the contrary, the amount of cotton consumed today is less than at the time this new '65 bill passed. But I want to say that I had excellent cooperation from the White House in my views, and after the bill was enacted, of course, we had no trouble at all. I pointed out the weaknesses of it in conference before

the House members, and the House finally caved in and adopted practically all the Senate had injected in the Administration bill.

B: Did President Johnson take an active interest in agricultural policy?

E: Oh, yes, as President he did. Of course he worked through his Secretary of Agriculture. We had quite a difference at times. For instance, I well remember when the time came to renew the rice program, President Johnson felt new rice growers should come into the picture, not leave it all to old rice growers. Of course, knowing the subject as I did, I argued him out of that notion, and that was one of the things he agreed with me specifically.

B: That must be some kind of a record. I don't recall hearing many people who've argued Mr. Johnson out of anything.

E: Well, in this case I think I was very successful in doing it, and of course there's a lot of rice grown in Texas, as you know, and I think he got quite a bit of pressure from that area.

B: Sir, I know you have to go very shortly. Is there anything else you'd like to say on this kind of record?

E: Well, no, not in particular. Except that I'd just simply like to reiterate that of all leaders in Congress that I worked with, I don't know of one that was more effective than Senator Johnson, and of course I attribute that to his great--to his driving power, he never quit. When he made up his mind that this or that piece of legislation should go through, why he put his all in it in order to have it enacted, and, as I said, he had good people to work with, in his office and others, in other places, and he had methods of his own to see to it what he advocated got not only proper attention but effective cooperation and final passage.

B: Did those methods continue while he was President, and did they work as well from the White House as they did from the Majority Leader's office?

E: You mean after he--

B: After he was--did you see any difference between Johnson as Majority Leader and Johnson as President?

E: Well, he had more opportunity to work as Majority Leader; in this way he wasn't--the Senate didn't consider him a part of the body, although he presided, and he wasn't in the same position to--

B: I mean after he became President.

E: Oh, well, he called quite a few people to the White House while he was President to try to win them over, certain house calls, two or three times as I remember. And President Johnson did what very few Presidents tried in the past, and that was to consult with Senate leaders as well as with members of the Senate as a whole. He'd call the whole membership, say thirty at a time or thirty-three at a time, a third of the Senate, both Republicans and Democrats, particularly when he tried to put over legislation of a national character. In other words when there was no bipartisanship, and I attended many of these conferences and he had the leaders of the various--he had Cabinet members present and others to present his case, and he got up and summed it up. He was very effective in doing that.

B: Would these be particularly briefings on the Vietnamese war?

E: Yes, and also legislation affecting the Vietnamese war. You know, in respect to the so-called Tonkin Resolution, I for one opposed this resolution at first, and I had an amendment to it which I was to propose but I was talked out of it by none other than the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Mr. J. W. Fulbright. And I felt that the Tonkin Resolution was more of a declaration of war than any resolution I ever voted for except where war was mentioned specifically.

B: What was Senator Fulbright's reasoning?

E: Well, his reasoning at the time was this, that he had obtained the promises from Dean Rusk, you see, that this section that I referred to, which I think is Section III, would not be used, and you know the Tonkin Resolution was ostensibly put before us, as I recall, so as to give the President a heavier hand in dealing with the enemy in international waters. Of course, as you remember, we were attacked in international waters by the enemy, but this section of the resolution made that apply not only to international waters but to attacks on the mainland, and that in my mind was something that more or less was in the nature of a declaration of war, because it gave the President the right to defend Americans who proceeded to do the bidding of the Administration or worked in conjunction with the South Vietnamese in trying to sustain our business for being there.

B: Is that what your amendment dealt with?

E: Yes, it would have stricken it from the bill, but, as I said, I was talked out of it, and later on, in a White House conference, I can well remember being the only dissenter at the time to the Tonkin Resolution, and I told him that I was very much disappointed that Section III was used and that he was referring to that particular section as a backing from the Senate, when, as a matter of fact, that wasn't the picture painted before the Congress by the head of the Foreign Relations Committee. And the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, at the time felt that this particular section which I opposed wouldn't be used. Anyhow, to make it more or less unanimous without too much conflict, I agreed to withdraw it.

B: Did you get any pressure from the President himself?

E: No, sir, because it all happened, you know the resolution was enacted soon after it was reported out of committee, and I may say that many Senators, I don't suppose, studied the resolution very closely, because we were told

it had to be enacted immediately and the more Senators who voted for this the better it would be. And only two Senators out of the hundred voted against this proposal.

B: Sir, I know it's about time for you to go. Anything else you'd like to say in here?

E: No. Oh, there's a lot of things I could say about President Johnson, but I had him over at my hideout many times. He loved to eat my gumbo, and the pralines that I made; he was natural, you know. There was no--

B: What's he like on occasions like that? Does he talk still about politics?

E: He talks friendly--he's very friendly. He may appear distant when you first meet him, but when you talk to him he becomes warm hearted, and I remember often times him even suggesting, "when is your next meal," "when will you next have the--", but he really and truly liked Southern cooking, and I can say that he had a good appetite and never refused to eat his just share of whatever I cooked.

B: I heard he could tell a pretty good story, too.

E: Oh, yes, but at times the President is a little shy, believe it or not. He's not one of these fellows who can get up and tell a good story at any time.

B: Is he shy when there are strangers around?

E: What I mean by that is, I don't believe that President Johnson liked public speaking very much; that's my impression. I don't think he liked to make speeches as some do, and his mannerism was sometimes kind of strained when he met with people. I don't know, sometimes he was misjudged by his facial expressions. Anyhow, he was a fellow well met, and, as far as I'm concerned, I always liked President Johnson very much from the time I started working with him. He was a true friend. He didn't try to violate any promises he

made to you; of course I didn't ask him for much. All I did was to simply work with him for the good of the country.

B: Thank you very much, sir.

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