INTERVIEW III

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INTERVIEWEE: ASHTON GONELLA

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

MG: I wanted to ask you about LBJ's relationship with his mother. First, while she was alive did you ever meet her?

AG: Yes. A lot of times we would go by her house and sit and have coffee and talk with her. They had a happy relationship between the two of them. She was his, quote, "Mama," and he respected her. He liked to tell people about her ability, her intelligence, and her love of poetry and English, and this was always something he liked to brag about.

MG: Well, what was she like as a person when you were around her?

AG: She was a very, very gentle, gentle lady. Of course she was up in years and when I met her, not in real good health; not ill or anything, but she just was. . . . I'm trying to think how old she was at that time. Very gracious, and very proud of him, very proud of him.

MG: Anything else on their relationship?

AG: No, not that I can think of.

MG: Let me ask you to describe his conversations about her.

AG: Do you mean while she was alive or afterwards?

MG: Both, both.

AG: Well, I've said before while she was alive he was very proud to introduce her to people and brag on her and so forth. I think, after she

died, I guess as all of us, we realize what we've lost, and then things come back stronger and you realize the influence your mother had on you. And I think she did indeed have a big influence on him, as far as sitting and teaching him to read and being with him. I think he very much missed--it made him realize that he'd missed other opportunities to be with her during times in Washington, maybe sometimes he wouldn't go by to see her every time he went to the Ranch or something like that, and I think he probably regretted that. But that happens to all of us.

MG: Yes. Do you think that his mother helped diminish the sibling rivalry in that family, or did she exacerbate it?

AG: Well, not purposely she wouldn't have, but the fact [was] that she was proud of him, and he was a big, good-looking man and had done well, and maybe none of the rest of them had really made a mark in national life, if you want to put it that way. So every time he came to town his picture was in the paper and [if] she was with him, that might have stirred up something, but she didn't do it deliberately by any means. I don't think she said, "He's my favorite child and he's better than you," and so forth. But Sam Houston was indeed jealous of him, and I think the girls were, the sisters.

MG: Did she expect LBJ to take care of the others? Give them employment opportunities. . . ?

AG: No, I don't think so, but I think those of us who grew up in that area of the country [know] the mother always wants all of the children to get along and be one big, happy family, and if there is any disagreement, it's upsetting. I don't think she would have ever said, "Help out this one because she's not doing well, or help out that one."

(Interruption)

After the election I think there were eighteen new Democratic senators and he [LBJ] had looked in the paper and none of us had realized it, but at breakfast Sunday morning he announced that twelve of them were Catholics and that he wanted to find out something about the Catholic religion if twelve of them could be elected. So at that time Luci was either in the process of her conversion or had completed something. So he said to Luci, "All right, Luci, we're going to go to your church and I'm going to find out what all this is about." So all of us went down to the Catholic church outside of the Ranch that Sunday morning out of deference to the new senators.

MG: But Luci didn't change religions until later, did she?

AG: Well, that's what I can't remember. It had been several years that she had wanted to do this, and I think at that time she was in the process in her own mind of wanting to convert.

MG: Let's see, in 1958 she would have been only--what?--eleven or twelve years old?

AG: She would have been about twelve, that's right, that's right. But she had early on thought of taking up the Catholic religion.

MG: What did this new large Democratic majority in the Senate do in terms of LBJ? How did it change his leadership?

AG: I think in his mind it certainly enhanced it. The majority party only has to be by one, but I think the fact that it was such an overwhelming majority, he had all this new talent from all over the country, it was an amazing election, just a sweep. And then, obviously, trying to jockey around for committee assignments and so forth changed the makeup of the Senate.

MG: Some of the analysts have concluded that it was actually easier for him with that one- or two-vote margin the years before to maintain unity than it was when they had the big--

AG: Well, I don't know whether it was the numbers that made it unwieldy; I think as time went on and the ones coming in in 1958, it was new geographical blood and new philosophical. In other words, in the very beginning when I went there in 1957, I think every major committee chairman and the second and the third in line were all southerners with the exception of [Warren] Magnuson and [Henry] Jackson, those two committees. All the other committees, three deep, were all southerners. Those were people he could relate to and it wouldn't have mattered, the numbers. But then when you started getting in Democratic senators from the East, the Midwest, the North, they had different ideas and different thinkings, and I think that's what made it unwieldy, more than just numbers.

MG: He was criticized by [William] Proxmire, among others--

AG: Oh, yes.

MG: --for his iron rule of the Senate, one-man rule, and basically exercising too much power, thereby diminishing the representation that each senator had in fact. What do you think about this?

AG: Well, there again that was someone that came in new and suddenly wanted to be a big star. I don't think you ever had that criticism before with the Dick Russells, the Bob Kerrs, the [Estes] Kefauvers. They didn't feel that they were diminished because LBJ was leader. They had a voice and they were recognized and could accomplish things, but the newcomers suddenly got to town, and "I'm one of a hundred, but I want to be a big

boy." And I think that is what bothered Proxmire and [Richard] Neuberger and those that felt they were lost in the crowd by seniority.

MG: What was LBJ's reaction to this criticism?

AG: (Laughter) At first I think it was kind of like when your child misbehaves. I mean, he's a member of your family, but you want to spank him and punish him. And I think, as everyone knows, LBJ was very thin-skinned. He wanted everybody in this world to like him and love him, which is impossible, but whenever anyone didn't like him or criticized him, I think he really did truly hurt. And then he got mad and wanted to retaliate: "I'll put him in his place."

I myself believe in the seniority system. I see what happens in the Senate today wanting to make everybody a chairman of a major committee. That's why they formed all the subcommittees, so that everyone could be chairman of something. And it has weakened the Senate as a whole. It's not as effective as it was then.

MG: How could LBJ retaliate against someone like Proxmire?

AG: Through legislation; I mean in other words, the scheduling of a bill that he might have wanted or not wanted and through--of course he already had his committee assignment, but certainly through any future growth in anything. Because the majority leader does control, you might say, the Policy Committee, which is as it should be; he is the majority leader. He could prevent legislation from coming on the floor or he could push it, and that was always an ace in the hole for anything. And it is today.

MG: Let's talk about his relationship with some of the other liberals, like Hubert Humphrey, during this time.

AG: Well, I think they had a good relationship. I don't think LBJ was as liberal as some people like to make him out to be, and I don't think he ever thought about, "This is liberal," or "This is conservative." I know I'm prejudiced, but I do believe Mr. Johnson put the country and the welfare of the country above everything else. He didn't think about, "Is this liberal or is this conservative? Is this going to get me votes or is this going to lose me votes?" He was for civil rights--that was incredible for a southerner to come out pushing civil rights--and got the other southerners, most of them, to go along with him. But I don't think that was an influence of a liberal senator coming to him. But he got along with [Jacob] Javits and Humphrey, on both sides of the aisle.

MG: Did Humphrey influence him, do you think, on other types of legislation?

AG: I don't know that I think he did. No.

MG: Did he influence Humphrey?

AG: Well, there you've got two very strong people. I think--what am I trying to say?--Humphrey was a little more narrow in what he was trying to accomplish, and it strictly was liberal. Whereas, when they would work on that particular type of legislation he and Johnson worked together and perhaps there was some influence back and forth. But it wasn't as though they were together on everything. If that makes sense.

MG: Yes. Did he use Humphrey as a mediator with the liberal group?

AG: Oh, I think he would sometimes appear with him as that, but I don't think he needed a mediator like that. I think he had his own ins with the labor group--Mr. [George] Meany, [Andrew] Biemiller--and that had been established for some time, so I don't think he needed that much of a mediator. Then there were the really left liberals like Joe Rauh and

those people that perhaps you sometimes needed people to smooth things over, but then I think he would more go to Jim Rowe or George Reedy to do underground behind-the-scenes work.

MG: Wayne Morse was critical of LBJ during this period, too.

AG: Yes.

MG: How would you assess his relationship with Morse?

AG: Well, that was kind of hard to figure out because, let's see, Morse changed parties, what, twice or three times, while I was there. (Laughter) I don't think Morse was that significant a figure to make a great impact; as I say, Mr. Johnson simply didn't like anyone to disagree with him or criticize him.

MG: Do you think the criticisms were at all justified? Was there a measure of truth in them?

AG: Well, that's hard to say because I am prejudiced. From my point of view, having worked for him, I thought Proxmire and [Albert] Gore were extremely out of line; they were probably the worst as far as public criticism. And you can always tie it to something, some incident--Proxmire could say the Senator had taken away their importance, their individuality, and so forth and so on, and effectiveness. Well, you could twist that in a court and prove a point, but I don't think it's justified.

MG: Do you think that these criticisms were the result, rather than a philosophical problem or a problem in principle, of them not getting something they wanted?

AG: I think it's just the makeup of the United States Senate. You've got a hundred men, and they all want to make the front page of the *Washington Post* every day; they all want to be the author of the greatest

legislation, they all want to be the spokesman. And they simply cannot. They are all frustrated because they're competing with ninety-nine other people, and so their staffs sit and think, "What can I do to bring him to the forefront?" That's a lot of competition. And they're paid to sit and think up ways to get their boss's name in the paper.

MG: You've mentioned, before we started this, that one of the significant daily routines was members of the Senate coming into LBJ's office and having a drink, discussing legislation, and really resolving some of the issues in a rather informal way.

AG: Yes.

MG: Let me ask you to elaborate on this.

AG: Well, that happened usually, I will say, after six o'clock at night or five o'clock at night; there was never any drinking or anything during the day. But in the evenings the Senate always was in session until eight or nine o'clock. He just believed in keeping everybody there until you got your job done. Various senators would come in from both sides of the aisle, sit and have a drink and talk business, talk about what was going on on the floor, how they could get this through to the best advantage of everybody. I think his relationship with [Everett] Dirksen was the most unusual. I don't remember that much about [William] Knowland, but every morning at eleven forty-five Senator Dirksen came in the office and sat down, and they talked about what was going to happen that day. And I don't know that that's ever been done since, with the two leaders sitting down and doing it from, not a cut-throat point of view, but they actually wanted to make the Senate run smoothly and accomplish something. I've seen at night, six o'clock, all the various senators come in from time to time. [John] Pastore would

come in, and [Clinton] Anderson and [Robert] Kerr, all of them, you know, that wanted to just sit down and get something accomplished as far as the Senate was concerned.

MG: In what other ways was his leadership unique?

AG: I think everybody--not everybody, that's a broad statement. I think the majority of the senators felt that above all he would be fair. In other words if a senator had a proposition to bring before the Senate, legislation or what have you, he would come to Mr. Johnson and present it, and I think they felt that he would be fair and listen. Now he was persuasive, we all know that, but I don't think they felt that he was like a dictator--except one or two.

MG: To what extent was his success attributable to his ability to count noses and know exactly where a senator stood on an issue?

AG: Well, I think you have to be a vote counter or you can't do anything. I think a lot of credit has to go to Bobby Baker for that, too. He was one of the best vote counters the Senate's ever had. Nowadays if something is coming up, it's a toss of the coin; I mean, no one knows which way it's going to go until the vote is cast. And we didn't have a surprise element too often. You knew.

MG: How was Baker able to do this, or how was LBJ?

AG: He constantly was sitting and talking with the senators, and you knew where his commitment was. And if we needed a vote that we didn't have, then that's the time to sit down and say, "Well, all right, let's compromise and talk about this. If you'll go along with this, then you know you've got that bill you want for the army base back at your home or something; we'll trade out or something." I don't consider that bad,

a lot of people do, but I think the art of compromise is just that, an art.

MG: To what extent do you think LBJ's powers or effectiveness as majority leader was attributable to his ability to raise funds for his colleagues who were supporting him, campaign funds?

AG: That's a little difficult, I can't assess that as much because that was a different time. The raising of funds then was not anything like it is today. Today you can't survive without hefty contributions, the PACs [political action committees] have changed everything, and it's a whole new world. I don't think then--though you needed money, obviously--but there wasn't the impact of television, there wasn't--I don't think it was that significant.

MG: You could get by with less money.

AG: Yes, yes.

MG: Did the other senators need his money or the money he could raise as majority leader?

AG: Well, as I say, all campaigns need money; you've got to buy ads, you've got to do things and so forth, but just in that day and time I don't think it was that significant. Maybe I'm totally wrong.

MG: Do you think they saw him as a fund raiser, the other senators?

AG: No, I think they saw him more as a drawing card. I mean, if he would come into somebody's state and speak at a dinner for them, that was quite a coup. A picture in the paper, a drawing card, but I don't think that meant people were going to shell out all of this money because LBJ had gone to New Mexico or South Dakota or something.

MG: You didn't see the monetary aspect as a major ingredient of his power?

AG: Not that much, I really didn't.

MG: How about committee assignments, was this a major--his ability to promise committee assignments?

AG: Oh, yes, yes, that's politics. But there again I don't think he ever supported any senator for a committee chairmanship or ranking, down the line, if it wasn't to a mutual senator's advantage and the state. In other words, you wouldn't put someone head of Appropriations that had absolutely no background just for the heck of that. I think there was some rhyme and reason.

MG: We haven't talked about his relationship with Ralph Yarborough, the new senator from Texas. They had been political foes throughout the 1950s, I gather, with Yarborough representing the liberal-labor element. Let me ask you to analyze their association.

AG: I don't think their lack of congeniality, if you want to put it that way, had anything to do with their political philosophies. I think LBJ--I'm putting words maybe in somebody else's thoughts--but I don't think he felt Yarborough was of the caliber. . . . I don't think he thought he had the background, the broadness, the intelligence, the ability, and so forth to represent Texas. That may be a harsh statement to make, but I think there were times when he showed embarrassment when Yarborough spoke on the floor because I think he thought, "This is my fellow senator, from my state," and I think he was really embarrassed at times, and so said.

MG: Describe, if you will, that occasion when--

AG: I think it was when Yarborough was making a speech, and he got up and started saying things that really were not in keeping or what have you with the issues. I looked over and LBJ had just put his hands over his head, and head down on his desk, in just sheer embarrassment. It was a

little amusing at the time, but he felt it. And I don't think they ever had what you would call a good relationship, which is bad, for the two senators from the same party from the same state.

MG: Were there times when he and Yarborough could work together on--?

AG: Oh, I think there were times when they had to. With various functions in Texas, you had to appear on the dais together. So I mean it wasn't open war between the two of them where they didn't speak or didn't shake hands. Oh no, but there just was not the close working-together relationship. Whereas there was a very close working relationship with the Texas delegation. As you know they met, I think it was every Tuesday, if I'm not mistaken, for lunch. And that was a unique thing to any other state. I don't know of any other state that did then or does now get together to talk about legislation that affects the state on both the House and Senate sides. And it was a very unique, worthwhile--
(Interruption)
--had a Mardi Gras ball in Washington and it usually is the week before Mardi Gras at home. It started out in the Mayflower Hotel, where I guess the first time we had maybe seventy-five or a hundred people; now there are about twelve hundred. But each year they have a queen, and each year it rotates among the delegation as to who is chairman. This particular year Hale Boggs was chairman, and his daughter was queen at that time, and because they had such a good relationship--Mr. Johnson and Mr. Boggs worked together a great deal--LBJ agreed to crown the queen, which is a big thing and so forth. I think he stayed for the dance, then afterwards there was the breakfast for the queen, which was hosted by the Boggses. And then every year thereafter, maybe before, he always went to Hale Boggs' summer garden party, which was one of the big

social events in Washington among the politicos. They had a fine working relationship.

Mardi Gras is--they are very protocol conscious, and they have the "krewe" that comes in and these are businessmen who have contributed to the occasion and they are dressed up in costumes. You have the krewe dance, and that's call-out dances; you call out the ladies and you give them a present and you all have to sit while this is going on. LBJ said, "I want to dance," and he asked me if I would dance, and I said, "Mr. Johnson, you can't do that now; this is the krewe dance." He said, "Nobody's going to tell me when I can't dance." So up we stood, and we took about three steps, and then he realized, I think, that that was not the thing to do. But it was really a funny, amusing thing.

MG: You mentioned before we turned on the recorder that he admired Huey Long. Let me ask you to elaborate on that.

AG: I was not here at the time, and I guess some of his older staff, people who were with him longer than I, could give you more detail. It was my understanding and he told me that when he first came up here to work that he had made friends through the pages and so forth, and that whenever Huey Long was going to get up on the Senate floor and make a speech that they would contact him, and he would leave the House side and come over and sit in the gallery to listen to him. He just had a very deep admiration for him. I've heard him tell that to Russell Long and bring tears down Russell Long's face, to tell him how much he admired his daddy. For that reason he also had a good working relationship with Russell Long.

MG: Did he admire Huey Long for his programs and positions as well as his speech-making ability?

AG: Well, that's hard to say, I don't know that he ever elaborated to that depth, and of course Huey Long died in 1935, so I don't know. But I guess as a youngster, you have someone that you just admire for any number of reasons. I don't know whether it was his philosophy, his style, his what, accomplishments. He did say that he never missed a speech that he made on the floor.

(Interruption)

That makes it look as though [James] Rowe just suddenly decided that Humphrey was his choice and went and joined his campaign and that really was not the whole truth. He wanted Johnson to be president, he wanted to work for him on the campaign, but he got so impatient. He would come in every week: "Are you going to announce?" And Mr. Johnson would say, "No, my job is in the Senate, and I'm going to stay here and be majority leader." And Rowe just got more and more impatient, he wanted to get into something, and figured it was too late, and here we are only in March of 1959. Finally he got mad and stormed out of the office and the next thing you knew he had gone with Humphrey to work on his presidential campaign. But I think something ought to be said that it wasn't that he just suddenly decided to jump on Humphrey's bandwagon. He really wanted Johnson, but he was a very impatient man, and thought it was time to get rolling.

MG: Do you think LBJ felt that he was losing time, campaigning time?

AG: No, maybe I'm naive, but I think the man really and truly genuinely felt, "I cannot leave the Senate." Those were his children, his family; he was majority leader, he felt he could not be running a presidential campaign at the same time, that he would lose all of his credibility in

the Senate, and he felt his duty to the Senate. I think he was sincere about that.

There is no mention in here either of when--or maybe that's in 1960--Bobby Baker opened up the office downtown, the LBJ for President office. Have you got that mentioned in there?

MG: Citizens for Johnson?

AG: Yes.

MG: Tell me about that.

AG: I can't think of the month, but I remember all of a sudden someone told Mr. Johnson he had seen this, and I have never seen him as livid and furious at anything, and he called Bobby. Bobby said, "Yes, Mr. Leader, we went on and did this." [Johnson said], "You go down and you take that sign down this minute; you close up that office." And Bobby had to do it. I guess Bobby thought, "Well, we can just go on and do this, and he hasn't sanctioned it so he can't be blamed for doing it." And Mr. Johnson got--I thought he was going to kill Bobby.

(Laughter)

I really did.

MG: Was it again the feeling that he had to stay there and--

AG: He had to stay with the Senate.

MG: --mind the store?

AG: Right, right. Well, Mr. Johnson always said, and I think it was when we were in Dallas or else just before we went to Dallas, he said, "An election is won or lost in the last week." And he proved to be absolutely right.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III

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