INTERVIEW III

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INTERVIEWEE: RALPH K. HUITT

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

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

Tape 1 of 1

G: Let's start with what you were saying earlier about Johnson's relationship with John Foster Dulles.

H: All right. Without being able to answer that definitively, which you will understand, I would say that I think their relationship was a warm, mutually trusting relationship. Johnson had the practice of not making decisions on an issue or on a subject without first checking with all the experts he could. He did this whatever the issue was. If it were an agricultural issue, why, he'd want to know what the agriculture people felt about it. And he did that, of course, on foreign relations.

One day he had an interview in his office with Mr. Paul Ringler, the principal editorial writer of *The Milwaukee Journal*. In this interview some of his habits certainly were evident. One thing was that he intended to convince Mr. Ringler absolutely and completely. It's very important to him to do that because Ringler was interested in talking to him in the first place because the midwestern liberals were so critical of Johnson. They were critical of Johnson because, in their view, he was not making issues. Now this was 1958. There was an election that year, of course. There would be another one, a more important one, in 1960 when the presidency would be up for grabs. It was their point of view--and I've heard them say this many, many times--that Johnson should

be taking issue with Eisenhower and, if possible, making Eisenhower look bad by setting up issues which the Democrats could take him on.

What Ringler was interested in was finding out what Johnson thought he was doing and why he adopted the strategy he did. Johnson was very eager to tell him about it because he wanted him to go back and put it in *The Milwaukee Journal*, which is one of the great newspapers, and certainly one of the two or three best in that part of the country. So he really gave him what was called the treatment. He was just as effective and as convincing and played the role of the leader. One of the things that he did, which I think probably is not the proper thing to do, but nevertheless is very impressive, was to call a couple of people on his telephone and put the conversation on a box that made it audible throughout the room, so that you could hear what Johnson said, and you could hear what the other person said.

One of these calls was to Olin "Tiger" Teague of Texas, who was the chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee in the House of Representatives. They had an interesting piece of byplay in which Johnson told him he needed his advice on some veterans matter. He said, "I have to go to you for that, Tiger, because we don't have a veterans affairs committee in the Senate. We'll get one someday." Teague said to him, "Oh, heavens," or something, "Lyndon, don't get a veterans affairs committee. You don't need a veterans affairs committee. We don't need one either." Well, of course, he was never quoted on that, but he did say it and it was heard by people he didn't know were in on the conversation.

A little later then he called John Foster Dulles on the telephone and again put it on

the box. He asked Dulles for his advice on some piece of foreign policy. So we heard the Secretary's advice. It was from this conversation that I became impressed that these men trusted each other and liked each other, because it was clear that Johnson was in the habit of calling Dulles, and Dulles was in the habit of answering cordially and telling him anything he wanted to know. This, of course, too, was very impressive to someone like Ringler who sits there and sees someone call the Secretary of State and get him instantly, just as if he were calling his secretary.

That of course was what always happened where his office was concerned. I know that as one of the lowliest people in the world, when I was there in 1954 and he was minority leader, I could call any government agency or anybody in town and ask for any kind of information or any document or anything like that and get immediate service on it, because everybody knew he was the minority leader. Everybody knew that he might become, and of course he did become, the majority leader in a couple of years.

A little later in 1954 I went over and spent about six weeks in Jack Brooks' office, Jack being a first-term congressman from Texas. I'd try to get things from people and I couldn't even get their secretaries, much less get the things that I wanted. Nobody hopped and skipped for a freshman congressman. But once you said that word, "This is Senator Johnson's office," then the people came across.

Well, I must say that Ringler became tremendously impressed with Johnson's strategy. Johnson told him that he did not think that the American people wanted someone to oppose the president for the purpose of opposition. That he thought the issues would fall out in good time, and that he thought what the American people would

be impressed with was a government which was getting its job done. He said, "If we set ourselves up as obstructionists, and if we attack a popular president of the United States, then we will go into the election of 1960 with that kind of record, and people will know that the Democrats have kept things from happening." So he thought much better of something that Eisenhower proposed that the Congress worked into acceptable shape for themselves and passed, than he did of the occasional veto which they provoked because they passed something the president wouldn't sign, and then the hassle of trying to get something else which the president would sign.

(Interruption)

There was a labor bill--and we could look it up, because I remember who the principals were--in the early summer of 1958. It was going to be difficult to get that bill passed because in the Labor and Public Welfare Committee in the Senate, the principal proponent of the bill was Senator [John F.] Kennedy, and the principal obstacle was the fact that Senator [John] McClellan had a bill of his own with very, very many amendments to the existing law. His, of course, was very conservative, where Kennedy's was fairly liberal. So the leader passed this in the way that he passed difficult pieces of legislation. He got the principals together off the floor and they worked at some kind of compromise in which ultimately they would be able to bring a bill to the floor with the principals pledged not to accept any amendments and not to try to amend it themselves. Later on then I believe it was McClellan, some six weeks later, would get to bring his bill to the floor, so he would have his inning in that manner.

So they were stalling the Senate, again, a Johnson tactic. When he had an

important bill that had to be worked out he would keep the Senate in session, because he thought it would look bad to the country and it would be poor for the Senate. He might even lose senators who would go somewhere if he didn't keep it in session. Now he didn't keep it late, but he did do a day. I remember this particularly because they were looking, on a Wednesday as I recall, for senators to come down and make speeches. They wanted to keep the Senate in session, but they did not want to put another bill up. So Senator [William] Proxmire was invited to come down and make a speech. He gathered up his papers and set out for the Senate floor, because it wasn't very often that he was invited to make a speech. This time, of course, they wanted someone to talk. Senator Proxmire had the little rostrum up on his desk, had his speech there and was about to be recognized by the presiding officer, when suddenly the big swinging doors at the back center of the chamber came open and in strode Johnson, McClellan and Kennedy. Johnson used the leader's privilege of getting the floor any time he wanted it. He got the floor and he called up the labor bill. These three leaders voted down some, I think, eighty-five amendments offered from the floor. They stood fast and the Senate defeated all but, I think, one of them, which they decided to accept. This included amendments in the very language of parts of Senator McClellan's bill. He opposed them because of the agreement.

So this [is the] business of knowing that there were two or three persons in almost every situation who among them could control the outcome, if they could be brought together--and it was Johnson's belief that some meeting ground could be found on anything, he just had to find the key to it. So he got these three together and found that

the key to this particular bill was the promise that both bills would ultimately be considered. That got the support of such diverse people as Kennedy and McClellan and got that passed.

G: Why don't you take a look at this list of senators. This is a year later, 1955. I'm wondering if you can give me some idea what Lyndon Johnson would look at in dealing with these senators, or at least some of them that you may have some insight on. What considerations would he have in trying to get one of these senators' votes?

H: Well, I don't know that this is anything that you're interested in, but one thing that interested me was that Johnson had many favors that he could perform for senators who went along, for senators who were helpful, for senators who asked him for it. One of them was that if a senator had a bill which was not going to pass, but it was important to him and people at home were watching and that kind of thing, they could go to Johnson and say to him, "Now, we know this bill is not going to pass, but we'd like a respectable showing for it." Johnson could always turn up fifteen to twenty people to join the votes that the man was going to get anyway. So it's not bad if you lose a bill with thirty-five votes in favor. You can say, "Well, our bill almost passed this time." So he would do that for a number of senators.

Now there were occasions, of course, when he would not, for instance in the famous Rule 22 debates at the beginning of the session, where frequently the liberals handled their strategy and their floor tactics so badly that Johnson was just ashamed of them. He really didn't believe that anybody should be that bad. But of course, on those times, he showed no mercy. He had no intention of making them look good.

Now one senator who was too proud to do that was Paul Douglas. Paul Douglas would carry amendments, bills, or something to the floor and argue them all evening long without even telling his friends that he was going to do this. So he would have almost no support. I remember talking to Howard Shuman, his assistant, several times, saying "Howard, is anybody coming over? Has the Senator raised any votes?" He said, "Nope, nope. He wouldn't let us do it." So maybe Proxmire, who admired Douglas very much, wouldn't be over there because he would not have been notified about it. So he would carry on his eloquent and really quite impressive testimony on the floor, and then end up getting about six votes. Now, you see, if he had cared to ask, probably even Douglas could have gotten fifteen or twenty votes from Johnson because he would do that as a favor. That's one of the things he would do for people who were helpful and who went along.

G: I noticed that Johnson was often able to get two or three Republican votes, even on issues that were pretty much partisan issues, particularly people like [George W.] Malone. How did he do that?

H: Yes. That's part of the game. That's part of the game. No one who expects to be successful in the Congress of the United States can work just one side of the aisle. Even the president of the United States will look for votes on both sides of the aisle. Now of course when he got a handy Democratic majority, he didn't have to do that. But the handy Democratic majority was actually harder to handle than an economic majority of about five or six where they had to stand together to win. But Johnson would never fail to go across and see if he could get people to vote on the other side. I remember the

obvious pleasure he would get when some Republican would vote with him, because he would be sitting at his little desk, keeping a tally and [William] Knowland right across the aisle. Then to see the surprise on Knowland's face to find out that a vote he had counted on had been taken away from him.

I remember one time Knowland thought that he had Harry Byrd's vote. Byrd was downtown somewhere and Johnson sent somebody to talk to him and then caught him before he came in. Knowland got the surprise of his life when he found out this vote he thought he'd lined up, he didn't really have. So I would guess that with these people, he'd simply persuade them on the merits.

G: Do you remember what issue that was?

H: No, I don't. I don't remember. No, I don't remember that. Gosh, getting Malone's vote is something. That was a frightening man. Did you ever see Malone? Gosh, he was a big burly, grey-haired fellow, looked like some barroom brawler. He dressed well and he was a gentleman and all that, but when he'd turn loose on somebody on the floor, you'd get the impression he was going to hit him or kill him, or something like that. He was a fierce one.

G: How about Bill Langer?

H: Well, of course Bill Langer went with the Democrats most of the time. I was there in 1954 when he was in pretty good shape and then in 1958 when he seemed almost to be a corpse. In 1958 when he came to the floor and would get up and get the floor, his friends would flock over right around him just like a football huddle so they could hear what he had to say. The reporter would have to go over and sneak under an elbow or something

so he could get it down. He was so emaciated and so tiny that when he wanted to go someplace, a male aide and his female secretary would just pick him up by the elbows and carry him with his feet about six inches off the floor, wherever it was he wanted to go. Of course, in 1958 he didn't even go home. He was re-elected without going home. And as I recall, he died the next year. But he had gotten to be so small and so weak that it was barely possible to understand his voice even when one was leaning over close to him. So far as the whole Senate knowing what he was talking about, that was out of the question.

G: Johnson seems to have gotten his vote quite a bit, as you said. How about Bob Kerr? He and Lyndon Johnson were very close, weren't they?

H: Oh, yes, yes. He and Johnson were close friends, very close on a lot of the issues that mattered to both of them. Both of them very impressive and very powerful men. I remember in 1958 when Proxmire was doing everything he could to get himself re-elected, he sent me over to the Johnson office to see if I could get them to cook up some floor fight between him and Kerr, or him and Johnson, or preferably both. Because this is the old business of picking up importance from the importance of your enemies. He wanted to debate the oil depletion allowance with them. He knew that this would go down very well in Wisconsin, where there was always a big front against the oil depletion allowance and he's little David taking on the two Goliaths.

I went over there and I gave, frankly, his reason for wanting to do it. Sometimes the senators will do something like that if the purpose is frankly political. They will do a good deal to help out a man who's in that situation. But of course they wouldn't have any

of it.

G: Did you talk to Johnson about that?

H: I talked to George Reedy, and he told me that Johnson wouldn't do it. But I asked him to ask Johnson and he did. Johnson wouldn't do it and I didn't try Bob Kerr, aside from that particular angle.

But I'll give you an example of how very unlike senators sometimes will help each other for partisan reasons. Proxmire had a run-in with John Byrnes, who was ranking Republican on the Ways and Means Committee early in the year of 1958. Byrnes tried on him what the Republicans had tried on several liberals, which was to add up the cost of every bill that Proxmire co-sponsored and then tell the people of the state that this is the kind of money that the guy wanted to spend. So they came up with an appellation for Proxmire of "Twenty-Three Billion Buck Bill," because Byrnes had a chart which showed all these bills. Of course some of them were similar bills and were clearly overlapping. He admitted that and later reduced it to about eighteen billion bucks, but he still said that Proxmire was trying to spend the country into bankruptcy.

Well, Proxmire, who had a conservative father and is very conservative about money anyway, was appalled at this and set out to show that he also sponsored enough bills to save money that he would save as much as he was advocating spending. Well, the whole thing is phony as hell, as you can see, because the fact that he co-sponsored those bills did not mean that he expected actually to spend twenty-three billion dollars, and the fact that he co-sponsored these savings didn't mean that that would do it either.

So we raked up every kind of saving bill we could get and weren't even close. It

looked like what was the best source of ideas was the Hoover Commission Report, in which they had added up what each of these savings that they recommended would come to. They had a total for it. Well, Proxmire wanted to put all these bills in, but he couldn't do it because they were already in. Senator McClellan had done this. He'd put in all of the recommendations of the Hoover Commission Report as soon as they were made, and Proxmire was not even a member of the Senate at that time. Well, he could not co-sponsor something which already had been sent to committee, so what he wanted to do then was to put in all these bills again under his name. If he did that, though, he ran the risk of annoying Senator McClellan, who's a very powerful Democratic senator.

So I called Senator McClellan's legislative assistant and told him why Proxmire wanted to do this, and that he would say on the floor that these bills had already been introduced by Senator McClellan, but his way of showing that he supported these bills under the rules was to put in the same bills under his name. He said, "I don't think the Senator will mind but I'll talk to him." He called back in about a half hour and said, "The Senator says he'll be very glad to have Senator Proxmire do that." So Prox put all those bills in and added it up, you see, so that he went up over the eighteen billion mark. Well, of course Johnny Byrnes criticized him and said that this was phony because the bills were already in. Proxmire said, "Well, I'm just as much for these bills that I put in as I am for the ones that you have been adding up." I know it was phony anyway, so I don't think the voters were impressed one way or the other.

But that's simply an example of what he was trying to get Johnson and Kerr to do in regard to the depletion allowance. He was trying to get them as Democrats to give him

a little bit of visibility in Wisconsin. That probably would have worked.

G: Let's talk about Estes Kefauver for a minute. I get the impression that he was very much a maverick.

H: Yes, I think he was clearly a loner. He didn't seem to have any friends especially. He didn't seem to associate with anybody very much. I think it's interesting that the two greatest handshakers perhaps in the history of the Senate, Bill Proxmire and Estes Kefauver, are probably as private as any senators there have been. Now Proxmire is very sociable and outgoing apparently, but truly is really very much self-contained, as much I think as anybody I have ever known.

Both took up the handshaking for the same reason: they had to do something. Kefauver didn't have the money to spend on big public relations campaign, and when Proxmire was running in Wisconsin, most of the papers and most of the radio stations were controlled by Republicans. They just didn't pay any attention to him. Proxmire could go to a town and go to a radio station, give them a release, go to a newspaper and give them a release, and none of it would be used. The next morning the Republican governor, who was off socializing in Chicago, might have his picture on the front page at a party. So Proxmire had to do what could be done. He figured that if he talked to enough people, met enough people, shook enough hands, eventually they would remember him. And it did work, just as Kefauver's walking across the country, shaking hands with thousands and hundreds of thousands of people eventually made a candidate out of him. Well, he was a lone man. I was very much impressed with that.

G: Anything about his relationship with Lyndon Johnson?

H: I don't know of any relationship that they had.

G: How about Richard Russell? What was Johnson's attitude toward Russell?

H: I think everybody knows that Richard Russell was the mentor of Johnson in the Senate, just as Rayburn was in the House. Johnson, in time, came to be the senior partner in that relationship. By senior I mean the one with the most clout, the most persuasiveness, the most influence and so on. I think Doris Kearns in her book tells about how the Johnsons, in effect, provided a home away from home for Russell, who would come over on Sunday afternoon and read the papers and sit around the house and talk and so forth. And I would guess that Johnson's respect for Russell surpassed his feelings of that sort for anybody else in the Senate. I think that relationship was as close and good as one could be.

G: Did you ever see them together in an informal situation?

H: No, except to see them talking together on the floor or something like that. No, I did not do that. Of course, the Democratic Policy Committee, where a lot of this kind of conversation went on, was closed to everybody except George Reedy, who took some notes on it but did not write minutes. He just kept the notes for Johnson's use in case he wanted to remember what was agreed on or who said what. But I remember the horrified look on Reedy's face when I asked him if I could see those notes. (Laughter)

G: Anyone else that you want to talk about here on this?

H: No, because what I know about his relationships with any of these people is much less than what some other people you're in touch with know.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III]

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