

INTERVIEW II

DATE: June 20, 1977

INTERVIEWEE: HUBERT HUMPHREY

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Senator Humphrey's office in the Dirksen Senate Office Building,
Washington, D. C.

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H: Now, what do you want to talk about?

G: Well, I was going to suggest that we start with the Capehart Amendment to the 1955 Housing Bill. Do you remember that?

H: Gosh, one of the great capacities of a man is to be able to forget.

G: I think that was an amendment where he needed your vote and you were on an airplane--

H: Oh, well now, you see, I didn't identify it as that. Yes. I was on my way back from Minnesota, the planes were stacked up over Washington due to congestion in the airport. It was a tight vote, and Majority Leader Johnson felt he needed my vote. He stalled the debate in the Senate as long as he could, and in the meantime was on the telephone with the control tower out here at National Airport telling them get that plane in here that had Humphrey in it. I only can imagine what it was like with Johnson reaching out on that telephone, really almost commanding the controllers at the tower to get the plane in. He had called our office to find out what the flight number was and what time I had left Minneapolis, what plane I was on. And he did get the plane in; there was a car waiting for me when I got off the plane and it rushed me on into the Senate so I could cast my vote. Which is only one of the many ways that Johnson operated in order to get a bill through.

G: He was good at getting people there to the Senate to vote.

H: Oh, yes. He was indeed. If there were certain times that some of the senators might be prone to absent themselves for an hour or two, he would even assign people to make sure that such and such a senator was back, particularly if there were late night sessions. Sometimes some colleague might decide to nip a little, and that would mean that he might not be always present where you wanted him. I know my duty. I had one senator--I won't name him--that I was assigned to to make sure that that fellow was always ready for a vote.

G: Is that right?

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H: Yes, siree.

G: Senator, another topic: I have heard that when he needed to stall he would often signal to you to give a speech on something? Was there a standing signal that you had?

H: He had a few of us that he had in his stable, so to speak, that could be called upon. For example, if there was a foreign policy debate that was coming up and our Democratic side needed to have spokesmen, I was one of those and Senator Smathers was one of those, those two I remember specifically, that he would call on to get up and take the opposition. Also, if he needed to stall in order to prolong a session, maybe so that we could recess until the next day or so we could get a colleague in, why he would call upon certain ones of us. I remember he would call upon me, come over to me and say, "Now look, Hubert, we've got Senator so and so, and he is a half hour away from here. We've got somebody going to pick him up," or, "He's in the car coming back," or, "He's by plane coming back and he won't be in until three-thirty, and we have got to stall until at least a quarter to four to get him in from the airport. Why don't you just get up and take the floor for a while here and hold us on this issue?" Which we did readily; I mean, you have got to be able to do that. He always knew where the senators were.

I think that one of the keys to his leadership was that he not only knew who the senators were in terms of how they reacted and under what constraints they would move or not move, but he knew a great deal about every senator and his family. He knew about the senator and the senator's friends, and he always knew where a senator was. I mean you could be out of town, anyplace, and he would know where you were. He would find ways and means of discovering where you were. And if he needed you he would be after you, and he'd maybe sometimes get a plane to send out after you.

G: Was he also good at timing a vote so that certain opposed senators would be absent?

H: Oh, both ways. He was always keeping head counts. Johnson said the first lesson of politics is to be able to count. I have never forgotten that. He never, ever permitted a vote to take place if he could help it until he thought we had maximum strength on our side and, hopefully, some reduction of strength on the other.

G: There are a couple of legislative issues that I want to ask you if you saw his hand in or what sort of role he played. One is the Hell's Canyon legislation.

H: Yes. I can't remember the details of it, but he was involved, I know that.

G: Was that a case, do you think, of him getting western senators to support something he was interested in, perhaps the jury trial amendment or something, in exchange for--?

H: Partly so. He always looked ahead. Johnson would have in his mind what he wanted later

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on down the line, and, therefore, he might very well line up support for a group of senators or a senator that he needed later on. He always identified himself with the West. I think that's important. He never considered himself a southerner in the sense of the southern bloc. He made it clear that he was essentially a southwest and a westerner, cowboy style rather than the plantation style; it was a ranch house rather than a plantation. It was very significant how he identified his home. He went down to the ranch, he didn't go back to the plantation or even the farm. He went to the ranch. He was a westerner, he was a cattleman, he was an oilman, in the sense that he identified with the economy of the West.

G: One of the pieces [of legislation] that he supported was the Social Security amendment in 1956 which lowered the disability age to fifty. It was a very close vote. It was one vote, I think, or two votes difference.

H: Yes. We were working on very close margins all the time during Johnson's leadership. I think people forget that we didn't have any 61, 62, or 63 Democratic senators. We were always within the 52, 54, and there was always a spilloff. I mean you couldn't be sure that you ever had them. I know that on one particular tax bill he got every Senate vote except two or three, every Democrat, but when you are able to lose two, three, four, you have frequently lost the issue on a party-line vote. You were mentioning what issue?

G: The Social Security amendment.

H: The disability amendment. That was in the mid-fifties.

G: Right.

H: Johnson, you have to keep in mind in order to understand him, was a protege of Franklin Roosevelt. He always considered himself a New Dealer. In the real sense of the Roosevelt tradition--Social Security, yes, minimum wage, yes, the kind of economic legislation for depressed areas, yes, education, yes--he was a Rooseveltian Democrat, and the Social Security issue was hotly debated on that disability issue. I think that was during Eisenhower's presidency, as I recollect.

G: Right, 1956.

H: We didn't have any support for lowering of the age for disability from the administration, and we had lots of opposition from the Republican leadership. Johnson sort of enjoyed on occasion joining an issue with the Republicans when he knew he had a good issue. He was smart enough not to pick every issue, because every issue would just diminish the importance of the ones that you could win. So he would target, he would select; he was selective, and even if he lost it was a good issue on which to lose. In other words, you always were building. As he used to say, "pro bono publico", "for the good of the public."

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You were always building support amongst the public.

G: Do you recall how he was able to get that majority in his favor on that particular bill?

H: I am sorry, I don't. But I can just see him working the precincts around there. He must have gotten a few Republicans over on his side.

G: He seems to have had the ability to get people like George Malone to vote with him.

H: Yes, and he would always cater to some of their more outrageous prejudices which he knew he could handle. In other words, George Malone is a case in point. Yes, he would handle George Malone by being able to give George a lot of time on a trade bill. He'd know full well that after all he could win on the trade bill. He knew that he had Eisenhower's support, he knew that that would bring a certain amount of Republican support, and he knew that he could bring a lot of Democratic support. But he'd give George a lot of rope, he'd let George just run wild with his opinions on the trade bill. But Johnson always knew there was no real danger in that resulting in crippling legislation. Many times other Democrats would want to cut George Malone off at the pass; Johnson didn't mind letting him run in the pasture, but he always knew the gate was locked. You know, he never let him out.

G: I gather that he also got Bill Langer to vote with him a lot.

H: Well, Bill Langer was a maverick populist. I mean, Bill was not as difficult as some of the others. Langer was more of the old farmer-labor tradition up in our state. Johnson had very personal politics, you have to keep that in mind. He knew some things that Langer wanted. For example, Langer wanted an ambassador from North Dakota. North Dakota had never had an ambassador, and he just raised Cain until he got an ambassador from North Dakota. And Johnson would always side in with him and say, "Absolutely, you're entitled to that. I'll do everything I can with Eisenhower and with Dulles. We'll get an ambassador." And finally they got one from North Dakota that went to Nicaragua. It was a kind of a prestige thing for Langer, and of course it went over big back home--namely, that North Dakota had never had an ambassador. Here was Bill Langer fighting for an ambassador, and here was the majority leader of the Senate backing him up in his struggle and crusade to get an ambassador from North Dakota. Again, Johnson knew that this was more personal than it was substantive. He always was able to use those personal, subjective efforts to accomplish something that he wanted later on substantively.

G: I guess one of his real strong points was finding areas of common ground between senators who might disagree on a range of issues-- for example, getting Senator Russell to work with you on farm legislation.

H: Oh, yes. And foreign policy legislation with Senator George and so forth. He'd always

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build on that. He'd always overdramatize that. It wasn't so difficult, really, [when] you look back at it, because the South and the Midwest have always been together on farm legislation. We needed each other. But Johnson would make it very, very clear that this was a great wedding that had taken place, and that he had been the preacher, so to speak, that put the bonds of holy political wedlock on both of us. At every little gathering there would be, why, he would point out how he had been able to get Russell and Humphrey to working together. And not only that, a lot of times on party matters that would come up where we had differences, he'd get both of us to get up and speak. Because I always liked Dick Russell, I admired him, and I think Johnson brought Dick Russell around to look with some favor upon me. Johnson would always like to have these sessions of harmony ever so often. Knowing that our party had a good deal of disharmony within it and dissident elements, he'd like to pull together as much as he could, as you have indicated, senators of different points of view.

G: Did he work with you much on the effort to achieve 90 per cent parity on the farm legislation?

H: Who? Johnson? Yes, sir. You see Johnson was essentially, again I say, a Rooseveltian, and he was a westerner at heart and he understood agriculture's needs. Of course he always used to rub my nose in it a little bit. He'd say, "Well now, you see, I go for you for 90 per cent of parity, why don't you come with me for oil depletion?" He said, "When it comes to dairy products, Humphrey, when it comes to that corn and that wheat you want the whole world, but when it comes to my little oil men down there you want to push them down in the ground. You don't want to give them anything." Johnson always painted everything in capital letters. But he was a strong supporter of the farmer, of what we considered the farmer's best interest at that time.

G: Can you recall what he did tactically--?

H: Just a minute. (Interruption) All right, where are we?

G: We were talking about the farm bill. Was he any tactical help in this measure, or on any of these bills that came up every year really, I guess, to get 90 per cent?

H: Well, not every year, but they came up quite often. I can't remember the tactical help. All I know is that he was a good solid supporter. Had he been against us we would have had serious trouble, because we were able to get fringe votes that went along with us because Johnson was with us. The Majority Leader's position, particularly his kind of majority leadership where there was rewards and punishment, was very important in this matter.

G: Do you remember H. R. 3, which was sort of a slap at the Supreme Court after the Brown decision that sort of got out of hand?

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H: Was that first, on our side, the McClellan bill? There was a whole series of these bills that came out of the Judiciary Committee.

G: There was the Jenner amendment, I think, and then there was this H. R. 3.

H: I don't know. I would have to know the substance of it. I remember that there were a series of bills directed at the Supreme Court to more clearly define by legislation the jurisdiction of the Court and to weaken the Court's position, some of it related to desegregation, some of it to civil liberties cases and so forth. Those were all on the calendar for a long time, and finally, under pressure, he decided to bring them up. I remember as follows: Johnson said, "The way to handle this is to put it all together in one package." And our people thought--when I say "our people," some of our liberal senators, they were always suspicious of Johnson--"If you do that, why, you're going to get in trouble. We'll go down. There's enough antagonism about each of these issues so that combined we will not succeed. We ought to take them up one at a time." Johnson's theory was that if you have got a series of bad bills the best thing to do was to put them all in one, and then, as he said, "When you hit a snake with a hoe, be sure you chop its head off all at once." He always had these metaphors that he was using, you know.

We finally did put all the bills together in one, and Johnson left us to debate them. While he was away from the Senate for a period of time, things got out of hand. It really got out of hand, and he came back and he got a hold of me and said, "What in the hell has happened here? Now what did you liberals do about this?" John Carroll from Colorado was one of those that was involved, Estes Kefauver was involved, and there was a number of others. He had laid out a program for us. We had had a caucus on it, and he had said how he thought we could handle this legislation and kill it. He wanted to kill it all. And our people refused to go along with him. I cannot remember all the details; I'm giving you the big picture. Our liberals refused to go along with him. I called them back into caucus and said they'd made a real serious mistake, that Johnson was sincere and that he was trying his level best to give us a scenario that would kill these bills.

So when he came back I reported to him and I said, "It's just impossible. These fellows have got their own independent judgment, and there's no way you can pull them together." He said, "Well, let me get at it." In about another day or so, he had put all these bills in one package. He'd pulled them all together, and he frankly told us, "Either you're going to trust me or you can go your own separate ways and we're going down the tube. Now you leave me alone and I'll get this legislation all together, and one of these days I'll have it ready and we'll kill it all, all at once, all of these bills." And he did. I wish I could remember the details of it, because that's maybe one of the most masterful legislative strategies I've ever seen worked out. The liberal voice in the Congress, about twenty-six, twenty-seven of us, all thought we knew what was best. I was, frankly, his man in this fight.

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I don't know if you can check the record on that, but I had tried to hold our liberal group together, to follow his scenario of how we should handle these bills. Some of them from the House had gotten over and were reported out by the Senate Judiciary Committee. Senator McClellan in that time was in charge of the bills. Johnson said, "No, you fellows are going to louse it all up. You're going to end up with all these bills being passed." And we damned near did. They had us on the ropes, and he had to move to reconsider and get the votes to reconsider the legislation. Then he put them all together in one package; that way he was able to bring all the different elements together that were opposed to any one of the bills. There were just enough little pockets of opposition to each bill so that when you added it all up, on the three bills or whatever the number was, it gave us a majority. That's where he was very, very skillful on this. He also took a certain bit of delight in being able to point out that liberals didn't quite know how to handle the situation.

G: How about appointing you to the Foreign Relations Committee? Do you remember his strategy in getting you on that committee?

H: Oh, yes. Yes, that was after the election of 1952. He wanted to make sure that that Committee was strengthened, and he had two people he wanted to put on, Humphrey and Mansfield. He came to me and told me that he wanted me to serve on the Foreign Relations Committee. He said, "Frankly, we've got to keep an eye on this fellow Dulles. We Democrats have got a foreign policy that Roosevelt and Truman have worked out, and we don't want these Republicans to just scuttle it. That's what they're out to do, and we've got to have somebody on there that can protect our interests and somebody that knows what the score is, so to speak." Well, Mike Mansfield had been a history teacher out at Montana, and he'd been a very active member of the House on the Foreign Affairs Committee. I had always taken a great interest in foreign relations, and he knew that.

But for me to go on that Foreign Relations Committee I had to give up both Labor and Public Welfare and Agriculture. I said to him, "My gosh, Mr. Leader, you know at home my constituency is Democratic farmer-labor party. You're asking me to give up Labor. You're asking me to give up the Agriculture. Now I think I can handle the Labor part, because I'll still be very active in all labor debates and I've got strong support in the labor movement. They know that I'm reliable from their point of view. But our farmers, they need me on that Committee on Agriculture. There isn't anybody from my part of the country on the Democratic side on that part of Agriculture, and the Republicans have got a man on there by the name of Thye, Senator Edward Thye. For me to back off now, the Farmer's Union and the people out home that are the liberals in the agriculture area would just never understand it."

He said, "Now listen, this is one time where you're going to serve your country and your party." I remember him telling me very well, "You've just got to take another look at yourself here. You can fight for the farmers down here on this floor and you can

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fight for the laboring man, but we've got some serious foreign policy issues coming up and they're going to be major. The Bricker Amendment's coming up, for example." I remember he had a whole series of things he ticked off, but I can't remember all of them. He said, "I want you to go over on that Committee on Foreign Relations, and I'm putting Mike Mansfield over there with you. You're going to have drop those two other committees, because you can't be on Foreign Relations and Government Operations without getting off these other two committees."

I said, "All right, on one condition, that the first vacancy that's open on Agriculture I get it back." He said, "All right." Some year or two later Senator Clyde Hoey of North Carolina, a Democrat, died, and the fellow hadn't even fallen out of his chair before I was over in Johnson's office. As Johnson told me, "Out of respect for the man, Hubert, you could have at least had somebody in his family notified before you were over here." I was over there, and I said, "I want my position on the Committee on Agriculture." Well, he kept his word, and I was back on Agriculture. So then I had Agriculture and Foreign Relations and Government Operations, three committees that I liked very well.

G: There's some indication that in selling you to more conservative members of the Senate to get you appointed to Foreign Relations he used the argument that there was a move afoot to get Estes Kefauver on the committee.

H: Oh, he always had these, you know, the good and the evil, the true and the untrue, the radical and the conservative. In other words, as he would try to put it, you don't always have your choice. You've got to take the lesser of two evils. He did that particularly with some of the Republicans and some of the conservative Democrats.

G: Now, I wanted to ask you about the Bricker Amendment and the George substitute. Did you work with him on that?

H: Yes, sir, I sure did.

G: Can you recall what happened there?

H: No, I can't recall the details of it. I'm sorry that I can't.

G: I gather that he persuaded Senator George to offer this substitute.

H: Oh, yes. You see, Lyndon Johnson was one man, one on one. Whenever he wanted somebody like George he had him up to his office, and he would convince him to do it. Then he'd tell him, "Now, I can get Humphrey to back you on this, and I can get Mansfield to back you on this, and I can get the following." Then he would call us in one by one and say, "The only way George will do this is if you will do this and you will do that." You'd find out afterwards how he worked his little scenario.

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Walter George was a powerful figure in the United States Senate in those days, a powerful figure. He would work on George many times. Particularly on any big, tough question he tried to get George over on his side, because George had such influence with the conservative Democrats. And in order to get George to take on Bricker, that was quite an undertaking, because Bricker was a part of the North-South Democratic-conservative coalition, see, that Dick Russell and Walter George ran pretty much. They used the Tafts and the others on the other side. They were smarter than the Republicans. They really were. Dick Russell would outmaneuver the Republicans five times a day, but he was always getting them when he needed them.

Johnson always had his connections in with Russell. He had the best of working relationships. Dick Russell was his intimate personal friend, as you know. And he always had his relationships with Walter George; however, George wasn't as much his personal friend. George was eulogized by Johnson as what he truly was--he was truly a great senator. And he would get old Walter George and get him in there, locked in there, and that was just like bringing up an atom bomb. He was great.

G: Can you recall any other issue where he got George to support him?

H: He tried very hard on that tax bill one time, but he had to go against him. He almost had him in there. You've got a note on this thing, I recollect, here--yes, he opposed that alternative to the GOP's trickle down bill. They proposed a tax cut of twenty dollars balanced by repeal of accelerated depreciation formula, stock dividend credit and exclusion provisions. I remember how he worked that out. He called us all in, little groups and one at a time, too, and decided that he was going to take on the administration on their failure to get the economy moving and the administration's tax bill. [Secretary of the Treasury] George Humphrey was not one of his favorites. In this one, I think that LBJ got all of the Democratic votes over the opposition of Harry Byrd and George, which is really no small ordeal. But he tried hard to get George. He almost had him. Then he backed off. I think Harry Byrd got to George and kept him from coming aboard.

But Johnson would pick issues like that. Take, for example, on the Area Redevelopment Act later on, which is now known as the Economic Development Administration. That was another one where the Republicans were always vetoing our efforts in Congress. Johnson came up with this big public works program; he came up with this specialized targeting into the areas where there was high unemployment; he even made his own State of the Union address to the Democratic caucus, as you recall, [with] a counter-proposal to the Republican proposal.

[End of Tape I of I and Interview II]

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BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION: HUBERT HORATIO HUMPHREY, JR.

U. S. senator, former vice president, U.S.; b. Wallace, S.D., May 27, 1911; student Denver Coll. Pharmacy, 1932-33; A.B., U. Minn., 1939; A.M., La State U., 1940; postgrad, U. Minn., 1940-41. Pharmacist with Humphrey Drug Co.; asst. instr. polit. sci. La. State U., 1939-40; U. Minn, 1940-41; mem. adminstrv. staff WPA; state campaign mgr. Roosevelt-Truman Com., 1944; mayor City of Mpls., 1945-48; U.S. senator from Minn., 1948-64, 70--, elected senate majority whip, 1961; vice pres. U.S., 1965-69. Hon. chairman of President's Council on Equal Opportunity. Active in fusing Democratic and Farm Labor parties.