INTERVIEW III

DATE: September 23, 1976

INTERVIEWEE: WALTER JENKINS

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Mr. Jenkins' office, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: Do you recall the circumstances of his [LBJ's] election as Democratic leader in the Senate in 1953?

J: Yes. I recall very well that upon McFarland's defeat Mr. Johnson, I think, wanted to become the minority leader. He had been the assistant minority leader prior to that time, and he was probably one of only maybe two or three that were possible because the Democratic senators were fairly well divided between the southerners and the northerners or the liberals and the conservatives. There weren't many people who were acceptable to both, but he was and was supported both by Senator [Richard] Russell, who was sort of the leader of the more conservative group, and by the liberal senators also. If there was even an opponent I don't remember it, although I could be wrong about that. I don't think there was.

G: I guess he saw Russell as the key to the southern bloc, would you say, in securing that?

J: I think he not only saw him as that, he was that.

G: Was there likewise a key to the liberal bloc there in getting that?

J: They were not so closely knit.

G: What I'm trying to ask is, did Senator Johnson single out one key liberal to approach in securing the Democratic leadership?

J: I think he approached all of them that he had any contact with. I think he probably talked to Mansfield and Symington and Magnuson and so on.

G: I think you were going to talk generally about the Johnson Rule and his new policy of placing freshman senators on major committees.

J: Right. Up until Johnson became majority leader, it was most common for a new Democratic senator to receive two minor committees and not any major committee. I think Mr. Johnson decided that it would be beneficial to the individuals, as well as to the Senate as a whole and particularly to the Democratic side of the Senate, to get the new senators to participate by placing them on a committee in which they were interested and in which their state was interested. For the agricultural areas he tried to put them on the Agriculture Committee; for the areas that had a good many defense installations he tried to put them on the Armed Services Committee. He asked each senator to give him a list, the new senators as well as the old senators where there were openings coming up, of priorities that they wished. I'm sure it was impossible to give everybody his first choice, but as best he could he tried to give them the highest choice that was possible with the vacancies that existed.

G: And no resentment was engendered by giving the upstarts good committees?

J: I don't remember any. As a matter of fact, I think that the old heads in the Senate agreed with the policy, supported it, and felt like it was a step in the right direction.

G: Do you have any idea where he got the idea to do it and what led him to this decision?

J: Well, I think it was maybe two or three things. First, he felt that they would make a greater contribution to the Senate if they were working on a major committee in which they were particularly interested. I think he felt that it would be helpful to them back home, and I think he felt that he could work a closer-knit group for himself to work with as majority leader if they were happy and satisfied rather than if they were wasting their time on less important things.

G: You mentioned briefly the fight over committee ratios.

J: I don't recall the exact years, but several times when the Senate was very close--one time it was a margin of one, and at one particular time it was a margin of forty-nine Democrats, forty-eight Republicans, and one Independent.

G: That would have been 1955, I think.

J: I guess that would have been 1955. I don't remember. But the Republicans were always trying to get their ratio increased. It could be in that particular period they may have wanted a fifty-fifty ratio, but they didn't succeed.

G: How was this sort of thing decided, the ratios?

J: It was decided first in the Majority Policy Committee and second by the Senate as a whole after the Policy Committee made its recommendations.

G: On the Policy Committee, do you recall any changes that were made during his leadership, when he was chairman of the Policy Committee?

J: There were certainly some changes in personnel. I don't recall exactly what, but I do know that immediately after becoming Democratic leader he instituted a policy of trying to do everything by unanimous consent. I think probably he succeeded. He did his homework before the Policy Committee meetings met so that if he had a dissenter he tried to convince them that what was best--

(Interruption)

G: Let me add that when I cut you off you were finishing "--what was best for all concerned." That didn't get on the tape.

J: Right. Well, that probably was the end of the thought anyway.

G: I get the impression from the files that one thing he did was to increase the liaison between the legislative committees and the Policy Committee so that the members of the Policy Committee were kept informed of the status of legislation and the merits of it. Do you recall his efforts here?

J: Yes, I do, and that is true. Most of that work was done by Bobby Baker, who was secretary for the majority or minority, as the case may be, and his staff.

G: Do you recall how it worked, how he improved the liaison with the legislative committees?

J: I think it was probably more informal than anything else. It was just an effort on the part of the Policy Committee staff to stay close not necessarily to the senators but to the staff heads of the various committees so that they could keep the Policy Committee and Mr. Johnson informed as to what they were doing and what might be coming up.

G: How did he manage to get unanimous consent in the Policy Committee so much?

J: I think by dint of his own personal conviction and ability to convince others that certain things were for the best interests of the party and the country.

G: You mentioned that you sat in on Policy Committee meetings.

J: I did on a number of occasions.

G: What were they like?

J: I don't know what they were like under anybody but President Johnson, but the ones which I attended were ones where the calendar had been pretty well worked out in advance. Everybody knew what was coming up, and they would be brought up and ratified in short order with very little dissension and very little discussion. The dissension or discussion had taken place privately beforehand.

G: Do you think he himself had gone over these calendars with the senators, or did he have staff aides do it, generally?

J: If it were a matter of some importance, he had done it himself. If it was a matter of lesser importance, the staff did it.

G: How long would the meetings generally last?

J: A couple of hours, from, say, ten till twelve.

G: I think you were going to talk about Wayne Morse and your recollections of him leaving the Republican Party.

J: Oh yes, I well remember when that happened. I remember that Mr. Johnson had sent George Reedy and me to Senator Morse's office to talk to him about some legislative matter. I do not remember what it was. Perhaps

George will. But I remember vividly that because of the surprise involved of him telling us that he was going to announce in a few days that he was going to leave the Republican Party. We asked him if we could tell Mr. Johnson about it, and he gave us permission to do so. A few days later the public announcement was made.

G: Did he say why he did it? Do you recall his attitude at the time?

J: I recall the attitude; I don't recall the exact words. He did it because he did not agree with much of anything that the Republican leadership was doing, and I think made clear that that's the way he felt.

G: Did he indicate then a desire to work with the Democratic Party in the Senate?

J: He indicated a desire to work with Mr. Johnson. I don't remember exactly about the Democratic Party. But he and Mr. Johnson had been close friends and associates. They had both served on the Armed Services Committee together, and while on opposite sides of the table, Mr. Johnson worked very closely with both Senator Saltonstall, who was the Republican leader of the committee, and Morse, who was the second Republican not only on the full committee but on the subcommittee which President Johnson either then or later--I don't remember the exact dates--was chairman of, Preparedness [Subcommittee].

G: I was going to ask you about Senator Taft's illness and his decline, and possibly get you to comment on the way he and Senator Johnson worked together.

(Interruption)

G: Okay, we're on.

J: I think I was starting to say that as best I can remember, Senator Taft and Senator Johnson from the beginning of Mr. Johnson's leadership worked together cooperatively and well. I think they both understood the Senate and how it worked and how it was difficult unless the leaders cooperated and worked together and reached agreement on what would be done, that very little would be accomplished. They developed a close relationship, a close friendship, and an ability to operate the Senate together in a very effective and successful manner. When Senator Taft got sick and [William] Knowland replaced him, in my opinion, Knowland did not have that background, that knowledge, and that ability to work closely with someone whose political beliefs might be different. While I don't recall exactly the issues concerned, I do recall that President Johnson had to whip him a few times before he really began to realize what the situation was. Later, Knowland and Johnson worked out a relationship which was almost the same as the relationship between Taft and Johnson had been, but it was only a after a few months of working at cross purposes that that was accomplished.

Can you turn it off just a minute while I see what they're knocking about?

(Interruption)

G: Do you think it would be fair to say that Knowland, at least initially, was more narrowly partisan than Taft, and tried more often to take advantage?

J: Yes, I think it would be fair to say that. I think he was very partisan and could not divorce that partisanship as an individual senator from the need for bipartisanship as a Senate Leader rather than as an individual senator. But [he] learned to do so.

G: Did you have an opportunity to get to know Senator Taft very well?

J: I knew him fairly well but not closely; I mean I saw him and met him.

G: What was your impression of him?

J: I thought he was a great American, a great senator, and an able, responsible person.

G: What was he like, though? I mean, how would you characterize him?

J: Not a great deal of warmth, very businesslike, very determined to do a good job, a hard worker and sincere.

G: Do you think he was one of the more learned members of the Senate?

J: I believe so, and not as conservative as some people think. If you'll look at his record, you'll find the Wagner-Ellender-Taft bill. You'll find other legislation, housing and so on, that he was interested in. I think most people felt that Taft was an ultra-conservative. I never felt that he was that far to the right.

G: Do you recall any particulars of him and Senator Johnson working together in a particular instance?

J: No, because it was continuous. It was day-to-day.

G: Do you recall how Senator Johnson got the news of his--what was it, cancer?

J: No, I don't recall that I knew when or how he got the news.

G: Could you at all tell what the impact of Senator Taft's death was on LBJ? I guess by this time they were good friends.

J: They were very good friends and had a great and healthy respect for each other. I'm sure that Mr. Johnson was very sorry and unhappy about the death from a personal, public, and political standpoint.

G: I wanted to ask you about the nature of bipartisanship under the Eisenhower Administration as it began in 1953. To what extent was it genuinely bipartisan?

J: I think on foreign relations matters it was almost completely bipartisan. I don't know that that would apply to every member of the Senate, but it applied to the more responsible members of both parties and to the committee leaders and Senate Leaders of both parties--and in the House, too.

G: Do you think the Democrats at first felt that they were just being consulted, though, and not really having a--

J: I think perhaps early there was a little of that feeling. But I think once President Eisenhower realized that he got true bipartisanship from Johnson and [Walter] George in the Senate and Rayburn and others in the House that he began to depend on them as much if not more than on the Republicans. I believe you will find that the vast majority of the Democrats supported Eisenhower's foreign policy and tried to be helpful and bipartisan on it.

G: I'm thinking in particular of an issue that came up rather early, Eisenhower's Yalta resolution that had to do with Soviet violations of wartime agreements. It seems that at least one wing of the Republican

Party in the Senate tried to use that as an opportunity to condemn the two Democratic Presidents, Roosevelt and Truman. And yet the Democrats, certainly, and another large body of the Republicans were aiming more at a condemnation of the Soviet Union than of the two American Presidents. Do you recall--?

J: Only in general terms, but I think your analysis is probably correct.

G: No specifics, though, of that time?

J: No. As I said earlier, my job was not primarily legislation. I was on the fringes of it.

G: Another issue concerned NATO and the status of forces agreement that I think perhaps led in part to the Bricker Amendment when it was brought up in 1953 and carried over to 1954. Do you recall any of the issues here?

J: Well, I remember that there was bipartisan support for NATO and what it was trying to do, and there was a good deal of bipartisan opposition to the Bricker Amendment.

G: Do you remember how the fight over the Bricker Amendment took shape and how the George Substitute emerged? Of course, we're getting into 1954 now.

J: I remember generally only that there was a good deal of support for the Bricker Amendment and I think there was some fear on the part of the Democratic leadership as well as some of the more responsible Republicans that it might be passed by a coalition of Republicans and conservative Democrats. There was a feeling that it would be very bad for the country if it were, and that perhaps some compromise ought to be reached

that would give them a little bit of what they wanted without going way too far.

G: I guess perhaps the issue was limiting or handicapping the President's ability to conduct foreign affairs.

J: That's correct.

G: Do you have any recollections of the reciprocal trade agreements? This is not normally one of the . . . .

J: Only in a general way, that it was a policy of the administration, and I think supported by the Democratic leadership, of an effort to substitute trade for aid as much as possible.

(Interruption)

G: Let me ask you about the McCarran-Walter Immigration Act and the efforts to revise the national origins formula for immigration quotas. Do you recall the struggle here?

J: I recall it, yes. I don't know for sure what all I recall. I recall it was rather controversial.

G: How so?

J: There was a good deal of opposition, and again I'm vague. But if I'm not mistaken, the McCarran-Walter Act was to tighten immigration policy, not to make it more broad. I think that the senators who felt that we ought not to be quite so tough to people were very much opposed to it and were trying to either amend or defeat the provisions of it.

G: I think Senator Johnson voted for the act. Do you recall the role that he played here in the struggle?

J: I don't know that he played a leading role or not. I may be confused, but I believe he probably supported some amendments.

G: Oh, did he?

J: I believe, and then perhaps voted for the act as amended.

G: Do you think the conflict took shape with regard to regions of the country that had, let's say, large immigrant groups, or did it have to do with manufacturing areas that wanted to bring in cheap labor? Can you recall who was for and who was against and why on the McCarran-Walter Act?

J: I believe you will find that the conservative senators were for it and the more liberal ones were either trying to amend it or defeat it on the basis that it was too restrictive.

G: I'll turn this off.

(Interruption)

G: We're on again.

J: I think I was about to say that most of the Democrats felt the RFC had been a very successful government agency, had benefited a lot of small businesses and big businesses, and it should be continued. [They felt] that the record had showed that they had not only gotten back all of the money they had loaned but had made a profit over the years. That doesn't mean that all their loans had turned out well, but considering the whole operation it was a profitable operation from the government standpoint and [the Democrats felt] that it should not be discontinued. I think that when they were unable to continue the RFC they retreated to the small business position, which was the follow-on.

G: Right. And there was some issue of temporary controls, wage-price controls, I guess, attached to the SBA [Small Business Administration] bill.

J: That probably was the Knowland amendment, I imagine, and it probably was the one that Knowland made an effort to do something about without giving proper notice to the Democratic leadership. Is that your understanding?

G: Yes.

J: That's something that never would have happened under the leadership of Taft and Johnson, because they would never try to put something over on the other. They would never try to bring up something when the other might be absent or when the Democrats were having a meeting somewhere, or vice versa. But Knowland did make an effort to bring this amendment up at a time when he felt he had a good chance to win it without giving proper notice to the Democrats so that the Democrats could have all their people present and at least let them express their views, whichever way they were going to go. I remember that Mr. Johnson rather resented the effort and expressed the belief that we would have to teach Knowland how the Senate operated, and I think successfully did so on that occasion and maybe one or two others before they developed a--

G: Did he talk to Knowland at all about that, do you recall?

J: Oh yes, I'm sure he did, because he was talking to Knowland. I'm sure he told him that he thought that was dirty pool, or something of the kind.

G: I guess he had a lot more power than most minority leaders because the

margin was so thin there between the majority and the minority; I guess it was just two votes, really, wasn't it?

J: That's correct. He did have, because he was able to hold the Democrats together pretty well when they had not been held together under previous leaderships, and he was able to get a Morse and one or two other Republicans very often to go with him.

G: If it's all right, I want to skip down now and ask you about Hawaii-Alaskan statehood.

J: I'm going to have to stop pretty soon. You told me about an hour, and we've gone maybe an hour and a half. But anyway, that's all right.

Mr. Johnson was very anxious to pass both Hawaii and Alaska statehood, took leadership in it. He had a good deal of difficulty because Hawaii's bill had been prepared first and was being pushed by the people from Hawaii a little stronger than the Alaska bill. But it was also a more controversial matter. Efforts were made to get the Hawaii bill up two or three times. The opposition was such that it didn't look like it was going to pass. Finally Mr. Johnson convinced the delegate from Hawaii, who later became the governor, that--

G: This is John Burns?

J: Yes, Jack Burns, who I guess first was Senator Burns. But Jack Burns had insisted that Hawaii should go first. Mr. Johnson finally convinced him that if he would let Alaska go first, which was not so controversial, that his case would be greatly improved because people would have difficulty in supporting Alaska and opposing Hawaii. The issues were a little bit different, but they were such issues that people might not like to

have them pointed out. They were racial in nature, and things of that kind. He finally convinced Jack Burns to let them bring the Alaska bill up first, and it was passed without much difficulty. Then when Hawaii came up, why, they were able to get it passed, too. It's doubtful that either one of them would have passed had Hawaii gone first.

G: Do you think there was any opposition to either Alaska or Hawaii by the Democrats simply because they wanted to wait and have the states admitted under a Democratic rather than a Republican administration?

J: I don't think so. There may have been. I don't remember it. The Democrats took the leadership in getting the legislation passed.

G: Do you recall Senator Johnson twisting any southern conservative arms on the Hawaii statehood?

J: No, but I think that perhaps some of them indicated to him that if Alaska's bill passed, they could get by with their home states a little better with Hawaii being adopted.

G: Well, I certainly do thank you for your time, and I hope we can continue.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III]

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WALTER JENKINS

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