INTERVIEW I

DATE: FEBRUARY 22, 1977

INTERVIEWEE: RUSSELL B. LONG

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

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

Tape 1 of 1

G: Now Senator, what we're trying to do is get President Johnson's colleagues in the Senate to reminisce on their experiences with him there, their knowledge of his Majority Leadership, his expertise in getting legislation through the Senate, in general, anything that you feel is important or interesting to add to the record.

L: Well, I can't do justice to you at this moment, because I spent so much time with Lyndon Johnson and did so much business with him, supporting him on some occasions, opposing what he was doing on others, that it's impossible for me to think of everything I'd like to tell you just on short notice. But I'll do what I can for the next half hour.

G: I'd like to start by asking you if you recall the first time you met him, or your first impressions of him when you came to the Senate in '48.

L: My first recollection of him was a very bright young man with a twinkle in his eye and a winning smile. He had a way of looking you in the eye and turning the personality on and making his point. I first met him in the Senate restaurant. I think he was talking to Senator [Tom] Connally at that time. I got to know him very intimately thereafter as the years went by, working with him on different things. We had common interests, for example, with regard to the Tidelands bill and various and sundry other bills where Louisiana and Texas had a community of interest. He and Bob Kerr were very dear friends. I got along with Lyndon, I guess, better than I did Bob Kerr in the beginning.

G: Did he talk to you about your father?

L: Yes. He told me that he once had a job up here. He had a job on the House side, I know.

G: With Kleberg first, and then--he was doorkeeper.

L: Yes, but he said he had a job on the House side. One of his friends was a doorkeeper in the Senate, and he would ask this fellow to let him know whenever Huey Long started to make a speech. He wanted to hear him, and he would come running over to hear what Huey had to say. I think he really felt that those speeches were interesting and that Huey had a technique and a style that attracted a lot of attention from people all over Washington. Lyndon was very much interested in that. He thought Huey Long was a very moving speaker and a very effective speaker. He used to tell some stories on occasion and tell the story just as he recalled it. He would even quote what the different people said, what the other man said and what Huey Long said at various points in debate.

He used to like to tell a story which might have been cleaned up for the record, because back in those days when Huey Long would really give somebody the worst of it, the fellow would say, "If you don't mind, let's take that out of the record, or change the record to keep the other fellow from looking so bad." Huey would almost uniformly give consent that they could change the record around to keep the other guy from looking as bad as he did. However, many times if you'd go read the daily newspaper you'd see what actually transpired, because the reporter would have reported it the way he heard it.

He used to love to tell a story about Senator Clark. I think it was Bennett Clark, who was the son of Champ Clark, who happened to take

Huey Long on one time on the floor. Huey made reference to the fact that he had defended Mr. Clark and had sent his sound trucks up to Missouri to help Mr. Clark be elected. Mr. Clark stood up and said that wasn't so, there wasn't a word of truth in it. Lyndon used to love to pull out his wallet and say that Huey pulled out his wallet and said, "I just sent this note to the desk for the clerk to read." And he read what was on that note about that the man owed him several thousand dollars for the use of those sound trucks, which had never been paid. The man said, "I'll pay it! I'll pay it, every penny of it. I'll pay it immediately!" And Huey said, "I certainly appreciate that. Mrs. Long's been telling me it's very expensive to buy the clothes that these youngsters need to go to high school and college these days. I'd be very pleased to have your check." Very embarrassing for the fellow in either case. Johnson used to tell that story very well. It was very amusing the way it actually happened, and he would tell it with great gusto and great color. Obviously he had enjoyed many of the exchanges that took place in Huey Long's day as a youngster up here.

G: LBJ was a great raconteur, I guess.

L: He was. In fact, to be entirely fair about it, he would embellish some of those stories, too.

G: Let me ask you about some of the legislative issues that you worked with him or, maybe in some cases, against him on. The Tidelands bill, for example: do you recall his work on that, what he did to get other senators to support that?

L: He felt that he was the key to our success. He didn't make many speeches on it, not the vitriolic speeches, not the ones that would appear to have been responsible for our success. But he made this

point to me. When the Tidelands bill was pending, a filibuster developed. Senator Taft got disgusted, and he felt that Eisenhower was being crucified on a cross of oil and that he was going to pull the bill down rather than have Eisenhower suffer any further embarrassment. Lyndon Johnson got with Bob Taft, maybe taking someone else along with him for all I know--I wasn't there at the time--and pointed out to Bob Taft that if he let the left wing of the Democratic Party make him pull that bill down, that they were going to be running him out of the Senate by the time it was all over with; that he had no choice but to stand his ground and fight that battle for a while longer. So Bob Taft decided he would make a motion to table an amendment that the other side had pending, in a test of strength. When he did, that indicated that the votes were overwhelmingly in favor of passing the Tidelands bill. He contended that if he hadn't done that, the bill would never have passed. I suspect that's true, that Bob Taft was beginning to lose interest and lose heart in the matter, because he felt that there really wasn't that much advantage in it for Eisenhower; he was being hurt, and it wasn't helping Ohio, which was the state that Bob Taft represented. Of course, Taft was the Majority Leader at that time.

Oh incidentally, you might enjoy this part of it, a little aside. In order to vote a Tidelands bill out, in the previous Congress when I was on the Interior Committee, I had had to vote for the bill that I was against in order to get it out to the floor so we could substitute a states-rights Tidelands bill for it. When Eisenhower was elected, there were some changes and some vacancies on the Interior Committee. Lyndon Johnson helped put Price Daniel on the Interior Committee with

me, and also George Smathers, so they'd have two Democrats to help me. That would be three Democrats, and those Republicans were voting almost solidly on our side of the Tidelands issue. He put those on, and he put on one Democrat who was against us at the same time. He talked to me with a wink and a smile and said, "All I want is a fair advantage." With those three Democratic seats available, if he could put two of them who were for Tidelands and one of them on the other side, we would have the votes it took to report that bill out.

G: Did you get the feeling that he and Senator Taft had a better understanding with each other than he and Senator Knowland did after Taft's death?

L: Yes, I think so. I think so. I think that Senator Taft was more of a team man, and Lyndon Johnson always found it easy to work with a teamwork type.

G: Do you recall any times when he outmaneuvered Knowland on some of these bills?

L: There were those times. Usually what Lyndon would do at the time when the Republicans were in a majority . . . let's see, I guess that was about the 82nd Congress.

G: Fifty-three to Fifty-five, I guess.

L: Yes, about the 82nd Congress. Lyndon would lay back and sort of go along with what the President wanted on most things until he could pick off a few Republicans who would vote with him and could get his Democrats to vote almost solidly. So he would lay back and avoid giving battle up until he thought he had a chance to find some defections on that Republican side. They only had a two-vote margin. Now and then

you'll see those votes where, on issue of Defense, or something, he would manage to get Margaret Chase Smith and maybe Senator Cooper from Kentucky to vote with him and move at about the right time to defeat the Republicans, even though logically they had enough going for them with a popular President who had the power to call on people on a personal basis. You had a lot of conservative Democrats who would like to vote with Eisenhower if they could. So logically they should have been able to have their way pretty well, but he repeatedly defeated the President when he wanted to give battle. As you know, he loved to make the image of being the loyal opposition and cooperating with the President whenever the President was right. I heard him say many times that his view when he was with the minority was that you should support the President when he is right, and if you don't agree with him, you ought to tell him what you will do, that you ought to have an alternative to offer him, not just a flat-out no, a negative response.

G: There were a couple of pieces of legislation in the mid-Fifties that he was able to keep the Democratic Party united on. One was the Housing Act of '55 where they had the Capehart Amendment, and another one was the Minimum Wage bill that raised the minimum wage from 75 cents an hour to a dollar an hour, and things like this. How was he able to keep the Southern Democrats and the Northern Democrats together when they had only a one or two vote majority?

L: He was a great salesman. He was the kind of fellow who could sell ice boxes to Eskimos. I'll tell you one story you might be amused about. Senator Symington had been making a big fight when he first came to the Senate. He took the view that Eisenhower was cutting back too deeply on the Air Force budget and on the Army budget and on the Marine Corps

budget. Of course, Senator Symington was a former Secretary of the Air Force himself. I had been on that Armed Services Committee. In fact, I had occupied the very seat that Senator Symington then held on the Committee before I went to the Finance Committee. After Senator Symington had made many speeches--and I had been a very strong economizer on the cutting down on what I thought was unnecessary spending in the services. I had voted against Symington on enough of these things that, seeing that they had made a tremendous fight with regard to the Marine Corps, I finally told Senator Symington, "Well, for you, my friend, I'll go along with you on this Marine Corps thing if my vote is the decisive one. If you don't need my vote, it's easier for me to vote against you than to explain why I voted to spend more money than ordinarily I would think proper." In that particular case, I had made that commitment, and Lyndon Johnson found out about it. I didn't want to be embarrassed about it, but I was going to wait until all the votes were in to see how the thing went. Rather than pass my name over, I thought I would just vote against the amendment, but then if it looked like it was losing by a single vote, I would change it over.

Lyndon Johnson found out about that. He went and found someone who was voting against him, and he said, "Look, if you will vote with us, we'll win on this. This is very important, because Long will change his vote if you will change your vote." Then he went to someone else and said, "Now you see, these two men will change their votes if you will change your vote, and we can win."

When the vote occurred, I had voted against Mr. Symington's amendment. Then I saw Lyndon running around trying to change some votes. One man stood up and changed his vote from no to aye, to be

for it. Then he headed for another man like a bird dog after quail, and that man stood up and changed his vote from no to aye. They still didn't have enough, and he headed my way. I was standing there trying to get recognition. I knew that if he managed to get to me or managed to say anything to me, the press was going to say that Lyndon Johnson changed my vote. I had made the commitment to Stuart Symington, so I was just standing there, trying to flag him away with both arms: "Get away from here. Get away. Don't you come near me." About that time, he managed to get close to me, the chair recognized me, and I changed my vote. Sure enough, the press reported, just as I feared they would, that Senator Johnson rushed over and whispered in my ear, and I changed my vote. He should have known what I was standing there for was to change the vote the way it was, and leave me alone.

G: That passed by one vote, I think, didn't it?

L: I think it did. I believe he won by one vote. I was going to change the vote; there wasn't any problem about that. I would like to have people think that if I give my word to somebody, I'll keep my word. That's one of those occasions where I was somewhat embarrassed about it. I wish I could have had somebody go out and grab him fifty feet away from me so people wouldn't say he was the man that changed me.

G: Can you recall any other instances where he worked on other senators to change--

L: You see, what he did in that case: knowing he had one man who was willing to change, he managed to find two others. He parlayed that one vote into three.

G: Who were the other two, do you remember?

L: I don't recall. But that's what he was doing, saying, "You see now,

Long is willing to vote with us if we can win. If you'll vote with us, then Long will change his vote and I think we can make it." Then he went and found another man and said, "Well, you see, Long's willing to vote with us, and this man's willing to vote with us if you'll vote with us." So he made one vote into three.

G: You worked with him on that tax bill in '55 that was a substitute for the Eisenhower Administration's measure. You know, he wanted a twenty-dollar tax--

L: That's right. That's right.

G: Both Harry Byrd and Senator George on the Finance Committee with you were opposed to LBJ's version, and yet you got the Democrats to vote yours out. I think you only lost by a couple of votes in the Senate. Do you remember that? [You] had a press conference with him?

L: As I recall it, the other side prevailed in the committee because of those two votes, Senator Byrd and Senator George. Then we offered this substitute on the floor. I think Lyndon could see that we weren't going to win that vote. He went to Senator Byrd, and he sweet-talked him, as he had a way of doing when he was really trying to change the votes around. He said, "Now you've got plenty of votes. You're going to win; you have plenty of votes. You don't need to have all these fellows. Let me have this one. Let me have that one." There were several fellows who would have been willing to go along with Lyndon, but they didn't want Harry Byrd to feel that they had not kept the faith with him. He had Harry Byrd releasing first one man and next another. Finally, Harry Byrd said, "I've turned loose all the votes I can. If I turn any more loose, you're going to win." So from that point forward, Harry Byrd had to insist that everybody who had indicated they were going to

vote with him had to vote with him if they could. He was just trying his Democrats as solid as he could on that occasion.

(Pause in recording)

L: Lyndon Johnson was more associated with the conservative Democrats in the beginning, and Hubert Humphrey was the leader of the liberals. LBJ used to say to some of us behind the scenes that Hubert Humphrey had given him more cooperation than any single Democratic senator.

I used to be amused sometimes when LBJ was the Democratic Leader and Hubert was just one more Democratic senator but one cooperating with Johnson. Any time the Republicans were trying to get something done when they were in control, and Johnson didn't want it to happen, he seemed to have had some kind of an agreement with Humphrey to give him a signal. I don't know whether it was a wink, or whether he would hold up his little finger, or what, but somehow he would just nod to Humphrey, and Humphrey would be on his feet making some speech. Humphrey could compose a speech in the time it took him to draw a deep breath. Humphrey would be saying something to the effect that, "The Republicans say that the market has improved. They're not talking about the market for pullet eggs!" He would shout about how the farmers were getting the worst of it and one thing and another. Just on the spur of the moment Hubert would go into his routine. More times than one I'd hear Hubert tell about how the Republicans failed the farmers and how everything went from bad to worse as far as the farmer was concerned.

Finally the Republicans came up with this idea about a land bank, to pay farmers for putting some acreage into the land bank, which is just a way of taking it out of production. Hubert loved to tell that

Eisenhower turned down all these suggestions to help the farmer. Then somebody said something about a land bank, and Eisenhower said, "Bank? Bank? Did you say bank? That sounds like something we could be for." So he proposed a land bank. He had a lot of fun with all that. Of course, any time that Hubert was making those speeches, the Republicans couldn't vote; they couldn't move the legislation. They had to wait till the speech was over. So Lyndon and Hubert had a real cute arrangement there, that just on the spur of the moment, any time Lyndon winked at Hubert, Hubert was on his feet talking about the price of pullet eggs or the fact that the only reason that Eisenhower finally did something for the farmers was because you put the word "bank" in the name of the bill, and a few things of that sort. [It was] all very amusing and entertaining to the galleries and even the senators who were there. But everyone knew what was involved there, that Johnson wasn't ready to cooperate with the Republicans, and Hubert was out there making a cute speech, entertaining the audience and the senators as well, because Johnson at that moment wasn't ready to move.

G: What were Senator Johnson's techniques of persuasion?

L: He was fantastic in having a book on every senator. He would keep asking about people and finding out all about them. Many times, for example, he would make a point to me that with my background and feeling as I did about my father, that there was no way I could vote for this thing or that thing. Of course, in telling me that, that was usually the way he wanted me to vote, to vote against this or against that. He wouldn't make the same point if it was something where my father might have been on the other side. He was a great salesman, and of course, you know how a salesman sells. He stresses the good points and

goes soft on the other points.

Frankly, there were times when Lyndon would be trying to get along with both sides and trying to tell both sides what they wanted to hear, where he wouldn't much care one way or the other which side won. He was just trying to get something decided, to get it to a vote. He would sometimes make some of us think that he was thinking in our direction and make some of the others think he was thinking with them; when, fact of the matter, he wasn't really interested in either side. He was just trying to get the thing over with.

One little story you might get a kick out of, too. The first time I handled one of the big military construction bills, I had drastically reduced the amount of funds that were in there for construction all over the United States. I had cut it by about 24 percent. The committee went along with me, and Lyndon reluctantly went along. We cut a lot of money out for Texas as well as every other state, including Louisiana. He said, "Now, I'm going to help you with this, but don't talk long. Don't talk longer than a couple of minutes, because we've got the votes. If you'll just make it a brief speech, just put the speech in the record and let us vote, you're going to win. If you let these people start talking around here, you might lose control of it.

So I started to speak, and about that time he was jerking on my coat, saying, "That's enough, that's enough. Sit down. You've said enough." We passed the bill on a voice vote, and he said, "You see there? When you've got the votes, you shouldn't be talking. If you don't have the votes is when you ought to be talking."

G: Do you remember that bill, H.R. 3, that was sort of a move to abolish

the Supreme Court, or something? Howard Smith, I think, originated it. That almost passed. That was later, I think, in '58. It almost passed.

L: I don't fully recall that one, just very vaguely if at all.

I know with regard to the statehood issue, Lyndon became convinced, as I was, that you had a better chance to pass the Alaskan statehood bill than you had to pass the Hawaiian bill. He persuaded Jack Burns, who was the delegate from Hawaii, that the Alaskan bill ought to go ahead first. A lot of people from Hawaii wanted to try to attach their bill to the Alaskan bill. The people who didn't want either territory to enter the Union were trying to help attach the Hawaiian bill as a rider, because they thought that by adding the two together, there would be less votes for the bill--and the vote was going to be close--than there would be if you brought each bill up separately. Lyndon persuaded John Burns, who was then the delegate and later the governor from that state, to go along with that strategy. That was tough on John Burns. It could have been political suicide, but Burns made a strong statement to the effect that if Alaska became a state, Hawaii would not be far behind, and that if the Hawaii amendment was added to that Alaskan bill, it would probably mean that neither of them would become a state. It was a statesman-like thing for John Burns. He did that and risked his political life doing it, and Lyndon Johnson delivered on his word. The next Congress, perhaps even the next year, we passed the Hawaiian bill for Hawaii to enter the Union as well.

G: Did Senator Johnson generally try to touch base with Senator Russell before he did anything?

L: The two men were very, very close. They were both very sophisticated.

They didn't tell everything they knew. To use the term that I've heard Clark Clifford use on occasion, they "buried a lot of bodies together." On one occasion, which was a reversal of form, Lyndon was out there operating as usual. This was a time when the Democrats were in full stride, and Lyndon had a working majority to have things his own way. He asked for consent to do something, and Dick Russell stood up and said, "I object." Then he went on to do something else, and Dick Russell said, "I object." Then he went and talked to Dick Russell and asked him why is he objecting. Dick Russell said, "I can't trust you. I've found I can't trust you any more." Apparently some little thing had happened that Lyndon had done where Dick Russell felt it should have been cleared with him first. He felt that Lyndon had not kept the faith. The things that Dick Russell was objecting to were not things that made any difference to him. He was just being ornery, you might say, and did it for a day or so to make it clear to Lyndon that he didn't think Lyndon had kept the faith with him or kept his word to him.

There were these times when Lyndon would tell somebody something, and then he would do something that was not exactly opposite of what he said, but it wasn't entirely consistent with what he had said, either. Sometimes he would try to contend that he had stayed within the letter of what he said when, as a practical matter, we fellows would have to say, "Oh no, that wasn't what the deal was. That's not what you agreed to."

G: Is there anything else you would like to add in this session? I know you are pressed for time here. I hope we can get together again maybe this spring and have another session.

L: I was dismayed to read something that some lady wrote in a biography that Johnson was supposed to have said that reflected unkindly on me, involving an appointment to the Federal Reserve Board. I recommended a man to him that I felt would fight for low interest rates. He later appointed a man who came from Louisiana, but a man whom I did not know. From my point of view, I had no reason to think he would do what I wanted to do, and that was to try to hold these interest rates down. Something I read in a book by someone who claims to have gotten her information from Johnson reflected on me with regard to that. I hate to think that he might have said that type thing, because my position had been very simple. It had been just that I thought one of the best things that Franklin D. Roosevelt had done--in fact, the best thing Franklin Roosevelt had done was to hold interest rates down.

Lyndon Johnson just didn't look at it that way. Frankly, my attitude about his presidency is that that would be the largest single complaint I would have, that interest rates were too high throughout his entire presidency, especially during the period that I was complaining about. I was urging that a white man be appointed from Louisiana, not because he was white but because I knew that man favored low interest rates. He appointed instead a black man from Louisiana who, so far as I know, never did anything, to my knowledge, to help bring interest rates down.

From my point of view as an old populist, one of the finest things that a President could do would be to use his powers to help bring interest rates down. I didn't have much success in that regard about interest rates with Lyndon Johnson or with John Kennedy. You might say I struck out with both of them in that respect. I never did anything

but simply urge him to appoint somebody who I thought would be on the side of the people in that issue, and that's all there was to it.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I.

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