

INTERVIEW XVIII

DATE: December 18, 1986

INTERVIEWEE: LAWRENCE F. O'BRIEN

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. O'Brien's office, New York City

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G: [In 1966 you] had a reorganization plan that transferred the Community Relations Service from the Commerce Department to the Justice Department. This was the instance reflected in the documents where, according to Mike Manatos, you had more Jetstars in the air than you did planes over Vietnam that day, to get senators back from Puerto Rico and other places for the vote. Apparently, [Everett] Dirksen had backed out after indicating his support of the measure.

O: Mike's memo reflects the nature of the problem when he and [Nicholas] Katzenbach and Barefoot Sanders were in [Mike] Mansfield's office. That was just the time Dirksen had notified Mansfield he was going to oppose it. According to Mike, Dirksen had on at least two occasions assured Katzenbach and Mike that he would support it and Mansfield felt that ended the effort. So this was a shocker, and then Mike became deeply involved in the head count and checking out of absentees for twelve noon. Howard Cannon was the number-one target and Mansfield did not want to call Cannon to urge him to come back so Manatos was left with this problem. He did contact Cannon in Puerto Rico and Cannon agreed to come back.

G: Was this characteristic of Mansfield, a reluctance to--?

O: There was a tendency on the part of Mike over the years not to be overly aggressive with his colleagues. He would low-key it and when it would come to something like this, which really was arm-twisting, Mike would be reluctant to be calling his fellow members of the Senate. He never objected to our engaging in this. He preferred that we undertake this effort. He would be in support of our effort, but he wouldn't necessarily be in the forefront making the calls or pleading with members.

The Manatos memo reflects the state of the legislation at that point, the intensity of the effort and the concern about the bill. Manatos also talks about presidential calls he received on the Hill. Any number of senators were contacted and every attempt was made to provide transportation where it was necessary to get them back in time. That type of activity was something we engaged in from time to time. We tried to keep it low key. We were always concerned about publicity, using military planes for this purpose. But you would set that aside and take your chances when it came to a problem.

He became disturbed with Jack Valenti at some stage. I was trying to recall--

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G: Apparently, it was a matter of not being the one to transmit invitations to the senators?

O: He refers to invitations to travel on *Air Force One*, and he took this occasion to pinpoint his concern. He refers to these invitations as "platinum-plated plums" and said it would be helpful to him on future votes to be in the position of extending the invitation to Mexico City to Mansfield, Dirksen, [George] Aiken and [Paul] Douglas and [Joseph] Montoya, obviously. I had been aware of it and I would have reacted exactly the same way. It did not serve any purpose, if we were going to do our job on the Hill, to have someone else in the recesses of the White House extending invitations to join the President on *Air Force One*. If we weren't a part of that, that reduced our kit of tools.

As he said, he felt a little stupid to be asked by the Majority Leader of the Senate--he, Manatos--about the format for the Mexico City trip when he had no knowledge that Mansfield had been invited and he had to admit to him that he knew nothing about the trip. He summed it up as a congressional relations' concern; it wasn't an ego trip. We needed whatever we could have in our kit to work the Hill, and there was mighty little, actually. We had gone over things we could do to maintain friendships up there and obviously *Air Force One* would be significant in that area. And he said, "It would be helpful, Jack, if I can't dispense the goodies, to at least have a smell of the wrapper." Mike was not a fellow that became overly exercised; he was rather a low-key guy. This indicates we were very sensitive to something like this. It would be an embarrassment.

It was somewhat comparable to what occurred one day when I was in Mansfield's office and Mike was distraught and really greeted me coolly. [It was not] our usual "Sit down, have a cup of coffee" and I had no idea what--I thought I had detected something. Mansfield said, "Well, all right, tell me about it." I didn't know what he was talking about. As it unfolded, he was talking about the closing of a VA hospital in Montana which had not been discussed with him prior to the announcement of the closing. He had not even been notified of the closing and he was extremely disturbed and angered. I, frankly, had to tell him I had no idea what he was talking about. I called the White House in his presence and, sure enough, the Ramsey Clark review to bring about [budget] cuts had gone to VA hospitals. He had compiled a list of VA hospitals and, apparently, the Veterans Administration and the White House had not bothered to [call Mansfield] and we in congressional relations had not been advised.

It turned out to be a very serious problem between Mansfield and Johnson that continued for months. Mansfield never let go of his opposition to a House committee hearing on VA hospitals. The President reacted by trying to plant editorials about cost-cutting. This had elements of a couple of men overreacting.

It was a break for me that I didn't know [about it] that morning. It's an example of how essential it was for the entire administration, every department and agency, to keep the White House congressional relations department advised on everything that might be a

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problem--in addition to [providing] the usual reports on legislative progress. And never were we to be left in the dark, for obvious reasons. When it occurred from time to time, as in this instance, we would react very strongly.

G: The memorandum describes Dirksen backing out of an apparent commitment to support you on this measure and suggests a degree of undependability. How dependable was Dirksen?

O: I think Dirksen would play his cards close to the vest. That was his style. It was extremely difficult to get a commitment from him. He would talk on all sides of an issue. He would be very courteous and listen carefully and give you all the time you wanted and everything would be pleasant. You'd have to do a little guessing as to where you thought he might land. In this case, where Manatos is stating that he and Katzenbach on two occasions had gotten a specific commitment from Dirksen, it would be unusual for Dirksen to do that and then back off. You were more apt to have to sweat Dirksen out to the last moment where he had his options, and if he didn't support you, you could never really claim that he had said he would.

In this instance, this was a shock to all concerned. Whether Dirksen was misunderstood doesn't make any difference. Obviously, we're sitting rather comfortably. You had Dirksen's support, consequently you are not going to have a difficult vote the following day. Suddenly, within minutes, you have this fall apart. You have the Majority Leader saying, "Well, that's it. We're losers. It's all over."

The effort is a good example of President Johnson's personal efforts, because you see here again, he got personally involved. If he had a pilot's license, he'd probably pick up Howard Cannon himself. That's why we tried to husband his impact and not overuse it.

G: You had a meeting with Mansfield early in 1966 with regard to Vietnam and he seemed very concerned about the alternatives, concerned about [William] Fulbright's view but also concerned about the opinions that the war should be escalated.

O: That was Mansfield's position. Mansfield was not a hawk. He was a staunch supporter of the President. He supported President Kennedy fully and he supported President Johnson fully, and we could never have any quarrel with Mansfield's support of the program. In the area of Vietnam, he had a tendency to refrain from critical comments. He did not want to lessen his on-the-record support and yet as early as January of 1966 you see indications of my conversation with him, my report to the President by this memo, that he was beginning to express concern. This was in the context of escalating, where you had [Richard] Russell and [Mendel] Rivers real, true hawks, urging escalation, and Mansfield expressing confidence that the President won't bend to military pressures.

Then on the other side of the coin, I don't know specifically what Fulbright's argument on colonialism meant, but Mansfield in turn said that his arguments made no

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sense. But I do report to the President that I have no doubt of his deep concern. Then he suggested direct meetings with Fulbright, which is interesting. He felt that could reduce the public impact of what had become generally known in Washington as conflict between the President and Fulbright.

G: On another matter, Mansfield refused to schedule round-the-clock sessions on [Section] 14(b) [of the Taft-Hartley Act]. Let me ask you to--

O: That would be a judgment call. The repeal of 14(b) wasn't in the cards and we all knew it. Mansfield's view was: how many battles do you take on; how thin do you spread yourself? He was a realist and his view to go through an activity that would not have a positive result was something he wasn't prepared to undertake. On the other hand, we had committed to labor that we would never give up, that we would make every effort we could. And it seemed that this approach would be evidence of the intensity of our effort.

So you got caught in that judgment situation. Mansfield said that he'll shoulder the blame for not having the round-the-clock sessions. Mansfield has just about had it in this area and he was going to tell labor, "Forget the round-the-clock, just provide six or seven more votes and we'll get this done. That's your problem. Don't be leaning on us. It's about time you people produced, and you haven't."

(Interruption)

G: A couple of things that I want to ask you about procedurally with regard to congressional relations. One of the memos there reflects some improvements in your operation: one, having Manatos and [Henry Hall] Wilson screen invitation lists. Apparently, you had one situation where the Republican opponent of one of your Democratic congressmen had his picture taken with the President and publicized it all over the Iowa newspapers. Two, trying to speed up the processing of presidential handshake-type photographs so that they could be used by the congressman or senator quickly enough to really be news. Do you recall these activities?

O: We felt that this was an area where we could make some impact with a number of members. It was essential that it flow smoothly. The President was in total accord with this process, which was rather time-consuming and interrupted his schedule at times. But it was very important to a lot of members and we had made the commitment. You wanted to assure that the operation would run smoothly and maybe the priority with us was not as high with some in the White House who had other things on their minds. It was a continuing effort to ensure that we had as smooth an operation in this area as we could.

And it's quite a setback when you found an incident like this, where a candidate is having his picture taken with the President and then he was an opponent of an incumbent that we had been working with. That was the catalyst that got us to review this activity and tighten it up. That's basically what it was.

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- G: Was it a seasonal activity largely, following the campaign season or preceding it?
- O: Preceding the campaign season but at an early enough date so there could be utilization. For example, the lead time on printing of materials that a candidate would have. You not only had to have it done but you had to have it back to him in ample time so he wasn't faced with problems in fully utilizing it in his campaign. That meant you had to structure this activity at a relatively early stage.
- G: Typically, would a congressman call your office?
- O: No. We really extended the hand, made the offer, made the opportunity available. We didn't wait for them to call us. We seized upon it because you're always looking for something you can do to maintain this relationship, hopefully improve it and have a continuity of contact. Well, this was ideal; this fitted in nicely. We sought them out and they obviously would respond in most every instance enthusiastically. We carefully monitored contested districts. We had all our statistics and information on every contest, so you had an awareness where this effort would be appreciated. If a fellow had no contest or a walk-through, he wasn't very excited about this because he probably wasn't going to print literature or do television anyway. So it did vary.
- G: A general question: do you feel that after you became postmaster general that the White House was as considerate of the needs of congressional relations as they had been when you were doing that full time?
- O: Yes.
- G: Really?
- O: There was no perception on my part of any falling off. The problem I was faced with was that the President was very much interested in my continuity as full-time as possible. There were occasions when he reminded me of that and he expressed some concern that I was devoting attention to the Post Office Department that wasn't necessary. He wanted to be sure that I was continuing my activities with the staff.

My effort to adjust the staff failed early on and the retention of the office in the White House was his decision. It did cause some problems. He would charge Joe Califano almost daily with the responsibility to be in communication with me. And he would make comments to Joe: "Did you talk to O'Brien? What does the rest of this memo mean? Is this O'Brien's view?" That sort of thing. Joe and I entered into an informal understanding. I, of course, was abreast of everything, but if I weren't there at different times of the day, Joe was free, as far as I was concerned, to indicate to the President that he and I had discussed things that really didn't need discussion. We weren't trying to con Lyndon Johnson but some of it just wasn't necessary or at all vital. And Joe was free to use my name as he saw fit in assuring the President.

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That did not mean that we decided to drop this whole area of communication, and my relationship with Henry [Hall Wilson] and the rest, of course, remained a very, very close one. There was no day that I wasn't in communication, discussion with the White House staff.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XVIII

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