

INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM PROXMIRE
INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette
PLACE: Senator Proxmire's office, U.S. Capitol, Washington, D.C.

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P: My basic view is the same as it was before. I think we should have caucuses. I think the leadership should recognize that it really is a representative of the other party members in the Senate and, as a matter of fact, that that's the leader's job, to reflect that view. That's one of the reasons I wouldn't want to be a leader. Of course, he has every right and reason to advance his own views, but he's not a single senator who's advancing an agenda that he happens to have, a private agenda. It seems to me [that] as leader, as leader, he has a duty to advance a party agenda, one that a majority of the party, at least a majority of the party, favors. And if he can't do that, he either ought to get out or he ought to step aside while a particular issue's being handled. And I think that Senator Johnson as majority leader never had that view.

G: Your speeches that February, March and April [of 1959] bear evidence of a lot of research. How did you go about researching this tradition of the Senate and how it had changed from one period to the next?

P: Well, I was elected first in a special election in 1957, in August of 1957, as a successor to Senator [Joseph] McCarthy, who had been a

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Republican. Wisconsin Democrats hadn't elected a senator since 1932 and we hadn't elected a governor in thirty elections, since 1896 except in 1932. The year after I was elected to the Senate, we elected a governor. So it was a very, very unusual kind of a situation. I took office in August of 1957; the speech was made a year and a half later on Washington's Birthday in 1959.

We did do some research for the speech. Other senators were very, very reluctant to become involved personally. In fact, when they called me about my speech they would call me at home, they wouldn't call me here in the office. They were afraid the lines might be tapped. There was a real fear of Senator Johnson as the leader. But we did considerable research in the library and in talking with other senators and other staff members and so forth. And we got an impression from them--undoubtedly many other senators could have spoken with much more authority about the Senate, because I was at that point a newcomer. Now I've been here twenty-eight and a half years.

G: You had marshalled some of the writings of political scientists, too, [Hugh] Bone and Malcolm Jewell, to essentially state the same thing that you were stating, that the Policy Committee was not functioning as it should and the caucuses were not meeting. How about Ralph Huitt, did he help in this regard, too? Was he--?

P: I can't remember whether Ralph was even on my staff at that point. He was on my staff for a while as kind of my counsel, and he was of course extraordinarily useful because he'd been a Senate staffer for

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some time. He's a fine, brilliant man, and he was very helpful. But I just--I should be able to remember. I remember that my administrative assistant, Bob Lewis, felt very strongly about this. I don't think that Ralph, as I recall, was that critical of Lyndon. He was a fellow Texan. He'd worked on Johnson's staff, I think, for a while, and he liked the Leader and I'm not sure whether he opposed or supported my position or whether he did much work in this. I just don't know. I know that he did a lot of fine work for me in other respects, but I can't remember that he was involved in this.

G: Did you urge other senators to go public with you on this issue?

P: No. No, I didn't urge them to do it; I realized that it might be difficult for them. By and large, they'd call me up, as I say, at home and say, "Keep it up, you're doing great. I'm with you all the way, but keep me out of it." Just sort of that view, and of course some senators, like Wayne Morse, had been critical of the [Leader]. He was critical of everybody, and he was critical of the Leader from time to time. And there were other senators who very much resented what Johnson's power was and the fact that they didn't get the committees they wanted or didn't get the kind of support on legislation they felt they should get from him. But they knew that he had a great deal of power.

I remember when Dick Neuberger responded to me. He got up on the floor, and I've forgotten whether it was at my second or third speech, and he said, "You know, you're showing a gross ingratitude. Everything you've got in this body you owe to the Leader. Why do you think

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you got on the Agriculture Committee?" I wasn't on the Appropriations Committee at that time; I was on the Banking and Agriculture Committees and the Post Office Committee. Neuberger said, "The leadership got you that." And I said, "That's exactly my point. Everybody in the Senate's in the same position. Does this mean we can never be critical of the person that's supposed to take his lead from our position and not in reverse?"

G: Was it pretty apparent that LBJ himself named those committee assignments or did he have to yield to other members of the Steering Committee?

P: Oh, God, no. Absolutely. No, no, no. Well, I think he would listen sometimes. Of course, you can't run this kind of a business, even with the power he had, without a certain amount of consensus. And he would try to help people, and he tried to help me, I'm sure. But he would determine who would go on what committee; he'd make the final decision. I was anxious to get on the Finance Committee and I wanted to get on the Agriculture Committee. We had an agricultural problem in the state. I remember that Spessard Holland wanted to keep me off because he thought I was too critical of Ezra Taft Benson, who was the Republican secretary of agriculture. Of course, there was every reason why I should have been critical of him, he was ruining our agriculture as well as in other states. But Johnson overruled Holland and put me on the Agriculture Committee. He did that kind of thing when he felt it was right and in his interest and so forth.

But I'm sorry, what was the question you--?

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G: This was, could he singlehandedly name the committee assignments--

P: Oh, yes. Sure.

G: --or did he have to yield to the other members of the Steering Committee?

P: He would name all of the members, as I recall, all of the members of committees. He would give his list and we'd simply ratify it. At one point I was put on the so-called Steering Committee, which was really a committee on committees.

G: Do you think that the reason--?

P: As soon as [Mike] Mansfield came in, which was only three years after I got here, then the Steering Committee functioned and Mansfield didn't make any effort to influence it. In fact, he felt that it was up to the Steering Committee to do it and he didn't want to have any input in that. I don't know how he functioned with the Policy Committee, but with the Steering Committee, which I served on, he let the committee decide what they wanted to do. And we did it by vote.

G: Do you think that his not appointing you to the Finance Committee was a retaliation for that Rule 22 fight in your--?

P: No, because the Rule 22 fight came--the criticism of Johnson came after I'd been here quite a while. I was already settled down in committees. As a matter of fact, I was appointed--I'm not sure whether it was 1959 or 1960; anyway, it was after my speech--to the Appropriations Committee. I took [Estes] Kefauver's place after Kefauver [died]. Now, that may have been--I'm not sure whether

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Kefauver died before the 1960 election or not. At any rate, I did get that appointment to the Appropriations Committee.

G: But in 1959 before you made your Washington's Birthday speech, Johnson had overlooked you in making the appointment to the Finance Committee and appointed someone who didn't have your seniority, and some people have attributed that to the fact that he was retaliating on the Rule 22 fight when you--?

P: I think that rather than that--that may have been part of it, but I think another important part was that I had been a very vocal, vigorous critic of the depletion allowance.

G: I see.

P: Of course he was very concerned about that, and I am sure he was working with Bob Kerr, who was a very powerful man on that committee, and Kerr didn't want to have a bunch of people on the committee who'd be in a position to vote him down on that. He already had Paul Douglas on the committee and Albert Gore and some other people that he couldn't influence in that way. So I think that that was the reason.

G: Had he, in appointing you to the Agriculture Committee the year before, in 1958, tried to elicit any promises or--

P: No.

G: --expected you to vote a particular way or--?

P: No, he never did that. I don't know if he did that with anybody, but he certainly didn't do that with me. He didn't say, "Now, you're going to go on that and I expect you to check with me," or anything of that kind at all.

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G: Did you have any advance signal from the leadership's office on this speech of yours, the first one, the February speech? I know that you sent--

P: I didn't warn anybody. Nobody knew about it.

G: --copies of that.

P: I don't think anybody knew about it. If they did, there was a staff leak, but I don't think we had a staff leak. I just went on the floor. (Laughter) What happened was I went on the floor, it was Washington's Birthday. And in 1958 on Washington's Birthday, a senator got up and read Washington's Farewell Address and then we adjourned. And that day [in 1959], a senator got up and read Washington's Farewell Address and then I gave my speech attacking Johnson. Some wag in the gallery said, "There were two farewell addresses today, Washington's and Proxmire's." And then Herblock had a marvelous cartoon, and the cartoon had King Johnson sitting up there with a crown, and a spear going right through and knocking his crown off with a "Zing!" And the little comment on the cartoon was, "Methinks, milord, that the peasantry is getting restless."

(Laughter)

G: Well, what was Johnson's reaction to the speech, do you recall?

P: Well, he was very unhappy with it, and I think that's one of the reasons why Neuberger came to the floor and made his speech. Johnson didn't speak to me directly; he didn't call me into his office or call me on the phone or anything of that kind. And he talked to people on the phone all the time. I remember he called me a number of times on

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the phone on other matters. He was much, much more aggressive than any leader we've ever had in that way. He'd call everybody. I think he even had a telephone down in his swimming pool in Texas. He'd spend most of his time I think on the phone instead of swimming in the pool.

But he didn't call me on the carpet or anything of the kind. And he didn't organize any kind of effort by other senators, except Neuberger and a few others who got up on the floor and spoke. I think he was too smart to do that; I think he knew that if he tried to do that kind of business that the whole thing could blow up in his face. He had to do this on the basis of a great deal of sufferance and support on the part of some of the senators. And at that point we barely, barely had a majority. When I arrived, it was 1957. If I had been defeated--Matt Neely was dying, and if Matt Neely had died after I had been defeated, it would have been a tie. There were only ninety-six senators there; it was before Alaska and Hawaii came into the Union. So there would have been forty-eight and forty-eight, and Vice President Nixon would have, of course, voted with the Republicans to organize the Senate and Johnson would have lost his leadership, or at least his majority leadership. We would have lost all of our chairmanships.

So my victory was very, very important to him. I was aware of that, and he was very, very anxious to get me re-elected. In fact, one of the things he did in 1958--I had to run again right away--he said, "What are the big ethnic groups in your state?" I said, "Well,

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the biggest is German, and we have a lot of Poles and a lot of Norwegians and Danes." He said, "Okay, I'll tell you what I'm going to do, I'm going to send you to Germany, Poland, Denmark and Norway." And I said, "What do you mean? I'm not going to go on anything where the taxpayers have to pay." He said, "The taxpayers don't have to pay anything. This will be paid for by the German government." The German government had asked for a group to come there, so he just put me on the delegation. And I didn't know any better, so I went overseas, and I got over there and I ran out of money. So I wired my father, who was still alive at that point, and told him I was broke and that I needed a thousand dollars. Well, somehow Drew Pearson got hold of that, so he ran a story: "Little Billy Proxmire got over to Germany and ran out of money so he wired his daddy for--" One of those things. But I was there because Johnson had decided that he wanted me re-elected. And of course, he needed to get me re-elected because he wanted to hold onto that leadership. It turned out that 1958 was a magnificent year for us. I think we knocked off thirteen Republican senators and it established us for the next twenty years.

G: Yes. I read that the first time you were elected, in 1957 in the special election, that you talked to Johnson by telephone after your election. Do you recall that?

P: Yes.

G: Either you called him or he called you.

P: Yes, and then Johnson advanced something that was not true, but I think people thought it was so cute that they ran it in the papers. I

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resented it and denied it, but of course it didn't do me any good. Time magazine ran it and I called them up and said, "Look, when you have two immediate sources, best of sources, and one says one thing and one says another, at least you run what each of them say. You don't just run it as a fact." He said that when he met us at the airport--and a whole bunch of Democrats came out to see me, because they were all happy that we had won. I was a fifteen-to-one underdog; the guy whom I beat had beaten me twice for governor. He said that when I arrived he said it was his birthday and that I said, "Well, I've got the best birthday present that you've ever had: me." I didn't say that. That's not my style; I wouldn't say anything like that. But he insisted on that. (Laughter) I guess he thought it was kind of a cute story that he made up, but it was untrue.

G: It's certainly been published.

P: Oh, yes.

G: Had he helped you in the campaign? Had he raised money for you, or sent speakers out there, or anything of that nature?

P: I think they figured I had no chance. And I won by a landslide. The reason I won big was--what a lot of people don't understand is in a special election, if you're running at a time when the other party has control of the White House and control of the governor's mansion, you can't lose. As I say, this guy had beaten me twice, and I won nine out of ten congressional districts. I just won big. Because what happens is you have a very light vote; very few people come out. I think only about 15 per cent of the electorate came out. Who comes

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out? People who are mad. Labor just came out big, and labor really did a good job. The Republicans thought that they had it cold so they didn't try, didn't have people out working. The Democrats and the labor people worked their butt off and, boy, they got results. Labor usually is lousy in elections, terrible. But it's the only time I've ever seen labor really do an effective job, and they won and they won big because they worked so hard.

G: When you arrived in Washington, the 1957 civil rights bill was being debated, and I guess you got here just in time to vote for it, as I recall.

P: [Strom] Thurmond was filibustering the bill, and he had been speaking for twenty-four hours, I think.

G: Can you recall the atmosphere at the time that bill was being debated, and Thurmond's filibuster?

P: Well, it was an atmosphere in which people were getting ready to go home. That year we adjourned sine die I think about the thirtieth of August, or the thirty-first. It was very, very early compared to anything that's happened since then. And of course senators were worn out with the late session of Thurmond's long talk and they were anxious to go. It was kind of a party atmosphere; there was a lot of drinking and so forth.

One of the things Johnson did which I thought was pretty good, he said, "Now, do you want me to give them a hard time to get you sworn in right away?" And I said, "Sure." So he went out on the floor and he just lit into the Republicans and into the Republican leader,

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because what had happened was that the Governor of the state--I'd run for governor but was defeated; it was another man that was governor--said that he didn't have time to send the certification in that I'd been elected. And he had gone to a baseball game, to see the Milwaukee Braves--it was then the Milwaukee Braves playing, before the Brewers came along--and Johnson got up and lit into them. "The Governor's at a baseball game! He's watching the Milwaukee Braves play, and here we have a United States senator who's just been elected, and the Governor hasn't got the time to see that he gets in." So it was very, very effective, and they swore me in in a hurry after that.

I could see why people became obligated to him and were anxious to help him. Because he would help me, he would help other senators, I think, wherever he possibly could. But I don't think, I can't recall, that they did very much for me in that election because, as I say, I think that they figured that it was a lost cause and--nobody came into the state, as I recall, to help me. I think it was 1958 that Kennedy came out. He came out and helped me, because of course he was running for president and Wisconsin was an important state. He might have helped me in 1957, I'm not sure.

G: With regard to the 1957 civil rights bill, you get two impressions of it. One, that it was the best possible bill that could be passed under the circumstances, and the other version is that LBJ really prevented a stronger bill from passing. Which do you feel is the more accurate?

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P: Well, I think that on the basis--I can't remember precisely at the time. Of course, I was for the strongest bill we could get. But I think that he did very well to get what he got, and of course, as so often happens, you get half a loaf or even a few crumbs and the whole thing begins to collapse, it goes your way. And that's what happened in this case; later on we got some really good civil rights legislation. It took a while; it took about four or five years after that, but we got better legislation the next year, and then in 19--I can't remember the exact time, I think 1960, and later on we got some legislation where we changed the course of the country.

G: You've described a meeting with LBJ as being an exciting, a unique occasion, one in which he did all the talking. Can you go into specifics and recall--?

P: Well, the one I remember most vividly was one of the ones that took place after he became president. And as presidents tend to do, he invited me up to the White House to meet with him. You know, as usual, they say, "I want to get your views." Unlike Carter, who when I went up, President Carter sat down and took notes, and when I followed up on it to see if anything was happening, after I told him what I thought should be done, I found out it had been, that he'd gotten in touch with the agencies and so forth. (Laughter) With Johnson, it was so typical of Johnson, I think I might have been there fifteen minutes, maybe twenty, and I don't think I talked for a total of ten seconds. I said, "Mr. President, you're very nice to ask me up." Then he went into his usual monologue in which he told me

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exactly what he thought was wrong, what ought to be done, and raised hell about this and that and the other thing, and that was it. Somebody came in after a while and broke up the meeting. It was strictly a one-way street.

G: Was that the way it had been before, when he was majority leader, as well?

P: Pretty much, yes. It's a while ago and I just can't remember clearly. But when he'd call me on the phone and so forth it was always pretty much of a one-way conversation. It might have been different with other senators, or with congressmen or constituents, and it may well have been my fault. But usually I just wasn't looking for anything. I wasn't interested in having him do this or that or whatever, and I wasn't interested in giving him any different opinion. Not that I wouldn't have if I'd felt that way, but there just wasn't anything that I particularly felt was burning that he ought to be doing.

G: Do you recall his ever trying to get you to vote for a particular measure that he was interested in, or the methods of persuasion that he would use in talking with you?

P: I don't think so. In fact, I think about the only Senate leader who had made that effort was Bob Byrd, strangely enough. Mansfield never did. In fact, Mansfield felt that wasn't his function. Byrd seemed to want a record of making sure that all the Democrats would vote together, and it's very important to him even though we're in a minority now. He feels that way much more than when we were in a majority. But Byrd feels that often I've been the only one who's

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voted against something. He comes around and other people come around, I think at Byrd's suggestion, and say, "Come on, you don't want to be the only Democrat holding out on this thing."

G: Did he ever hold up bills that you were interested in, bills for Wisconsin, let's say?

P: No, as a matter of fact, it was the reverse. Particularly--in 1960, I had a dairy bill that I wanted to get through affecting the farmers in Wisconsin, the dairy farmers, and Johnson was extremely helpful in moving it along. I got it adopted in the Senate, and it passed the House, and it was very helpful to our farmers. And he was especially helpful in doing it. What happened was that I'd gotten about, oh, maybe fifteen senators as co-sponsors, including Kennedy. And the headline all over the country was, "Kennedy Dairy Bill Passes the Senate." I remember it drove me bananas because he didn't even know what was in the bill! You know, he just said, "Sure, I'll go on it," because he was of course interested in Wisconsin.

G: Yes. Amazing.

P: Of course, he was also running for president and he was the nominee, so that made it the news, but even still it was my bill. But Kennedy didn't have anything to do with advancing it, Johnson did, and Johnson was very helpful in that.

G: Another thing that you did, you forced a roll call vote on something regarding, I think it was the depletion allowance, cutting it from 27 1/2 per cent to 15 per cent. And Johnson reportedly was furious

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that you had forced these senators to go on record regarding that amendment. Do you remember that?

P: I don't, and I certainly don't remember Johnson telling me, trying to talk me out of it. And it may well be that you figure that if he had I would have used that in my speech on the floor, which I probably would have.

G: Do you think the other senators were afraid of him?

P: Oh, yes.

(Interruption)

--and he could be very arbitrary.

G: But he didn't retaliate against you?

P: No, partly because it was 1959 that we had this thing. In 1960 the presidency became available with Eisenhower retiring, and I think that he figured that, after all, at that time Wisconsin was an important primary state. It's not now, but it was kind of like Iowa or New Hampshire are now.

(Interruption)

It's a fairly big state and it had an open primary, and it was a really significant--it came early, at that time, in the electoral year. And I think he had some ambitions toward the presidency, although I never could quite figure out how much. And once it became clear that he might go on the ticket, he was very helpful to me in Wisconsin. Of course I would say so, because it was true, that he'd been helpful in getting legislation for the state through.

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G: You were close to Wayne Morse, and he was another senator that freely criticized Johnson whenever he felt that LBJ had done something wrong. They must have had an odd relationship. Have any insights on that?

P: Well, I'm not so sure about that kind of thing. It was an odd relationship. They were both extraordinarily able men, both very, very intelligent, and Morse took enormous pride, of course, in his independence. He'd been a Republican, as you know, then he was an Independent for a couple of years. He had an extraordinary mind. This isn't relevant to Johnson but it would take me just a minute to tell you, indicating the intellectual quality of Wayne Morse. In 1947 or so, when [Robert] Taft was the majority leader, Morse got up on the floor and talked briefly, and it was during the morning business. Majority Leader Taft thought Morse's speech was taking too long, so Taft went over to him and said, "Morse, how long are you going to talk?" And Morse just blew up for some reason. He said, "As long as I please, Taft." And he went on. He talked for twenty-four hours. Didn't stop. Now, the people who were there and who were clerks tell me that it was the greatest intellectual performance they'd ever seen Morse didn't repeat himself, didn't have a note. What he said seemed completely coherent, logical, organized. He was talking about his love, the Hell's Canyon Dam, and he knew everything there is to know about it. But it was apparently a really marvelous, marvelous performance. That's the kind of ability Wayne had. And I think that Johnson admired that.

G: What was his attitude toward Johnson, though, Morse's?

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P: Well, I think that Morse must have resented the reputation that Johnson had and the feeling that he must have had that Johnson ran the whole show and all the senators, including Morse, were kind of subservient to him. I think that must have annoyed him. I don't know, that's just my speculation. And he spoke out once--I can't remember, unfortunately, the specific criticisms.

G: Okay. In 1958 you introduced an amendment to the mutual security bill to bar aid to Yugoslavia. Did Johnson become involved in this at all?

P: Not in any personal conversation. You remember my record much better than I do.

G: Well, another issue that was quite controversial was the question of diverting water from Lake Michigan in order to provide it for Chicago.

P: Oh, yes. That was a big one. Absolutely.

G: And you blocked that.

P: Paul Douglas and I used to fight over that. He wanted to divert it for the Chicago River, and of course it lowered the level of the lake and it had an adverse effect on Wisconsin ports and Wisconsin property owners. So I fought that hard, filibustered it. For some reason they'd bring it up at the end of the session, and of course that's asking for a filibuster. And I'd do my best to block it. That was a perennial.

G: You've talked at length, certainly in your speeches, about Johnson's sources of power in terms of being able to name members to committees and that he, not the--

P: And advance or retard legislation, too, and decide what would go up.

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G: How did he do that?

P: Well, I don't know because I didn't serve on the Policy Committee, but I suspect he ran the Policy Committee. He would decide what legislation would be considered and what would not be considered, and if I wanted the dairy bill up, he was very helpful at one point, as I say, in getting my dairy bill through. He just could decide to call it up and give it a green light, or he could say, "Well, I'd like to do it but I've got a lot of other things; we'll do it later on." And that's the great power that the Policy Committee has and that the leadership, if it wants to short-circuit it, which he did, can seize.

G: His defenders would argue that the Policy Committee really didn't hold up legislation, it was the committee chairmen that would do that, and that they would bring up legislation perhaps not in a timely fashion, but they would--

P: Well, they're both traffic cops. There's no question what the committee chairmen can do--I've been a committee chairman for six years with the Banking Committee; I was also the committee chairman on the Joint Economic Committee, but the Banking Committee is a better example because that's a regular standing committee. And you can delay legislation to some extent. I never tried to do it, and most chairmen don't. I think it's a loser. After all, your job is simply to call the committee together, hold hearings, and go with the majority. Do your best to persuade people to go with your view, of course, like any other senator, but then move it along. And I think most chairmen do that.

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The difficulty is when the bills go to the floor, they go on the calendar. Then the chairman can say, "I'd like it to come up," but it's up to the leadership to decide which bills on the calendar to bring up and when. And they have to make a judgment; often the judgment is based strictly on merit. They can decide that a bill would take too long and [because] you're coming to the end of the session it would block everything else. Or they may decide that there are other things that are more important, or they may decide that there are several senators who've got a hold on it and don't want it to come up, and you've got to listen to them. If you cross them you're going to be in trouble later on or you're going to be in trouble on that legislation. So the leader can maneuver various people on this, but he can make up the decision to bring it up if he wants to. The power that Jesse Helms now has in the Senate, for instance, is strictly a power that the leadership wants to tolerate him. They could cut him off like that (snaps fingers), any time they wanted to. But they don't want to do that; I don't know why, but they don't. And Johnson could do the same thing. But nobody stood up to Johnson the way that Helms has been standing up since then to other leadership.

G: Yes. To what extent was Johnson's ability to raise funds for other senators, say, campaign funds, an implement of his power?

P: I'm not sure. I think it was of some importance. He never raised any money for me that I recall; he might have, but I can't remember it. Kennedy's family made some contributions to my campaign.

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But I suppose that was critical under some circumstances. The campaign committee was supposed to have a fairly equitable distribution of money and then maybe have some extra to throw into very close races. But, of course, whenever you get something like that, there's always resentment and rumors and feeling that it's discriminatory and unfair, and so on. But I never felt that it was especially badly done; I thought it was handled all right.

G: Well, I wonder, in general did senators have enough financial resources in their own state without having to depend on Johnson for perhaps more money?

P: Well, more senators had to raise their own money. I think that's even true now, even with all the colossal amount they raise now, maybe not so true with the Republicans as the Democrats. But you know, the average winning senator in the last campaign raised something like two million dollars, and when I was running back in 1976 and 1982 I didn't raise any money in either of my last two elections; I ran completely without any contributions, without spending any money. But when I was spending money and raising money, I'd raise it by soliciting most of it in the state, raising a little in New York and Chicago and the big cities, but on my own. And I think most of the senators do that. If a senator can't raise money, if he's a Democrat, at least, he's in bad shape. I suspect a Republican, because the Republicans have so much more, can get a lot of money funneled into his campaign from out of state, because as I say, they've got access to so much.

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- G: What about other favors? You mentioned the one trip that LBJ asked you to go on, but awarding office space and trips and things of this nature, did Johnson use these as tools for getting votes?
- P: Not with me. I think I was treated fairly, not either given any favor or any disfavor on allotment of office space.
- G: I'm trying to find out what were his sources of power other than his leadership positions, the formal positions on the Steering Committee and Policy Committee and majority leader.
- P: Well, I think that was it. He didn't with me. Now, it may be that with others he might have gotten in touch with some constituents in the state of the particular person, or some big contributor, and said, "Can you talk to Joe or Jim or Jack or whoever it is and swing him around on this issue?" But I didn't hear about that, and he didn't do it with me. I think that these other sources were very, very important that you mentioned, that is, being able to determine committee assignments and being able to advance or retard legislation. These other things, the trip selection and so forth, I guess that's of importance to some senator or senators. And I'm sure that he probably did persuade contributors to contribute heavily to people who were friends of his. Of course, a lot of that was before--he was majority leader only three years when I was there, less than--well, let's see: 1958, 1959, 1960, yes. But of course the last two of the three years were so colored by the Democratic convention coming up and the race for the presidency, and he was involved to some extent, but in a sort

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of a--he was a very proud man, and he wanted, I am sure, to get nominated to the presidency but he didn't want to be humiliated.

G: There was speculation that some specific event led to your rebellion against Johnson in that first speech, that there was perhaps something that he did that slighted you or treated you unfairly that caused you to jump ship. Was there anything of that nature that--?

P: No, I think that from the beginning I thought it was a peculiar kind of a situation in this body. As I say, I came out of the Wisconsin legislature; I'd had very limited experience but the legislature was a lot like the Senate. The assembly had a hundred members and so forth. It just seemed so wrong that one person would be able to run the whole show, and I thought the best way to do it was just to go public and say so.

G: What about Johnson's ability to count votes, the head counts, the knowing when he had enough votes to pass a bill?

P: He relied a lot on Baker for a lot of that, Bobby Baker, and I guess Baker was pretty good at it. I think that undoubtedly he didn't want to take defeats, and I'm sure the fact that Baker was acting for Johnson made the difference; that's why people would be frank with him.

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G: --aspects of his organization, his leadership structure that you feel are unique or--?

P: Well, it was sure unique as far as anything I'd ever seen. The leadership we had in the Wisconsin legislature when I served there was

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permissive and consensus-oriented. The leadership we've had here in the Senate since the Johnson era has been both those things. And Johnson was *sui generis*: he ran the show; he called the signals; he decided what would come up and when; he decided who would get preferential assignments. I think a big factor here was that he was majority leader at a time when there was a vacuum of power in Washington. Eisenhower was not a strong president as far as the Congress was concerned. In fact, he never voted before he became president, and he thought the president's job was to execute the law and the legislator's job was to determine what legislation should pass. He didn't realize the president was the number-one legislator in the country. That left a tremendous opportunity for Johnson. That was especially true after I came in, because in the last part of Eisenhower's term I think that the lack of authority and power of this lame duck president was especially evident.

G: Johnson was criticized by liberal Democrats for not opposing Eisenhower enough during this period, for going along too often with the administration. Did you share this view?

P: Well, that was not true in the areas where I had my experience. It may have been true to some extent in foreign policy and military policy, although I think that's pretty much inevitable. Johnson may have agreed with Eisenhower. But as far as agricultural policy was concerned and other domestic issues, Senator Johnson opposed the President, I think, strongly.

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G: What was his political philosophy during this period? How would you assess his beliefs?

P: It was hard to tell, because he had a tough balancing act. He wanted to run the Senate his way, but he knew how far he could go. He was a southern senator in a southern Senate with a majority of Democratic senators, I think at that time, elected from the South. I could be wrong on that, but it was very close to a majority. Certainly the powerhouses [were southerners], because I think thirteen of the sixteen standing committees had southern chairmen. So if President Johnson were going to really get things done he had to keep the South under control. The South is a conservative part of the country. Therefore Johnson had to be aware of that. But I think he was always leaning on the southern Democratic senators on civil rights, and on domestic legislation generally, to be more accommodating to the rest of the country and more in concert with the Democratic platform and the position taken by Democrats around the country.

G: In 1958 you had a number of attempts on behalf of southern senators to retaliate against the Supreme Court for the Brown decision, and particularly in the area of civil rights. You had the Jenner-Butler bill and HR 3. Do you recall those and Johnson's efforts to derail them?

P: I'm not sure that there was much action on that after 1957. Now, see, I came in at the end of 1957. [I was there] only three days in 1957.

G: Well, this was 1958.

P: 1958?

G: Yes.

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P: I don't remember much about either one of those bills.

G: How about the whole question of Alaskan and Hawaiian statehood? Do you remember how that was enabled to pass? [You] had Alaska one year and then Hawaii in 1959.

P: As I recall, and I could be wrong, the principal opposition came from the South. But I don't recall that that was a major issue in the Senate. In 1958 to 1959, when it became--was it 1960 when they came into the States?

G: Yes.

P: [I don't recall] that there was much of a pitched battle, I think it was mostly accepted. The senators I think were more resistant than most because we were diluting our power, and diluting it to the extent of four new senators. But again, as I say, it was the South that felt that they were probably losing more than anybody else. I think Johnson was affirmative on admitting the two new states.

G: Sure. You took an opposite position from Johnson on regulation of natural gas in the Harris-Fulbright natural gas bill. Any recollections of this question?

P: Well, I just remember I took a position against him. I don't remember his talking to me about it or complaining directly to me about that. Of course, I was critical of what I thought was an enormous discrepancy of power that the Texans had on oil anyway. I remember I was outraged when Kennedy appointed John Connally as secretary of the navy, which buys all the oil for the armed forces and so forth, and I spoke at some length against him. But that was after Johnson was in

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the Senate; he was vice president then. But it was really a Johnson-- I'm sure it was a Johnson recommendation. President Kennedy felt that he ought to throw Vice President Johnson a bone or two and I think that was one of the bones they threw him.

G: One bill that you mentioned in I believe it was the second speech that you gave in 1959 was the housing act and how it was rushed through passage in the Senate. Do you remember that? And then this was in an effort to bail out the FHA, which they feared was going to run out of money. Nothing on that?

P: No.

G: And another one that you alluded to was the airport act and federal aid to airports. Do you recall that? Okay.

You criticized Johnson for not supporting federal aid to education, or not I guess supporting the party platform on federal aid to education. How did he oppose it? Do you recall what specifically he did?

P: I guess in my view he didn't advance it on his agenda; it wasn't a number-one issue that I [he] felt at that time should be pushed through. He may have been right, I don't know. I mean, in retrospect.

G: How so?

P: You see, I'd come out of the Wisconsin State Legislature, and I think that the number-one responsibility of a state is education. And our founding fathers left education pretty much to the states. At that time, I felt that the principal reason for the federal government

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supporting education was because of the discrepancy in financial capability on the part of the states. After all, you've got Mississippi on the one hand; you've got rich northern states on the other, and all American children should have an equal opportunity to get a good education. Since then, of course, the states have greatly improved. The income of poor southern states has greatly gone up. And I think it's important that the federal government do what it can but that it limit its authority, because one of the aspects of the kind of republic we have is that you have a degree of plurality of power and the one area where the states have authority is in education. If you get a central government that controls education, you're more likely to have a central power that can be overwhelming and overweening, and I think that can be a real problem.

It's like the very great importance of keeping the limits on the media control that government has, making sure that we provide for a genuine freedom of the press. I've felt for a long time that the federal government, through the fairness doctrine and equal time rule, is imposing too much regulation on the electronic media. And the electronic media, I think, provides about 75 to 80 per cent of the access to the news for the American people according to most polls. And I think that if the founding fathers' principles were put into effect that that same freedom of the press would be applied to electronic media as to the printed media.

The basis for federal regulation of TV and radio was that you had limited frequencies and therefore they had to be assigned and

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regulated. But my God, you've got only about a thousand daily newspapers. In contrast you've got three or four or five thousand TV stations and radio stations. Take a city like Madison, Wisconsin. It has one newspaper ownership. But it has four separate television ownerships. Milwaukee [has] one newspaper ownership. It has ten separate TV ownerships. Heaven knows how many radio stations. Chicago, the same--well, Chicago has two newspapers, but they've got an infinite number of TV and radio outlets. So that you have the electronic media competition. Why do we need FCC regulation? And I feel that under the notion that you ought to have as much freedom of criticism of the government as possible, that the federal government shouldn't infringe on that.

G: Another issue was unemployment compensation, and here you felt that Johnson was not particularly supportive either. Do you recall that?

P: No. I think that unemployment compensation, though, is something that--undoubtedly it was better then than it is now, because now we have a situation where only about 30 per cent of the people who are unemployed get any unemployment compensation. How many people know that? It's a pitifully inadequate system. I've felt right along that most people want to work, and if unemployment compensation is what it is, which is far less than the wage people get when they work, then people who have worked and worked hard should have something to fall back on when they, through no fault of their own, have to be laid off. You know, they don't get unemployment compensation if you're fired.

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You only get it if you're laid off because of economic reasons, and even under those circumstances most people don't get it.

G: Let me ask you to assess Johnson's relationship with his Republican counterpart, first [William] Knowland and then [Everett] Dirksen, who succeeded him in 1959.

P: I thought it was about right. I think that the majority and minority leader should be as cooperative as possible, and I think that's fine. Johnson was not excessively concerned about the Republican interests. On the other hand--the Democrats had a strong, competitive situation--and he pretty much ran the show. (Laughter) Even when the Republicans had the presidency and they had a very intelligent and effective leader in Dirksen, there was no question that Johnson was dominant.

G: Johnson was more effective also, I gather, than Knowland. Is that right?

P: Well, yes. I'm not sure how long Knowland was [leader] after I came to the Senate. I think Knowland served throughout 1958 and then--

G: Yes, that's right.

P: --in 1959 Dirksen became leader. I think that's right. But that was just one year that I had the chance to observe that. No question Johnson was the dominant force.

G: Do you think that he and Dirksen had an accommodation that they worked out with each other?

P: No, I don't think so. They were both very talented, attractive people who I think were respected by the press and by the public, and they

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had the good sense not to just have cat fights all the time and be too critical of each other.

G: Okay.

P: Is that about it?

G: A couple more questions, if you don't mind.

P: Five more minutes?

G: Okay. When Johnson was elected vice president, he met with the caucus and wanted to retain some of his responsibilities that he had had when he was majority leader, and there was a good deal of opposition to it. Do you recall that and--?

P: I remember that very well. I was very much opposed, Albert Gore was very much opposed, so was Paul Douglas. I think it was absolutely unconscionable and ridiculous. It was also unconstitutional, in my view. I mean, here you had the Vice President, representing the executive branch, coming down to run our caucus. And he said, well, he wouldn't run it, he'd just preside. Well, what the hell, you know Johnson, once he gets in there he'd be calling the shots.

G: Describe what happened in that caucus when he made the attempt.

P: I can't remember who spoke out; I'm sure that Gore was one of them. But there was I think pretty much of an overwhelming consensus, and I think that Mansfield, too, probably agreed. I can't remember what Mansfield said and I can't remember that caucus, it was twenty-five years ago. But I'm sure that this was something that nobody wanted, and at that point Lyndon Johnson was vice president of the United States, which meant that he'd lost his Senate power. He was no longer

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the majority leader and there was no way he could discipline anybody. And I think it took a little while for people to really appreciate and understand that, they were so used to giving Johnson what he wanted. But people think that it was a promotion. In a sense it was but--[in a] ceremonial sense maybe, and of course he became president of the United States, but for those years when he was vice president he was pretty much without power.

G: As an individual, what were his strengths and weaknesses?

P: Well, he was well informed, he was on top of things, he was intelligent and articulate, extremely forceful, and he was not really--at least he wasn't as far as I was concerned--a bully. I think that some people think of him as a kind of a guy who would frighten people and intimidate them. I suppose he had--I can't think of a way to express any particular weaknesses on his part. He had a strong ego, but I think that's not necessarily wrong.

G: Was he too sensitive to criticism, do you think?

P: I don't think too sensitive. He was sensitive to it. Got a lot of it and he was aware of it.

G: Was he honest?

P: Yes, I think reasonably honest. He didn't make a point of telling you precisely what he thought, which can be very annoying even though it's an example perhaps of integrity. But I don't think he was especially devious. He wasn't with me.

G: Okay.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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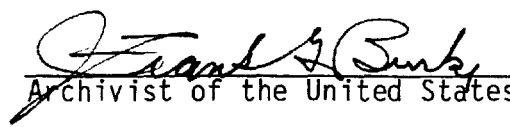
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