

INTERVIEW II

DATE: June 9, 1977
INTERVIEWEE: JOHN SPARKMAN
INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE
PLACE: Senator Sparkman's office in Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: Let's begin with your years in the House together. You were on the Military Affairs Committee and President Johnson was a member of the House Naval Affairs Committee. Did the committees ever have any conflict with regard to which committee would investigate what or getting in each other's way?

S: No, we worked together quite well. In those days there was a distinct division as between the jurisdiction of the Naval Affairs Committee and the Military Affairs Committee. Of course, later on they were combined and became the Armed Services Committee.

G: President Johnson during those early years supported President Roosevelt's efforts toward defense--the Selective Service extension in 1941, which was a very close vote, I think one or two votes in the House.

S: One vote.

G: Do you remember his work on that bill?

S: That bill came through the Military Affairs Committee rather than the Naval Affairs Committee, and actually the committee voted it out by a single vote. And then when it came to the floor of the

Sparkman -- II -- 2

House there was very strong opposition, particularly from the Republican side. We won the fight in the House, as I recall, by a single vote.

G: Do you recall how the fight went?

S: He was supporting it.

G: Yes, I had heard that Sam Rayburn had him be the floor leader for that bill. Do you remember that? Is that accurate?

S: I don't believe that's correct. It could be, because Andrew May of Kentucky was chairman of the Military Affairs Committee, and he opposed the bill. It may very well be that Speaker Rayburn asked Johnson to take a strong hand, not necessarily that he was the manager of it. But it worked out that we won it by a single vote.

G: Can you recall how you got that one vote majority? Was it a question of getting some member to change his vote?

S: No, it was a question of getting some members here on time to vote.

G: Is that right?

S: There were some who were out of town, including me. I had been down visiting some military installations in Florida and Alabama, and we were to fly back from Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Lyndon wasn't along, but Bob Sikes and I were together, as I recall, and we got on the plane at Muscle Shoals. By the time we got to Chattanooga we had noticed that there was very bad weather ahead, and finally we were advised to land at Roanoke. We managed to get in there, but it was a horrible time because it was completely enveloped in clouds and rain. But the air controller was directing us. There

Sparkman -- II -- 3

was a radio in the cabin, and I was sitting right there listening to the controller on the radio. He had cautioned us that it was going to be very bad landing at Roanoke.

Finally we got there, and the controller told him just to fly around, watch for a hole, and if we ever got a hole to dive into it and go down. Shortly after that, the pilot of our plane said to the controller, "How about my letting down out here?" The controller almost jumped out of his seat. He said, "Don't you do it. There are mountains out there five thousand feet high." But we managed eventually; we found that hole and got in.

But they decided we couldn't come on to Washington from there, so Bob Sikes and I took a taxi from Roanoke and went over to Charlottesville, Virginia, to catch a train. We got there and caught an early morning train. I think it came through there about five o'clock. We got on that train, came on into Washington, got off the train and took a taxi straight to the committee room and got there just in time to be in the committee meeting and to cast our votes. That's how we got the one vote in the committee.

G: That was a close one. Do you recall President Roosevelt's efforts to use PWA funds to put men to work building destroyers, naval vessels, and the opposition to that in the House?

S: Yes. President Roosevelt did a wonderful job in handling the PWA and the WPA. As a matter of fact, he worked out a program whereby the two worked together. That was very useful, particularly in putting up school buildings and public buildings throughout the

Sparkman -- II -- 4

country. I'm sure he made the same kind of a program work in connection with the destroyers. I don't know the details of that because that would have been in another committee.

G: I think during the war, perhaps 1942 or 1943 if my dates are correct, it may have been earlier, you and President Johnson and several other southern congressmen from cotton-producing states met with President Roosevelt at the White House. Do you remember that occasion?

S: Yes, I do, quite well.

G: Can you describe it?

S: We arranged a meeting with the President. By the way, perhaps the real spokesman of that committee was "Cotton Ed" Smith of South Carolina. We went down to talk with the President, and President Roosevelt always took charge of the conversation. He was well briefed on the cotton situation, and he took advantage of the opportunity to give us a complete briefing on the cotton situation. "Cotton Ed" Smith would object at different times and say, "You're just not right. That's not the way of it." Finally, FDR, who was not particularly fond of "Cotton Ed" Smith, said to him, "Senator Smith, if you know as much about cotton as you want to make me believe you do, you haven't got any business being in the Senate. You ought to be out in the business world." But we got it worked out all right.

G: Did you ever get a glimpse at the relationship between President Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson?

Sparkman -- II -- 5

- S: Oh, yes. Lyndon was quite a favorite of President Roosevelt's. As a matter of fact, Lyndon was elected in Texas the first time, nominated in a Democratic primary, and it was a very close race. My recollection is that he won by eighty-seven votes. I think his opposition was Pappy O'Daniel.
- G: No, that would have been 1941, when he lost.
- S: Well, the next one. He ran two races against him. I think his opponent again was Pappy O'Daniel. I may be wrong. But anyhow, he won a very close election. I think it was eighty-seven votes. President Roosevelt happened to be down in that area and he had a special train, and he invited Lyndon to ride to Washington with him. He did. They were very close.
- G: Did you have an opportunity to see his relationship with Sam Rayburn in the House?
- S: Oh, yes. Sam Rayburn was his patron saint, you might say; they were very close friends. Sam Rayburn was a wonderful speaker, and he helped all young congressmen. It was generally believed that his great favorite was Lyndon. And understandably so, Sam Rayburn and Lyndon's father had served together in the state legislature. I believe it was the state senate. They were very close and old friends.
- G: Another domestic program that the southern congressmen were interested in was the report on the economic conditions of the South. It was issued, I believe, in 1938. Did you work on that report at all?

Sparkman -- II -- 6

S: No. A report was made. I don't remember who offered it, or sponsored it. I don't believe that it came out of Congress. Anyhow, a report came out saying that the South was the great economic problem of the country.

G: The nation's number one economic problem.

S: That's right, the nation's number one economic problem. After another year or so, anyhow when recovery started to take place, Roosevelt came back and said it had been dubbed the nation's number one economic problem. He said it was the nation's number one economic opportunity. He did a great deal toward helping the South.

G: He got a lot of southern support, too, didn't he?

S: He did. In fact one time, I think it was in the 1944 convention that was held in Philadelphia, I was on a program with Senator O'Mahoney and Jimmy Roosevelt. I don't remember whether there was a fourth one or not, but anyhow, the three of us. The big question that came up was about southern conservatives. I said, "People think of southern congressmen as being conservative. I just want to point out that had it not been for Southern support and southern sponsorship President Roosevelt's New"--what did he call it?

G: New Deal.

S: "New Deal would never have become effective." Jimmy Roosevelt spoke up and said, "I want to back up what Senator Sparkman has said. Without the support of the southern so-called conservatives, my father's program would never have been put into effect."

G: Let's talk about the Senate.

Sparkman -- I -- 7

- S: Let me say this: I've always contended that it was erroneous to dub southern representatives as being conservative. They're conservative on certain views; they believe in preserving the standards of the country, but when it comes to economic matters they are liberal.
- G: Let's talk about Lyndon Johnson as Democratic leader in the Senate. You moved to the Senate in 1946 and he came in 1948, and it wasn't long before he developed a leadership position, first as whip and then as minority leader and later Democratic majority leader. What were his techniques in getting legislation through?
- S: They were tremendous. (Laughter) He was a very positive majority leader. I speak of that rather than the minority, because that's where he showed his power. He was, as I say, tremendous.
- G: How did he keep the Democratic majority together when you had such ideological differences?
- S: Go to them, slap them on the shoulder, talk with them and, "You've got to do this. You've just got to do this." And if during a roll call some Democrat voted contrary to what [Lyndon expected], especially on close votes, old Lyndon would jump up in his seat and point a finger at him and run back to him and say, "You've got to change your vote."
- G: In particular, I want to ask you about the Capehart Amendment for the 1955 Housing Act. You introduced the Democratic version of that bill, and then the Republicans amended it with the Capehart Amendment. And that was narrowly defeated.

Sparkman -- II -- 8

S: Capehart at that time was the minority ranking member on the Banking Committee. He had proposed 35,000 units of public housing. As I recall, I offered an amendment to change that figure to 135,000 over a period of three years, I believe it was. It carried. I don't know just what the vote was, but before the vote was taken everybody thought the Capehart Amendment was going to win. At that time there was a great deal of opposition in the real estate industry to public housing. They'd made a nose count, and they thought they had it cinched. But actually we turned it around and won it.

G: Did you have any advance knowledge of how the vote was going to come out?

S: We knew it was going to be tight.

G: How was he able to muster a majority on that?

S: Well, a lot of personal work was done. Lyndon worked with them. I worked with them. The Democratic majority in general on the Housing Committee worked with them. And we got them.

G: Can you recall any other particular instances where he was able to mold a majority in a very close issue?

S: I don't know that I can recall a particular issue, but there were several occasions when we had very close votes.

G: I think one was the minimum wage, where it was raised from seventy-five cents to a dollar. Do you remember that?

S: Whatever the figure was, that was a close vote. Oh, I was thinking of an earlier vote. We'd had a vote on the minimum wage while I was still in the House. Just before I came over to the Senate we

Sparkman -- II -- 9

voted on the minimum wage. I believe, though, that was to raise it from a lower figure to a still lower figure, and the other one came later. It was a second promotion rate, as I recall.

G: Did you feel that the Democratic minority's role in foreign policy was one of helping the Eisenhower Administration during the fifties?

S: We worked quite well with the Eisenhower Administration in the field of foreign policy. [It was] rather strange, [but] we didn't work with the President. President Eisenhower was not much of a hand at having Congress come down there and talk with him. I'm talking strictly on foreign relations matters. So most of our negotiating and working was with John Foster Dulles. We got along quite well with Dulles in foreign policy.

G: How about the Bricker Amendment? Do you remember the circumstances?

S: Yes, I remember the Bricker Amendment quite well. I believe, if I recall correctly, he had or at least he felt that he had the required number to pass it. But there was a lot of work done, and I give credit for that primarily to Senator George of Georgia. Senator George offered a substitute for it, and that amendment carried.

G: Do you recall Lyndon Johnson persuading Senator George to offer that substitute?

S: I was not in on it, but I'm sure he did.

G: How about Alaska or Hawaiian statehood? Do you remember that issue and any work that LBJ did on that one?

S: I'm sure he worked on it. I don't recall the details of the opposition to it. There was opposition, particularly to Hawaii, because

Sparkman -- II -- 10

it was not contiguous to the United States. But both states were, as you know, voted statehood.

G: You supported school construction bills, I think, throughout the fifties.

S: I did.

G: There were some close votes on that.

S: Senator Hill in the Senate and Senator Bob Taft, a rather strange combination, teamed up on that. They teamed up on education matters and also up on health matters, and that's the way we got the education and health bills through in such good shape. We had great help over on the House side. Carl Elliott, a congressman from Alabama, handled that over on the House side, and we got good legislation on both matters.

G: One of the major differences, I suppose, between the Republicans and the Democrats was over farm policy and the Democrats supporting 90 per cent parity. Did you work at all on any of these measures with President Johnson?

S: I supported it, but that naturally was in another committee. I did not have any part in laying the strategy and so forth, but I supported them vigorously.

G: Do you have any recollections of the McCarthy censure?

S: Oh, yes. Joe McCarthy was on the Banking Committee. And by the way, I introduced housing legislation, and particularly veterans housing, a very liberal, very fine program, and Joe McCarthy teamed up with me on that.

Sparkman -- II -- 11

G: Is that right?

S: Oh, when it came to housing he was a good representative.

Now, of course, his troubles arose primarily from--well, first was his charge about the number of communists in the State Department, you remember, in that West Virginia speech, and then other things he did. Then his conflict with the Army. Do you remember the Army hearings? Of course I vigorously opposed him on those matters, but he was a worker. I just didn't agree with his philosophy with reference to those matters.

G: Did you feel like he was dangerous?

S: A lot of people thought he was. But he was an American, and he had the right to express his views.

G: After the censure, I guess the following year, McCarthy introduced a resolution that would pretty much tie President Eisenhower's hands at Geneva. That resolution was defeated, but the Democrats evidently got a good deal of political mileage out of the way it was defeated. It was brought out of committee and defeated on the floor. Do you remember that issue?

S: I remember it. I don't remember the details of it, but I do remember it was quite a fight.

G: How about the Civil Rights Act of 1957? Here was a case where Lyndon Johnson strained a lot of his southern ties. Did southern senators feel that he had betrayed them?

Sparkman -- II -- 12

- S: Some of them may have. I never did regard it as a betrayal. And, in fact, I gave Lyndon a good bit of credit for the work that he did in trying to work out that very vexing problem.
- G: Did he ever talk to you about that bill and what parts would be acceptable to the South?
- S: I'm sure he did, but I don't remember the details.
- G: Let's talk for a minute about your veterans housing bill. Did he give you some help on getting that through, or do you recall the details of that?
- S: I'm just trying to think of what year that was.
- G: I believe it was 1957.
- S: Anyhow, he supported it vigorously. As a matter of fact, we had no difficulty in passing it through the Senate. It was a good program, and I think almost anybody could have accepted it.
- G: Do you think his Republican counterparts in the leadership of the Senate were equal to Lyndon Johnson?
- S: No, I didn't think so. Of course, naturally, I was a Democrat, but I think Lyndon was one of the most able, if not the most able, Democratic leader we ever had.
- G: Whom did he rely on for advice and support in the Senate?
- S: I said a while ago I know that Lyndon talked with Speaker Rayburn often and Rayburn with Lyndon. I would hazard the guess that Sam Rayburn was his principal adviser. And he would talk to fellows like Barkley and George and different ones like that.
- G: How about Richard Russell?

Sparkman -- II -- 13

S: Oh, let me not forget Dick Russell. Yes. Dick and Lyndon were just like that. Lyndon looked to Dick Russell more than he did to anybody else, unless it was Sam Rayburn. But in the Senate I'd say he looked to Dick Russell more than anybody else.

G: Am I holding you from [something]?

S: I can go on.

G: Good. Did you sense that it was sort of a father-son relationship between him and Russell?

S: No, I wouldn't say father and son. I'd say two very close friends.

G: But Russell was considerably older.

S: He was older, and Lyndon had great respect for his views.

G: People have indicated that Lyndon Johnson would call them in the middle of the night and get them to support some piece of legislation.

S: He has called me, but his calls to me usually were early in the morning, about six o'clock or something like that. But I have been told that he called. I don't remember that he called me in the middle of the night. He may have sometime. I don't know.

G: Do you recall the occasion when he called you early in the morning?

S: No, no. But when we'd have some bill that he was very much concerned with, he'd start calling very early in the morning. I don't know how many senators he would call.

G: What other techniques did he use to get votes?

S: About all that are in the book. (Laughter) He was very persuasive, I'll say that.

G: Would he remind you of favors that he'd done for you in the past?

Sparkman -- II -- 14

S: Oh, he might in a general way. I don't remember that he ever specified anything to me, but it'd be just like him to say, "Now you remember I helped you on so and so and so and so." I don't remember any particular thing.

G: Can you recall his ever trying to persuade you to vote for a bill or support something that he was interested in?

S: I'm sure he did, but, as I said, I respected his leadership. I generally followed him completely.

G: Did you ever have to say no to him?

S: I don't recall it.

G: How about Bobby Baker? He used Baker as a vote counter, didn't he?

S: Yes, and Bobby was good at that. Bobby fell in bad days later, you know, but he was a great help to Lyndon in counting noses.

G: Some people said he could count better than Lyndon Johnson could.

S: I think there may be some truth in that. Bobby could just go right to them, you know, and quiz them.

G: Did you feel that there was a possibility that Lyndon Johnson might be presidential material back in the fifties? In 1956 there was a lot of talk about a Johnson for president boom.

S: Was that the year he was named vice president?

G: No.

S: No, no, that was [1960].

G: This was in 1955. Just before his heart attack he was considered as a possibility in 1956.

S: I was in the convention that met in Chicago.

Sparkman -- II -- 15

G: When Kefauver got the [vice presidential nomination]?

S: Yes. But I'm trying to figure out when it was that--maybe it was 1960 he was on the ticket. Yes. But I'm thinking there was a move to nominate him for vice president, and he made a speech--I think I'm right on this--and said that he was in favor of Jack Kennedy. Now, was that in 1956?

G: I believe so.

S: I think it was. I remember that speech quite well.

G: The heart attack in 1955 at least temporarily ended his presidential ambitions. Do you remember when he had the heart attack? Did you visit with him afterward?

S: I'm not clear. It seems to me I visited him at his home. We lived not a great distance apart. No, I won't be certain of that. I was in his home at different times, but I'm not certain that I visited in his home at that time.

G: Of course he did run in 1960, and there's some indication that he focused his campaign too much on his colleagues in the Senate and didn't get out and campaign enough around the country. How did you feel about that?

S: I think that may have very well been the case with the public generally. Now, with the Senate, of course, it worked there and in the House. He pretty well solidified himself with the Democratic senators and congressmen, but, you know, to make a national campaign you've got to identify yourself to the nation as a whole. I don't believe he did very much campaigning at that time.

Sparkman -- II -- 16

- G: Senator, can you recall any other issues during the Senate years that might have relevance here? The National Defense Education Act, for example?
- S: I think I referred to that a while ago, the Senator Hill and Senator Taft buddying up on it. The National Defense [Education Act]--one of the main characteristics of that was the training that was made available for persons going into the Army and the Navy, and scholarships were set up also. It was a very fine act, and I don't recall that there was any particular opposition.
- G: But can you recall any other issues that demonstrate Lyndon Johnson's abilities as majority leader, maneuvering or vote-getting?
- S: As I said a while ago, just name any act, particularly where there was a difference between the attitude of the Democrats and the Republicans, and you can know that Lyndon Johnson worked for the Democratic cause.
- G: I gather that he was also able to get a few Republican votes, like occasionally George Malone and Bill Langer and people like that.
- S: Yes. I was trying to think of somebody else back then. It seems to me that in one of these close votes or one of the important votes--maybe it was the Capehart Amendment--he had six or eight Republicans.
- G: I guess on that one he convinced some of the conservative senators that voting for any public housing was like being a little bit pregnant, so they voted against it. And then when they had your bill they got a number of Republicans to vote for it.

Sparkman -- II -- 17

S: That's right. That's the one I was referring to where he got at least, I think, six or eight of them to come over and support him.

G: Any other recollections here?

S: I can't pick out individual bills other than what we've done.

G: I certainly appreciate your helpfulness.

S: I've enjoyed it. He was a great fellow.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement pertaining to the Oral History Interview of John Sparkman

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, John Sparkman of Washington, D. C. do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted on June 9, 1977 in Washington, D. C. and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

John Sparkman
Donor

7-20-78
Date

James E. O'Heilo
Acting Archivist of the United States

August 1, 1978
Date