INTERVIEWEE: JOHN C. STENNIS

INTERVIEWER: Joe B. Frantz

June 17, 1972

F: This is an interview with Senator John C. Stennis in his office in the Senate Office Building in Washington, D. C. on June 17, 1972. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

S: You have some good questions here and all, refresh my recollection of them. Do you want to go down them?

F: That's my general plan.

S: All right. Well suppose we start and let me intersperse things that I might want to.

F: First of all, how did you happen to run for the Senate in '46?

S: Well, it was 1947, and I had had my mind on things of this kind for a good while. The time to run for office in the South, especially in those days, was when there was a vacancy. The vacancy came and I decided to run. I had already made up my mind that I was going to run when there was a real opportunity. Now I was the first one to announce my candidacy, and we had a fairly short campaign.

F: You didn't know Congressman Johnson when you came up here, did you?

S: No, I came here in the fall of '47, and I learned to know him slightly in 1948 when he was elected to the Senate from Texas. My first real contact with him was after he had been nominated, we had some conversations with him about his forthcoming campaign as I remember. I was a member of the Rules Committee then and on a subcommittee regarding contests of elections, so it seemed that that election in Texas might be contested, so I looked into the procedures and the law, too, in reference to such matters, but it never did develop to a contest at this level.

F: It stopped I remember with Justice Black.

S: That's right.

F: So all you did then was go ahead and accept him when he showed up?

S: Oh yes, it wasn't contested. I remember quite well when he was sworn in, and I remember too that he started attracting favorable attention very quickly and --

F: How do you account for that rise? Did he just get along with the right people?

S: You can't account for all of it in any one point, but he's what I call a natural worker. He went to work immediately, and he'd be unusually well prepared when he appeared on a subject or on a committee. And that's the best way to break in the Senate. And he had talent that was very evident, organizational ability, so he moved from that strong base, but opportunities did start coming in the form of leadership positions rather rapidly and a combination of circumstances he surged forward in those.

F: Well, as you know, Senator Russell was considered the man in line for what became the Minority Leadership first, but Senator Johnson who was very junior took that position instead. What do you know about how that came about?

S: Well in the first place, Senator Russell sort of waived it; he couldn't take it. He thought that his obligations to the State of Georgia was such that he couldn't take that position of leadership.

F: You mean he would have to take certain party stances which wouldn't square with Georgia?

S: Yes, that's right, considerably different from his position as a Senator from Georgia and in his own convictions too, but Senator Russell wasn't very strong anyway in taking positions that way that pertained to administration or leadership. He was a leader of a different type.

But anyway, Lyndon--I'll now call him Lyndon because I think of him that way. He was full of vigor and a great administrator and pulled things together. And with Senator Russell's backing, strong backing, he went forward and was elected Minority Leader.

F: Now he would have had a good Southern approval because of Senator Russell's approval, what about the remainder of the senators from other parts of the nation?

S: Well he had made a mightygood impression and was a leader, and too, this position to which he was being elected was not a position of Majority Leader. It would have been a tougher hill to climb, but he met the general qualities of leadership of everyone. He met the particular inclinations of the Southerners of course, and the so-called borderline states, and he had other support, they were looking for a vigorous leader.

F: This is a long time ago, but do you recall whether he ever talked with you about whether he should or shouldn't get into this?

S: Oh yes, yes, the first time was by telephone. He called me--

F: He was using telephone back then!

S: Yes. I very frankly told him that if Senator Russell was interested at all, that I would support Senator Russell, and of course he promptly replied that he had already checked out with Senator Russell. And I told him that I'd support him gladly, and did.

F: He never was one to sort of stick his neck out without--

S: No, no, he was very careful in every way. Not over careful, but he knew the rules of the games and he had a very vivid imagination, tremendous planning capacity, and never overlooked a point of any kind.

F: You had and have a sort of Senate Club, and I know some of the Senators that I have interviewed have told me that either they were never a member of the Club, or after some time they came to be accepted and so on. So far as

I can tell, you were always a member of that Club, and Johnson seemed to become one very quickly. Was this just because people recognized that this was a kindred spirit that was worth having around?

S: Well that so-called Club is something that cannot be described. I can't at least. But Johnson--he was quickly accepted, effective in ability and leadership, an administrator. He didn't overplay his hand, and he was recognized one that could influence legislation too. Influence it in getting a bill passed or getting it defeated. Those intangibles go to make up leadership and there are other intangibles including the so-called Club. But I think the idea of a Club has been overplayed considerably.

F: During those four years that President Truman was in his second term, or his first elected term, two issues that you and Senator Johnson had in common would have been FEPC and Tidelands. Do you have any recollections on the fight on either one of those?

S: Oh yes.

F: Tidelands wouldn't have been as important to you as it would have to Johnson, but still there was--

S: Yes, it was an important factor for my state and all in that area. Of course Lyndon's position there was contrary to President Truman's, but that was one of the things that he was early recognized for was his leadership, and trememdous capacity. That didn't cause any breach though with Mr. Truman. Now on the FEPC, the differences were great, but that didn't cause any breach or anything like that.

F: Senator Johnson was always quite adept, I gather, as opposing without breaking?

S: Yes, he understood the art of bending without breaking, and in politics, successful politics, legislation especially, there has to be some give and take, and he was very skillful in that. Later he proved very skillful in

that. Later he proved very skillful in lining up the extremes, getting them to vote all the same way for different reasons, but that's another story.

F: Was this a matter of--speaking of extremes--was this a matter of talking common sense to them or was this a matter of saying, "You'll give on this and I'll give on something to you."

S: Well, that doesn't exactly describe it. From my experiences with him, in all these ballots we had when I was on the same side with him or against him, he never did tell me anything false about the bill or what was in it, or what he would do or wouldn't do. He just didn't do it. And therefore he could always come back to you. And I think that was one of the mainstays of his influence.

Another thing, he's very skillful in taking an issue and getting a group. like a conservative group--I'm a conservative--and Senator Harry Byrd Senior, and Senator George, and others., to have a prominent conclusion about certain phases of the bill, and then he could influence the liberals on the same bill with some other parts of it or some other emphasis. But being always rather frank about it, rather frank about it.

And in that way he could gradually narrow the gap so far as voting is concerned, getting the vote to carry his position, and that's a matter of legislative skill. As long as you're honest about it--I think that was one of the great secrets of his success.

F: He must have spent a lot of time talking.

S: Well he did. He was most meticulous in talking to the individual senators. Of course he got to where he went so fast and turned out so much as Majority Leader, especially near the last, that he didn't have time for that personal attention. But he was honest about things, and when he changed his position some on these civil rights matters he was always frank about it and put his change of position on the basis that he was having to yield

to the political atmosphere of the times. Conditions had changed, and people's opinions had changed, but I wanted to be very fair, and I thought he went too far on much of the civil rights legislation even as floor leader. But as I said, I don't think he ever did it by subterfuge or misrepresentation of facts. He was frank and honest about it and put tremendous drive behind his positions.

We conservatives, we didn't yield on any substantial part, but we did know that times were changing some against us.

F: Was it much of a handicap to him to be from a state with large oil interests. There was always a lot made of that, was that a real problem?

S: It's somewhat of a problem, but that was one of the obstacles, but I don't think it was a controlling one. His obstacle, political obstacle in becoming President, that he was a conservative and had a conservative voting record, largely conservative leadership record--largely--and then they always associated him with the Southern opposition to civil rights legislation in opposition to what a lot of people call "progress" and that was an obstacle. And he recognized those things. He knew it well.

F: I know you can't read another man's mind altogether, but do you get the feeling that he modified his views on civil rights out of a sort of growing conviction that it ought to be different, or just because he recognized the political tide.

S: I think political tide was some of it, but he never was a man of bitterness on that subject. He didn't look upon the bad side of everything regarding the movement. He wasn't an eager-beaver in that field, if that's the right term to use. But he yielded his views some in response to the rising opinion on it. And of course he was politically ambitious, and he

showed that in many ways, but under our system that's no sin. But I thought, as I made clear, that he went too far in those changes. But I want to be fair to him.

F: We'll get to that again later, but one of the things that he was criticized for by the press in this period was his silence on Joe McCarthy situation and yet that worked out finally. Did you get the feeling that he was just lying low to let Senator McCarthy hang himself, or that he was scared to take on the Senator, or what?

S: Well I don't remember any contact with him about this Joe McCarthy matter until I was appointed as a member of this special subcommittee to look into it.

F: Any particular reason why you think you were selected, besides the fact that you had the reputation for being judicious?

S: I think that was the reason, the primary reason, and the only primary reason. President Johnson was leader then and he was the man who selected me I know; I don't know who else he conferred with, but he's the one who talked with me about it. He never made any intimation in any way whatsoever then or anytime during the entire case until it was disposed of to me as to what he wanted me to do or expected me to do.

F: He didn't give any kind of charge to his committee like: "Here's what I want you to come up with"?

S: No, not in my presence, and never did mention it to me with that approach.

F: Of course I always thought the superb stroke in that was naming Senator Watkins who seem so absolutely pure, no one could assail him.

S: That was a very sound decision. The Republicans were in the majority then, but he was put on there to be chairman, a very wise choice. The majority was going to--well, it was expected he would be. We chose him, the committee chose the chairman.

F: Then once the committee was named then, Senator Johnson just stayed out of it and let you--

S: He certainly stayed out of it as far as I was concerned. I believe he did altogether. Now after the evidence was in and the lines formed, and the evidence presented there--of course I was already committed. I had reached my own conclusion based on the evidence and spoke rather early in the debate, but so far as rounding up votes that way for censure, I don't know anything about it and didn't see any evidence of it from Johnson.

F: Was Senator Knowland active in this?

S: Not as far as I know, no more active than anyone. He wasn't much in favor of censure, I don't know--he voted against censure in the end. But that was a matter that differed from the law; that was matter of opinion. Then the Senate was on trial as a whole. This talk that the Democrats voted for censure as a bloc, there's nothing to that, that's not true.

F: This was not a political vote?

S: No, no, not a word of truth in that. The act of the issue was drawn and the majority was maybe was convinced that there had to be a censure. No senator wants to censure another but after the majority decided, well it would be easier for some others to go along, but any predetermined plan for the Democrats to vote as a bloc was just not true.

F: Did minority leader Johnson work fairly well with majority leader Knowland?

S: Yes I think they did; they had some rather sharp crosses, but they worked together as a whole. Both of them were strong willed men, both good leaders.

F: Did the Eisenhower Administration show much interest in the McCarthy hearings--I know they were interested--but did they demonstrate it from the White House level?

S: Well, they never did to me, but I know in a way--

F: You were left alone to look at the evidence?

S: Yes sir, I think all the committee members were. Now I didn't see activity there although I know they were interested, but you take the President of the United States, he never said anything to me through anyone else, in any way. We really had that censure up on the matter of--I thought his actions reflected on the Senate, that's really what he was censured for, not for any opinion he had, but his conduct.

F: Shifting to civil rights, in 1954 we had that so-called Black Monday Decision regarding schools. And of course one thing--you had plenty going on before that--but one thing followed another, and you finally came up with the Southern Manifesto in 1956, which Senator Johnson did not sign. Was there much pressure put on him, or was he recognized as the Senate Majority Leader he had to stay out of things?

S: Well on a personal basis and just Senator to Senator, of course we wanted him to sign it, but at the same time we recognized that he wasn't just a senator from Texas, he was a leader and he had a different responsibility in that degree. It wasn't held against him, I'll put it that way, by the Southerners that he did not sign it. That was our position and all, but he wasn't criticized by the Southern senators for failing to sign, there might have been some word of disappointment spoken, but nothing held against him.

F: It was recognized that his closest friends were from the South, and that he was drifting a bit from the Southern position as time goes on. How did he manage to hold onto his close friends, because they remained as

close friends? There may have ben some exceptions, but by and large throughout the people that he started out close to were the one he remained close to.

S: Well in the first place, he wasn't deceptive about it, he was open and frank. We realized, as one has to, that he was in that position. Of course, we had been the prime factor that had put him there, but at the same time he was in the position. And we knew that he had presidential ambitions, and most of us wanted to see him become president. I know I did. I put him in nomination in the Democratic convention one time in the early days. But this so-called civil rights matter evolved slowly and got to where it was almost a religion, a zeal, and lost all portion of common sense, I thought.

F: It reminded me a little bit of what I went through as a boy in West Texas in which you'd have a Rabbi and a protestant and an atheist get up and debate and of course everyone went home just confirmed in what they believed when they came.

S: It was kind of a fever. But Johnson was always frank about it. What I really blame him for is after he became President, it seemed to me like he used the power of the office then to a very great extreme, to the detriment of other groups. There are groups beside minority groups, there are majority groups, and it's no sin to belong to the majority. But that I thought he went to the extreme in using the power of his office too, in that field.

F: In these middle '50 days, did he ever talk too much about the position he was either taking or having to take?

S: Well, some, some, but he--I was not, on those points, I was not one of his close advisers.

F: Where was he getting his advice?

S: I don't know. He and Senator Russell were always very close, but I doubt that he advised very much with Senator Russell about that. He was advising with the more liberal type mind on that subject.

F: Did he ever, as far as you recall, discuss either nullification or interposition?

S: I don't remember ever having talked to him about that. No, no, I think not. He moved on beyond the position like that before then, I think.

F: One of the continuing issues through the 50's was Ezra Taft Benson, Secretary of Agriculture, with the agricultural price supports, and you're very much involved in that coming from a heavily agricultural state.

S: Well he was very effective in that way. He was a tower of strength. And you ask a minute ago why the Southerners didn't break loose away from him, you can't break loose from everyone in the legislative body. We needed help on other matters too, and these agricultural programs was one of them. He took those in stride and was a great tower of strength and held it together, I mean these agricultural programs. He helped do it. Of course others worked on it, all of us did.

F: Did you get the feeling that he understood the problem of agriculture?

S: Oh yes, he had a tremendous grasp of any subject, and he understood that.

F: Where did he get it? Of course he was always moving.

S: Yes, but he had a tremendous capacity to quickly grasp the essentials. And he surrounded himself with a lot of fine talent, and had the benefit of all that. But he was very thorough in grasping the essentials of any problems.

Talk about the space problem, and that perhaps illustrates. I remember when he was President, too. And those of the farm group, we used to go down there to see him about various matters, and he would show the greatest interest and concern, and he would show a good knowledge of the problem,

too, especially when it was laid out. And I remember once on the question of whether or not he would discontinue what they call "skip-row" planting of cotton, plant a row and skip a row and thereby cultivate twice as many acres as your allotment allows, the question was whether he would stop that.

And he listened to us down there, I happen to watch the time, it was very late in the afternoon, two hours and 15 minutes, that's while he was President, getting all the pros and cons on that question. The Secretary of Agriculture and his other advisers there, and that illustrates his thoroughness and his completeness.

F: You always had the feeling when you talked to him on an issue that he was really not just listening, he was learning?

S: Absolutely. He'd dig in and get to the very heart of it.

F: In this campaign of '56, Johnson was nominated--I suppose that was just a sort of advertising--

S: Yes, yes.

F: No one had any serious ideas.

S: No, no, not then. By '60 though he was really contending.

F: Right. Johnson surprised everyone in that vice presidential race between Senator Kennedy and Kefauver when he threw Texas' votes to Kennedy rather to Kefauver, although Kefauver went on to win. Any idea whey he went for Kennedy?

S: I couldn't say. That happened so quickly, that I don't remember being in a conference with him about that. We were there caucusing in Mississippi. I urged Kennedy, that we'd vote for Kennedy, and I'd visited some other delegations.

F: Why did some Southerners prefer Kennedy over Kefauver?

S: The main reason was in trying to hold to a more moderate line on the FEPC and by that time you know, this school matter was in a terrible condition and everything, and Kefauver had gone far away from a position that we could approve.

F: Did you have any opportunity to observe the relationship between Senator Johnson and Senator Kefauver?

S: No, I didn't have much contact on that basis since Kefauver worked largely on the judiciary committee and Senator Johnson and I were on the Armed Services Committee together and Senator Kefauver was there a while too, but he worked in the other committee, and I couldn't suppy very much there.

F: Was Senator Kefauver something less than a "team man?"

S: Well, he was accused of that, yes. I don't want--the man, I think had a lot of fine purposes, I don't want to discredit him at all, but politically he was more or less apart, separate in a way. Well, he knew that he had to get support far, far beyond the Southern borders, you know to get anywhere for the presidency, so he moved out early. I don't know about any conflicts, though, that they had.

F: Between '56 and '60, you've got two pretty noticeable senators now that you know are going to be considered in 1960, in Kennedy and Johnson. How did the two get along in the Senate in those years? There must have been at least an undercurrent of competitiveness.

S: Well, yes, there was. Well you see we had Senator Johnson, Senator Symington for prospective nominees and both active, somewhat in a different way. I remember I sat right between them on the Armed Services Committee during those years, and we were all on the Preparedness Subcommittee together too. And then Mr. Kennedy was coming along, and once he really started that last year, he went fast, but until January 1960 he wasn't considered a contender except by some ardent supporters.

F: He was relatively junior.

S: Yes, yes, and he had that back injury that took him out of the Senate work. You know he was a worker though, and stayed with it. But he wasn't thrown into the rough and tumble work of the Senate work and all as Senator Johnson was, or as some of the rest of us that had been here longer. But they realized during that year '60, you see, that they were rivals. The big question was all during Johnson's campaign there, could he rise above the Southern horizon. That was--and the belief was that he could not, the prevailing belief was that he could not. But he was a great worker and he made some good impressions.

F: Now as Senate Majority Leader, Senator Johnson never tried to keep either Symington or Kennedy down?

S: I don't think so, they might have thought so a little, but I don't think he went at it that way. He knew he had to attract votes in a different way, try to be--I think he was shooting for being in a lot of these states beyond the South to be the second choice. The third ballot man. He really worked hard. Of course as it turned out the nomination went on the first ballot. And he looked ahead and used the position of his leadership in the Senate naturally, but not illegally, and not in any way corrupt. But he was a power in national affairs. And he generated a lot of good will from the senators, but he never was able to convert a lot of the power and good will he had in the Senate into convention votes. Not enough, but he certainly was a factor, recognized as a factor in the forthcoming '60 elections. At the convention, of course by John Kennedy himself.

F: Let's talk a little bit about that Armed Services Committee, which was important then and in some ways looks even more important as the years go by, because there's a lot coming up that--

S: Well, it's become controversial now.

F: Senator Russell pretty well ran it, didn't he?

S: Oh yes, he'd come a lot. Senator Russell was pre-eminently qualified in many fields, including that one, and he delegated a good deal of the work and I was becoming a senior member by then, and he delegated a lot of it to me and to Johnson. And to some others. Well, Senator Russell and I saw things together so much. We naturally saw things together but he didn't try to run over anyone on the committee, but he was the committee largely. It wasn't controversial then either, you see. The idea of challenging weaponry on the floor of the Senate, it just wasn't done then, I mean, a weapon, to try to knock out a carrier or certain tank contract or something, it just wasn't done.

But the Armed Services Committee now has circumstances that pushed it into the foreign policy field too, and then expenditures have gone so high, prices so high, that the percentage of the budget that military is so high that that has made it subject to attack.

F: Did you get the feeling on that committee in the latter '50's that you were heading toward something in the 60's or did that sort of slip up on you.

S: Headed toward--do you mean war?

F: Yes.

S. No, no, to be frank with you, as I see it, in the 1950's the trouble in Viet Nam was not anticipated much. I just mention in passing, I made several floor speeches as early as '54, as I opposed to us going in there, alone especially. I think all of us, and I put myself first, neglected to think about it enough then. We more or less found ourselves in there later. I can talk to you more about this later.

But back to this preparedness Subcommittee that Senator Johnson was chairman of, I know his thinking there as intimately as anyone did, and maybe more so. I was vice chairman and he was very busy as floor leader and delegated a whole lot of the activity in the hearings to me. And a very significant contribution he made in 1956 when the Russian Sputnik went up, it was consternation here and we held hearings--he did and I helped--with reference to the Sputnik and our capacity with reference to rockets. And then the big decision had to be made whether we would go into this rocketry in a big way and that was positive; we thought we must. And number two, shall we put this space program in under the military jurisdiction or shall we create a separate entity. And Senator Johnson was in the middle of that big decision, and he helped reach that conclusion that we make a separate administration of that, that's when NASA was created, and I think that was a wise decision.

F: Why did you do it?

S: Well the possibility of intercontinental ballistic missiles was looming then and the parallel wasthe Atomic Energy Commission. The same question had arisen then after World War II, as to whether that would be under the military or be a separate entity, and it was decided to make it a separate entity and that had worked well. And the space venture was thought to be more than just a military matter. Von Braun was one of the chief witnesses, of course he didn't testify on that point. And I think that was a wise decision; I favored it as a separate entity.

F: This is very crucial to the Eisenhower Administration, you are making, in a sense, policy for it, did they take much of a hand in it, was there a lot of support--

S: Oh yes. The Administration was in on that decision, I just said Johnson had a major part in it, and that was my position too. Then came, sure enough, the ICBM's, the rocketry and we moved on from there, but this separate space program--the strong recommendations were made there by Eisenhower through as to a space program. He was up front in that. But of course President Kennedy further implemented it, and made the moon shot decision.

And in those early days of that committee, President Johnson became chairman of the space committee in the Senate, and I wasn't a member of it at first but later I became a member. And I held a lot of those hearings for him because of his duties on the floor. But he gave great impetus to it and others contributed, of course, but he is entitled to a lot of credit.

F: When you were holding those hearings, was there a great deal of controversy or were you mainly just trying to figure out--you're into something new here.

S: That's right, a new field.

F: Are you just trying to figure out what is the problem?

S: Yes, that right, the big problem is what to do--what can we do? And what is the prospect.

F: You've got a real educational process.

S: Yes, and one thing I remember that was emphasized, there was controversy about the little rockets and the large ones, whether the large ones were practical or not. After all, Sputnik wasn't a very big job, but it was far ahead of us. But I know the testimony of General Gavin was very strong, and he said "Unless we make a rocket with the thrust, the lifting power of a million pounds, we'll be a second-rate nation." Well, everyone stood agast at that, a million pounds! But within a few years we had a rocket making the moon shot, lifting six and a half million pounds, that is the thrust of six and a half million pounds.

Von Braun testified with reference to whether the ICBM's a little later should be mobile or stationary, you see, that was the question. We decided on the stationary. The Russians are still talking some about the mobile type. Those are illustrations, but the Space Administration got off to a good start, had some good administrators and has been a phenomenal success.

F: Where did you get Jim Webb on that?

S: He was one of the most versatile men that I've known. He came in I think, following President Johnson's elevation, well he left the committee and Senator Kerr became chairman. And I think he brought Mr. Webb in. He influenced him to come in. Of course, he was one of the very outstanding--

F: He was brought in because he was known to know how to manage?

S: Yes, that's right, his exceptional ability, a former undersecretary of State, you know, former Director of the Budget, all kinds of experience.

F: Not for any technical ability?

S: No, administrator.

F: Why do you think Sputnik caught everybody so by surprise?

S: Well; there was intelligence about their capacity in that field, but it came sooner.

F: I remember that they were working in this field some, but our intelligence was behind. And it was discounted, this rocketry was discounted, and it just hadn't been given the right emphasis. I don't know anyone to blame, I don't know anything like that, but as it turned out, our capacity was so much greater that we were far ahead of them in a short time and continued to widen the gap, and was still widening it.

F: Had you been involved in that program that brought the German scientists to this country following World War II?

S: No, that happened somewhat before my time.

F: You weren't warmed up good, huh?

S: Yes. No, I wasn't in on that.

F: On these space committee hearing that you held, did the Majority Leader just pretty well give you a blank check to run them the way you thought?

S: Yes, yes.

F: He had complete confidence, then?

S: Yes, we enjoyed that confidence and--

F: Was he the kind that would second-guess you?

S: No, not too bad. He liked to have his way and all, but that's natural. Well, he had made the contacts about the witnesses, you see, and we had a very able lawyer in New York that was quite helpful and he had a world of contacts there in helping select these witnesses. So we had very knowledgeable people in and really compiled a good record.

F: How do you explain Senator Johnson's sponsorship of J. William Fulbright for the Foreign Relations Committee chairmanship?

S: The sponsorship?

F: Yes, was it the matter of the age of Senator Green?

S: Well, everyone had the greatest respect for Senator Green, no one would discount him. He really was beyond his better years and the committee needed a more vigorous leadership and he finally voluntarily retired.

F; He volunteered?

S: Yes. But Senator Fulbright had been a very active member and a very vigorous man.

F: Did Senator Johnson and Senator Fulbright get along well together?

S: I wouldn't pass on that particularly. They had great difference of opinion later about the war, as is well known. Although Senator Fulbright supported the Administration in a great many of the things that he has changed his

mind about, and I'm sure honestly since then. But I think their only real difference as far as I know is the war, the war in Viet Nam.

F: As you come down to 1960, you obviously have got three men in here that are going to play a big role in Los Angeles: Symington, Kennedy and Johnson. Do you get the feeling that a lot of the legislation that comes up like the voting rights bill in 1960 is kind of a setup so these men will look good when they get out there to appeal to a wider audience.

S: Yes I'm sure that was part of it. That was a national panorama of things.

F: Get your name in the paper.

S: Yes, that's right. And that was one of their vehicles.

F: Did you go to Los Angeles?

S: Oh yes, I was a delegate there.

F: What was your position in all of this?

S: No, no, I was for him, but the delegation finally decided to cast a complimentary vote to Governor Ross Barnett, who was then Governor and he was head of the delegation. But we worked--several of us worked for Johnson. I was one of them. And--

F: Did you have much hope?

S: No, I wouldn't say it was a great deal of hope, but we thought, you know, make a good showing on that first ballot and if no one was nominated then he'd be in contention, you see.

Yes, and that it might build, ballot after ballot, but in the end the majority of the delegation decided to make the first ballot for Governor Barnett.

F: Did you have any idea that he would take the vice presidency?

S: No, at that time I did not.

F: How did you learn about it?

S: Well, I heard it on the radio, not that he was but that he was being considered. And I got a telephone call, too, to come down there to the hotel, Senator Eastland and I. He phoned for us to come and we went, early that morning after the nomination of Kennedy that night. And we conferred with different ones there including Mr. Johnson but that was more or less confidential council there as I understand it, I'd rather not--there was nothing bad that happened, but I wouldn't feel free to go into that. He had to make a judgment on it you see.

As I saw it,just from a political standpoint, the question was whether he would do that or just wait for the four years, continue as floor leader. Well, I hated to see him release himself from the floor leadership. Frankly, I thought he could do more good there than he could as vice president. That was a big factor in my mind. But those decisions have to be made.

F: Do you remember talking to Mr. Sam about that?

S: That morning?

F: Yes.

S: I remember him being there and I know what his position was and all, but I don't definitely remember particularly--

F: I suppose Mr. Sam was just about as well known to Senators as he was to Congressmen.

S: He was, he was. But it just happened that they were moving from room to room there all the time, at least while we were there. We left, and I went back again. But Mr. Sam was not there.

F: Did Mr. Johnson to a great extent defer to Mr. Sam, or was he by now willing to take him on if they didn't quite see eye to eye?

S: They were very close and all, and yes, Johnson was willing to go on his own most anytime, with most anyone, although he wasn't a reckless man in

that way. He didn't do it just for the fun of it; he would launch out on his own.

F: Did you ever go to any of those Board of Education meetings?

S: No, no, not much. Board of Education, you mean--

F: That Sam Rayburn held?

S: No, no, I didn't go to those. I really just wasn't in that group. But I know about it.

F: Did you think that Senator Johnson did this for the party?

S: Did what for the party?

F: Take the vice presidency.

S: Well that was a part of it, of course; that was a part of it. I assume that he looked on it--well, in the first place the vice president's office is nothing to be sneezed at. But looking on it as an opportunity of service, plus the prospects beyond that. I judge that he did it, looking to the future, because you know that's what he wanted to be, President of the United States. Of course fate intervened there, and no one anticipated that, but I judge that he went in as a party matter in part, but that wouldn't have been enough. The second reason is one I've already given. He knew that it would be a let-down to him just to be vice president, he's bound to have known it, and it was.

I had some of my most intimate association with him while he was vice president, he used to send for different ones I'm sure, but he sent for me a good deal just to talk to him.

F: He wanted to learn what was going on?

S: Yes, he had an enormous amount of energy.

F: In this campaign of 1960, I know the Kennedy-Johnson ticket had some trouble in Texas, although it finally came out, but what did you have to do for it back in Mississippi?

S: I campaigned; I campaigned for it.

F: Did you think Johnson's presence was crucial?

S: Crucial in Mississippi you mean?

F: Yes.

S: No, no I didn't think it was. I went over in Texas and spoke too in that campaign, in East Texas. But he contributed all right in the campaign. He made his train trip, you know, and that helped.

F: Did you get involved in that?

S: Oh yes.

F: Tell me about your relationship there.

S: Well, we were in on it, the planning of it and everything, and we met the train in Meridian and went on through to New Orleans with it.

F: Did you think it was a good idea?

S: Yes, yes I did.

F: Where did you go, Meridian, Laurel, Hattiesburg?

S: Yes, we stopped in Meridian, Laurel, Hattiesburg and on down into Poplarville I remember and maybe two or three other places.

F: Did you get a good reception?

S: Yes, yes, we had the band and everything. It was a real campaign. Four years later, Lady Bird came down and I met her. Senator Eastland and I both met her and she was traveling east-west and we met her at Biloxi. He made the difference in that 1960 campaign. He carried enough of the South anyway to make the difference.

F: Do you think it was just a matter of good old courthouse politics that he knew how to handle?

S: Well, yes, that was--they understood him. Of course, by then his record wasn't fully approved and all, and it varied a great deal from state to state. But he had a great knowledge of human nature and a driving type of politics too. He had a tremendous amount.

F: What was his particular pitch there in Mississippi?

S: Well, knowing what the problems were, you know, referring to the farm program and related matters and flood control, items of that kind. He dwelt on that. You didn't have to tutor him on subjects. He instinctively knew what the people were interested in, but he doubtless did confer with us and others, you know, about the happenings and if people were still interested. He had a good record too on all those subjects that he could refer to and back up, tidelands oil for instance and so forth.

F: It's well known that Senator Johnson has felt very close to you through the years. Has that been a handicap or a plus for you in your own political life?

S: It hasn't been any handicap. As I say, I thought he went too far in the presidency and used the authority of the office too much, and he had a very sticky subject you know of this permissiveness, it was called then. I thought he should have moved in sooner and quicker and with a firmer hand. But frankly those Supreme Court decisions were coming out there then and tended to set back the police power of the state, you know, and the authorities, and that contributed. But I know some of the burdens of the presidency. I've been here with Truman and Eisenhower and John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and now Mr. Nixon, and I think as much as you can, you've got to back, generally, you've got to back constituted authority. But that doesn't mean you have to yield any on principle and constitutional duties.

Now let me make a statement here for the record on a point that I know about. Some 60 or 90 days before the tragic death of the late President Kennedy I was in talking one day to Vice President Johnson. I've forgotten how the subject came up but he stopped me and said, "You can always remember that John Kennedy has lived up to every promise that he ever made to me with reference to the Vice Presidency." He was referring then to the understanding they had in the beginning and the recognition that he would receive as vice president, and he said that with great emphasis. There were no particular stories to the contrary but there had been stories that he and the Attorney General, Mr. Robert Kennedy, were feuding and various stories were out, but he just stopped and put his hand on my shoulder as I was about to leave. He was very impressive when he did it and of course in the light of the President's death shortly thereafter, it stuck very vividly in my memory.

F: You never got any feeling that he thought he was going to be dropped?

S: No, no he wasn't speaking in that vein then, and I don't remember anytime that he did. This was in about October or November, October I think, '63. The reason I place it of course is obvious because it's so soon thereafter.

And here's a personal matter in part: When he was President, Senator Talmadge and I sought an appointment with him, a brief appointment, and he gave us 5:30 or 6:00 o'clock in the afternoon. We really went down there to see him about seeing if he could place Senator Willis Robertson in some way with the world banks. Senator Robertson had just lost an election, and he was then chairman of the Senate's Bank and Currency Committee. And he seemed to relish the idea and did relish the idea of doing something along that idea, which he did. And Robertson served with great satisfaction.

But my point is this, he said, "Now you fellows sit down. I've got to redress and go make a speech here in the city to some group." He said, "Sit down here," and he went back in the little side room there, and he said, "We've just got to sit around the table like we used to do up at the committees. You fellows come down here now since I'm President, and you treat me like a man treats his mother, with great deference." He said, "Let's just have a few minutes here." And he got to telling us stories about some problems that he was up against, and he always had a homely illustration or two to embellish it with. So Talmadge and I both not only enjoyed it, but we thought that he enjoyed it too, those ten minutes. And they called him three times during that ten minutes to hurry up and he had to redress.

Well, it showed how human he still was and how any president, I think, yearns after all, amidst all that power, for those little personal moments and personal contacts with other men, not as President but as a friend and comrade.

F: I don't think there's any question of what the Senate years were probably the years he loved most during his life.

S: I think so, I think so. The Presidency will overwhelm anyone. It'll overwhelm anyone now because we've gotten into so many things in world affairs, and also taken over most of the local affairs.

F: This is getting ahead of the story, Senator, but why are we picking all our Presidential candidates nowadays from the Senate? We didn't use to do that until--well, up through Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt, Hoover, Coolidge, Wilson and the other Roosevelt, Taft. They all came out of either governorships or some collateral part of public life into the presidency. Now then we don't seem to nominate any one but senators any more.

S: I think in the first place the Senate is a place of opportunity for leadership to develop, and of course the House is too to an extent.

F: It's harder though to get separated from the mob in the House.

S: Yes, yes. But I think in the Senate, we're not only a smaller group but the present news media seeking a pro and a con person say to go on television together on successive Sundays or days, I think that's been a big factor to presenting Senators to this country as a whole to make them more of, not a household word exactly, but recognized as such. And it leaves the governors out in a way. Because a governor, a very competent, able man, he doesn't get before the people on these national problems, national questions. And that's my main observation about it. It's another illustration of the power of this modern news media, which has its strong points, and it has its hazards too. They bring in too much of the crime and the bad things that are going on over and over and over, all day, everyday and night. It emphasizes and suggests to a certain type of mind action. But back to your original matter or question I believe it's the way news is presented and issues are presented and senators get in on these national issues more than others.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By JOHN C. STENNIS

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, John C. Stennis, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and a transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder, and all literary property rights, will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by terms of this instrument available for research as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

3. A revision of this stipulation governing access to the material for research may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States, or his designee, if it appears desirable.

4. The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Signed John C. Stennis

Date April 24, 1975

Accepted Harry J. Middleton
Director, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library for Archivist of the United States

Date May 7, 1975