

INTERVIEW I

DATE: October 6, 1976  
INTERVIEWEE: STUART SYMINGTON  
INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ  
PLACE: Senator Symington's office in the Old Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

F: I'll ask you some questions, and we'll visit for a while. First of all, when did you first become acquainted with Mr. Johnson? It must go back to his congressional days.

S: I think I first became acquainted with him after President Roosevelt was inaugurated in January 1945; when later-to-be-Secretary of the Treasury John Snyder and I gave a reception at the Carlton Hotel for Vice President and Mrs. Truman.

F: At the Carlton here?

S: Yes. During the reception someone, either Secretary Forrestal who was secretary of the Navy at that time, or Mrs. Forrestal, suggested that my wife and I come down to have a cup of tea or a cocktail with them at the Office of the Secretary of the Navy. We did, and there I first met future President Johnson. I cannot remember at that time whether or not I met Mrs. Johnson. I know I met him. He was talking with Mrs. Forrestal. I was impressed with his drive and his good looks.

F: Now when you were in the Truman Cabinet he was on the Naval Affairs Committee in the Congress; did he take any active role in either pushing for or holding back from unification?

Symington -- I -- 2

S: I don't think so.

F: He wasn't a deterrent or expeditor either?

S: I don't think so. I think he was basically conscious of the increasing importance of air power. Because of that he strongly supported the concepts of President Truman and Secretary [of War Robert] Patterson and General Eisenhower, then chief of staff of the Army. In the separate Air Force concept, all three would be under the Secretary of Defense. The Navy position was one of coordination as against administration. In effect, the Navy was saying, "We don't care what the Army does with its air force as long as it leaves the Navy's air force alone." To the best of my knowledge, Congressman at that time, later Senator and President Johnson did not enter into it on the Navy side, as you might have thought he would because of his previous service in the Navy and his being on Naval Affairs. In fact, he was very helpful. We became good friends. He was helpful in steering the course of the Air Force, with which I was identified. He was a prominent and respected member of the Naval Affairs Committee, especially so in that he was close to Chairman Carl Vinson, who was Mr. Navy, you might say.

F: Right. I remember seeing a letter from him to you when you went home in January of 1952 saying how much they were going to miss you here. Did he play any role in urging you to get back into public life?

S: No. I think we would have stayed close friends if I'd gone back into business. When I made the decision to run for the Senate it was rather tricky. President Truman wanted me to run for Governor. I didn't want

Symington -- I -- 3

to do that, didn't think I knew enough about Missouri state politics. Later some people in Missouri, prominent people, persuaded me to run for senator. President Truman had already committed himself to another. This gave me a rather tricky problem. Mr. Truman was very popular in Missouri. But Mrs. Truman was for me, and during the campaign later-to-be-President Lyndon Johnson came to my state and campaigned for me, which I greatly appreciated.

I might add I campaigned for him for re-election in 1946.

F: He needed you in that.

S: --and also in 1948 when he ran for the Senate.

F: You were in Dallas in 1948 when he had his kidney stones. Jackie Cochran flew in. Were you aware of anything that was going on in the background? Do you remember the interview with him at that time?

S: Yes. He came out to see me.

F: This was in Dallas. I think they were having Stuart Symington day, weren't they?

S: I think so.

The Congressman said, "I have terrible pains"--I was up in his room--"in my stomach, and I'm seeing some people from Waco, Wichita Falls, Texas towns. I'll stay in the room. You receive them. When I feel the pain less, I'll come out and shake hands and say I'm on a long distance phone. There are to be several delegations." He showed great courage in being able to get up at all. His face was gray and he was obviously in terrible pain.

F: Kind of a triumph of will.

Symington -- I -- 4

S: Exactly. Then he told me he wanted to go to Mayo's, but didn't know how he would get there. I'd seen Jackie Cochran the previous evening. Bob Smith of Dallas was sort of my official host; a great Air Force general and a great fellow. I asked Jackie if she would fly him in her plane up to Mayo's. She said she'd be delighted. She was very fond of the Johnsons. So she flew him to Mayo's, I'm almost certain.

F: Yes, she did.

I would imagine in that particular race that President Truman took a considerable interest.

S: That was the summer of the Berlin airlift. As Secretary I was in Europe a lot, setting it up. It started in June, 1948.

F: Magnificent story.

S: One time, coming back to this country, I was exhausted. So I called up the office and asked [them] to get me reservations in a little hotel, the Sea View Inn in Biddeford Pool, Maine, where I'd gone as a child; and asked Mrs. Symington to meet me in Portland. The rest of my group went on to Washington with General Vandenberg, then Chief of Staff. I caught a B-17 and flew from Bermuda to Portland. My wife met me and we went to the Sea View Inn. I told the clerk, "Unless the President of the United States calls me don't have anybody wake me, because I'm very tired and I'd like to sleep until noon or something."

After I gave these explicit instructions, about eight o'clock in the morning I got a call. "I told you not to call me." The clerk said, "There's a Mr. Johnson calling you from Texas. He says he's not interested in any of your instructions and wants to talk with you."

Symington -- I -- 5

It was LBJ, and I said, "Hi," and he said, "Well, I just want you to know the election has been over for blank time"--ten days, two weeks, something, I forget--"and as of today I'm seventeen votes behind."

I think he said there had been over a million cast. Later he came to the Senate, and was very kind helping me come to the Senate.

F: Now, when you came in the Senate did you confer with him about committee assignments? He would have been minority leader at the time you came in.

S: Yes. I told him I'd like to be on the Armed Forces Committee if I could, because it was something I knew something about.

F: Yes. You also went on the Committee on Government Operations. Was that a particular interest of yours, or did you develop it?

S: No; he suggested it. I said, "I don't care about it. Pick the committees you think I should go on."

F: Outside of Armed Services which was logical.

S: That's right.

There's a lot more to that story about that Dallas-Mayo visit.

F: Oh, is there?

S: An interesting story.

F: Okay, we'll save that for some other time, maybe, and talk about it.

All during the fifties you had a problem with the Republican administration, in that there were constant attempts to cut back on the armed forces, particularly on plane reduction. You're on the Armed Services Committee and Mr. Johnson is on the Armed Services Committee: did you two pretty well coordinate on that?

Symington -- I -- 6

S: Yes, I think that's fair to say. LBJ got the H. H. Arnold Award, as I remember it. He was a true believer in air power, solid. In those days, before the nuclear submarines, air power was by far the important weapon. The missile picture was just beginning to develop. He and I, for example, were very strong for the B-70, the new bomber proposed to replace the B-52s. But then the Defense Department itself pulled away from the B-70s. When I myself approved the first order for B-52s in 1949 I think, one of the most telling arguments for that plane was that it could fly so high it was invulnerable. But due to the later development of missilery, as we found out with sadness in the shooting down over Russia of Captain Powers and our U-2, the higher a plane flew the more vulnerable it became. That killed the big argument for the B-70.

Until the Pentagon reversed itself, Senator Johnson in the fifties--he was majority leader and very powerful--backed all the way, as did I in my small way, the B-70. But when the Defense Department changed its own opinion, changed it to the RB-70--in other words a reconnaissance plane to fly over and see what the missiles had done, you might say, we pulled out. That is the reason I was apprehensive about the B-1, which had no real great basic advantage except its more modern technology over the B-70. It was emphasized that the B-1 could fly on the deck, could come in very low. But you can't fly anything at supersonic speeds on the deck. We found that out with the B-58, which was made in Texas.

F: The B-36 became a matter of concern and controversy in the latter fifties.

Symington -- I -- 7

S: In the latter forties. We had what the press called the "Revolt of the Admirals." Senator Johnson was of great assistance to the fledgling Air Force. That was a personal attack on Jackie Cochran, General Vandenberg and myself engineered by some people who were strong Navy advocates. It's all in the record. A man working for the Under Secretary of the Navy wrote a vicious attack on me and Vandenberg and Jackie. His name was Cedric Worth, a civilian. He was a writer of detective stories, had quite an imagination. The attack began being circulated sub rosa around town; so I went to Speaker Rayburn and asked him to get Chairman Vinson of the House Armed Services Committee to have an investigation. This he did and the truth came out.

During those days, the summer of 1949, Senator Johnson was on the Senate Armed Services Committee. He was of great assistance to us in defending our position, once he got the facts. One of his outstanding characteristics was a desire to get facts. He was head of the Military Preparedness Subcommittee, and had a fine fact-finder in Don Cook, his chief counsel.

F: You observed his relationships, of course, with Senator Russell of Georgia, who was the chairman of the Armed Services Committee. Did Johnson court Russell, or was this just a kind of natural relationship that worked?

S: You can read books like the one by Doris Kearns. He was my friend; Russell was my friend. At least to some extent they both courted each other.

Symington -- I -- 8

- F: Did you feel that Senator Johnson as majority leader did all he should have in the McCarthy period?
- S: It was a tricky business. I'm not trying to duck the question. I was on Government Operations, didn't want to get into it, but was on it. It came to John McClellan and Scoop Jackson and me. The country was sharply divided on the issue. We went through those sad Army-McCarthy hearings which didn't help anybody. As majority leader, I think Johnson felt this was not the kind of operation he wanted to wade into. There was merit in that. There was a tremendous amount of support for--
- F: Did he maneuver behind the scenes to isolate McCarthy?
- S: I don't know. Probably. He didn't maneuver with me because there wasn't any maneuvering. I decided after a time that McCarthy was very wrong.
- F: Your position was pretty forthright.
- S: But it was day-to-day with me, you see, and as majority leader he had many other problems.
- F: Was it his decision to pick Senator [Arthur] Watkins? Which I always thought was an inspired one because the man was almost unassailable.
- S: It may not have been his decision, but he would have been certainly part of it with [William] Knowland, at that time minority leader.
- Everybody had the greatest respect for Watkins. It was a very good choice.
- F: In the committee hearings one of the problems you had consistently was the foreign military aid and of course the escalating expense of



Symington -- I -- 9

that, which I know concerned you from my reading what I can about you. Did Senator Johnson sort of weight his questions to get the information he wanted, or did he just try to get the information?

S: I don't quite know what you mean.

F: I can ask, as you know, questions that will lead you, I can lead the witness into certain information I want to elicit, or I can just throw out questions and let the answers fall where they may. And I was wondering--I think he agreed with you.

S: You could not call Johnson an isolationist in any sense of the word. When it came to foreign aid, Senator Russell was pretty close to being an isolationist. He used to say to me, "The time will come when you will start voting against all this." The time did come when I started voting against most of it. It had to do later on with the problem of Israel. Because as much as anybody I think it fair to say President Truman was responsible for the state becoming viable after they announced their independence. At first the Israelis paid cash for everything. Later they began to run out of money. As a member of Foreign Relations I believe the United States had a deep commitment to the viability of Israel. As a member of Armed Services, a deep obligation to see that these people get the weapons necessary to defend themselves. The foreign aid picture has been clouded in recent years because Israel has run out of money. I think I saw the other day that a Japanese pays something like twenty-six dollars a year for national defense, whereas the average for an Israeli is over a thousand dollars, 37 per cent of their gross national product,

Symington -- I -- 10

a great deal higher than any other country, including the Soviet Union and ourselves.

There is a great deal of money, over two billion dollars, I think, this year, for Israel. They paid all until they just didn't have any money left. So the question is: "What is our obligation?" I first voted all the way for foreign aid. Everybody knows the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine were wise decisions, saved many countries, perhaps especially Greece and Italy. But then it became like coffee, a habit. I thought it went too far. I voted against it over my last years, as Dick Russell predicted. Now just about everybody piles everything in for everybody, logrolling the whole program to satisfy various special interests.

F: You hitchhike onto the main event.

S: That's right. My own feeling--it may be wrong but I have told it to various Secretaries of State--today and in other years, is that we have been trying to buy peace comparable to the way the British and the French tried to do it so unsuccessfully in the late thirties. I think this especially true in the seventies. There's not enough respect for the importance of the economy per se as a vital part of our national security.

F: You were on the Disarmament Subcommittee. Did that have a particular charge? Were you supposed to come up with something or just find out what you could about disarmament?

S: They called it a Disarmament Subcommittee; but it was really Arms Control, something I have been interested in for a long time.

Symington -- I -- 11

I fought in the Armed Services Committee for more interest in the nuclear aspect of armament. I could not find out, even though fairly fresh out of the Pentagon, details about missiles and the new Polaris submarine. I went to Senator Saltonstall, Chairman of the committee when I first came, and told him I thought we ought to get into it, deep. He said he was sorry, but it was just so secret he didn't want to know about it. Lev Saltonstall was a mighty fine man, but to me, it was like a bank president saying that he didn't want to know anything about his deposits.

I just could not get adequate knowledge out of the Armed Services Committee about atomic matters. Nor could I in the Foreign Relations Committee. I think we have paid billions of dollars as a result of that policy of secrecy. Therefore, I shifted to the Joint Atomic Energy Committee, where by law they have to give that information. But the Joint Atomic Energy Committee had turned into a tightly held club. Today I was just looking through the Wall Street Journal: much on nuclear debate; President Ford's nuclear policy and the strategem for it.

F: Practically a whole page devoted to that.

S: Yes. It's all breaking out everywhere now. Some of my colleagues were kind enough to say something about my interest on the floor last week. It is perhaps the most important subject in the world today.

F: Did you think Johnson had a grasp of the future of both space and atomic energy?

Symington -- I -- 12

S: I think he had a better grasp of space than he did of the future of nuclear power. But on that you have to realize that when you are majority leader you don't have a hell of a lot of time to focus on a particular problem like you can if you are just chairman of a committee. Everybody in government is responsible for the lack of knowledge on the part of the people of the nuclear picture. We all participated in the unnecessary secrecy surrounding this subject; just a lot of nonsense. One of the reasons could have been that some of my colleagues were heavily interested in uranium. Let me emphasize I never heard that about President Johnson.

It all started out with Einstein's letter to Roosevelt, then the successful explosion in a squash court in 1942 in Chicago, under Fermi; then the Manhattan Project under Groves. When the war was over, instead of putting out, it was all held tight. Then President Eisenhower came in with the atoms for peace plan. He was a great gentleman and a great American, but the atoms for peace plan has now turned very definitely into an "atoms for possible war" plan. Because in showing them how to use nuclear power to make electricity, they also show them how to make bombs. There is an interesting quote in a book on De Gaulle by an Australian named Crozier that when Eisenhower went to see De Gaulle in Paris in 1959 he said, "Why do you try to equal the Soviets in nuclear power? You know you never can." And De Gaulle answered, it's in quotes, "In the megaton era you don't have to equal anybody; all you have to have is enough." Or as Churchill put it, "Why bounce the rubble?" That is why it was so important to

Symington -- I -- 13

release the facts and set up meaningful methods of world control, in the beginning.

The fact that we didn't get into it was a frustrating aspect of my recent years in the Senate. We are interested in it now, as evidenced by this and other articles showing it is busting out all over. People are beginning to realize it doesn't necessarily have to be a country; it can be an intense militant organization like the Irish Republic Army, the Palestine Liberation Front, some criminal organization. In this field I wish--and say this with complete sincerity, because if there was one characteristic of Lyndon Johnson it was knowledge of what matters were going to become important--he had stayed as chairman of Armed Services, had stayed in the picture. I am confident we would not be in such a mess today re the proliferation of nuclear weapons. A fellow like Amin today, if he got fifty of these weapons, could be a very dangerous power.

F: Right. He could virtually blackmail.

S: That is exactly the word, exactly the word! It's not going to be a few athletes at an airport or at Munich; rather a city or two, perhaps many cities.

F: Did you work with Lyndon Johnson in his senatorial days on farming problems? You both represent farm states.

S: Sure. He came out and talked to my farmers for me.

F: Again, did he seem to have a grasp of the agricultural problems?

S: Yes, yes.

F: I know he could get down on the level of farmers and talk to them.

S: He was a great humanitarian. The things he learned in his youth about the problems of the little people never left him. We were

Symington -- I -- 14

staying with the Wesley Wests one day at their ranch, and he said, "Tomorrow Lady Bird and I are going down to look at a piece of property I'm thinking of buying. Would you like to go?" I said, "Sure, my wife and I will." Incidentally, I have never met any human being I respect more, or am more devoted to, than Lady Bird Johnson. She was made in heaven. I had forgotten about this trip. When, I think it was Ruth Montgomery, a newspaper woman who said when she wanted to write a book about her, asked what she thought the first time she saw the ranch property, Lady Bird replied, "I really can't remember much about it. Why don't you ask the Symingtons? They went down with us when we were considering buying it." That was the LBJ Ranch. LBJ was always very proud of whatever he had. When it wasn't much, he was proud of it. When it got to be more, he was still proud of it.

He had this tremendous drive. I never saw a human being that had this drive, with the possible exception of Hubert Humphrey. I can remember going down to visit him in 1955 after he had his heart attack, and he was on the phone about getting the pool heated. It was the most important thing in the world to him at the moment.

One day I was over in the Board of Education with Mr. Rayburn, and he agreed we could pick up my wife and go to get a steak. LBJ was then majority leader. He walked in and I said, "We're going out to get a steak. Why don't you come?" He said, "Call up Lady Bird and see if she will do it. I'd like to." So we stopped by my house, picked up my wife, left my car and got into Mr. Rayburn's car--he had his chauffeur. Then we stopped by and picked up Mrs. Johnson, and all

Symington -- I -- 15

went out to Chevy Chase. On the way out Lyndon said, "How about coming down to the country with me tomorrow?" I said, "Well, frankly, I've got a golf game, so unless it is very important." He was majority leader and I was just a senator. "No," he said, "it's not important. I just thought you might come down and visit with me at George Brown's in Middleburg."

He seemed very tense that night at Chevy Chase, wanted to talk politics all the time, talked politics all through dinner. We ran into Senator Prescott Bush and his wife. He went over and talked politics with Bush for some time. He was up tight. When we dropped them off, Mr. Rayburn turned to my wife and me and said, "He just can't think, eat or drink anything except the problems he has as majority leader. He won't relax." That was on a Friday night. On Sunday morning we picked up the paper and read that over the weekend he had had his heart attack.

F: Did Mr. Truman ever express himself on Johnson's potentialities as presidential timber?

S: I don't remember. I think he would have preferred President Johnson to President Kennedy. He thought at least at first that President Kennedy was too young for the job. He didn't realize how fast Kennedy had developed, especially after he came to the Senate.

F: Was there any sort of feeling in the Senate in those latter fifties that you were having to choose between either Kennedy or Johnson?

S: No.

Symington -- I -- 16

F: The Senate work got done, irrespective of the fact that you've got two candidates.

S: Johnson was the boss. There never was, and probably there never will be, a more authoritative majority leader.

F: Was he accessible? Could you get to him?

S: Oh, sure. No problem.

F: Did he tend to punish people who voted wrong, or did he understand?

S: Yes, he did. But he got things done. You can't run the Senate unless you run it something like Mr. Rayburn ran the House.

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

S: I was over there a lot. I was devoted to Mr. Rayburn, stayed with him down in Bonham. He and my father-in-law, who was a Republican senator, was defeated, and then went back to the House, were very close. They both were in the cattle business; both loved to talk cattle.

F: Senator Wadsworth?

S: Yes. They were close, Rayburn and Wadsworth. I was devoted to Mr. Sam. He was one hell of a man.

I'm going to have to leave you now. If you want to come back I'd be glad to talk with you some more.

F: All right.

S: I've got a date uptown at twelve-thirty.

F: Then you had better go. I have a few more things that I would like to ask you.

S: Sure. As I understand it, I can look this over.

F: Right.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]



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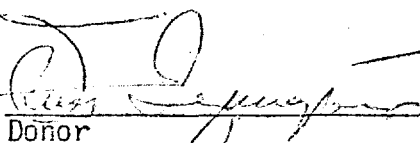
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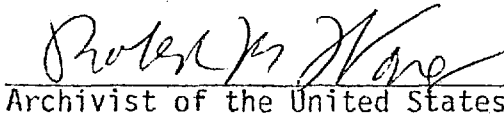
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