

INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 21, 1969  
INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT TAFT, JR.  
INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN  
PLACE: Congressman Taft's office, Cannon 315, Washington, D.C.

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M: Let's just identify you, sir. You're Robert Taft, Jr., Republican from First District of Ohio in the current Congress. You did serve, however, in the Eighty-eighth Congress prior to the one you were elected to in 1966, so you're not exactly a newcomer around here. Is that correct?

T: Yes, that's correct. I came in as congressman-at-large in 1963 and served for two years in that capacity, and then I ran for the Senate and lost by a narrow margin to Steve Young. Then I ran back in my own district, the First District in Ohio, and beat Jack Gilligan in 1966 and came to Congress.

M: And too, Jack Gilligan [lost] the Senate race in 1968?

T: Yes. And I came to Congress in '67 and '68 and was re-elected again in this current Congress.

M: Now you told me, and I think it may be useful to get this down, that you had no way of having any knowledge or appreciation of any relationship that your father may have had with Lyndon Johnson.

T: No. My timing is such that I was never in Washington with my father, really. I graduated from college in '39, which is the year that he came to Congress, was married that year, went on to law

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school and really never lived in Washington. I might have visited from time to time, and my father did come home to Cincinnati from time to time after 1946 when I was back in Cincinnati practicing law after having been in the Navy. So I had a chance to talk with my father from time to time about political matters. I know that he had a high respect for Mr. Johnson, as his opposite on the other side of the Senate at the time he was Senate leader.

M: Mr. Johnson, I guess, had just become Leader, Minority Leader at the time that your father died.

T: Yes, that's correct. During the first three months or so, three or four months of the Eisenhower Administration, there was a connection between them in which they worked together. As a matter of fact, Mr. Johnson in numerous conversations that I've had with him since coming down to Congress in the last few years has made mention of that fact, and talked with some humor about the bargain that my father attempted to pull on him with regard to breaking up the even split which existed insofar as some committee appointments were concerned.

M: Well, you might relate that.

T: I don't recall the entire detail of it. It may be that Jim Patterson may have that. That may be the memorandum that I have in mind that I wrote about meeting with Johnson, because it seems likely to me that I did write a memorandum on that for the purposes of the biography, which Jim Patterson might have, and I'd be glad to have you have a copy of that if it's available.

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M: Fine.

T: I'm sure the President, ex-President, would remember it anyway. If he hasn't accounted it, I feel reasonably certain that he could again say what he said to me.

M: This is a message to get off dead center in the committee assignments.

T: Yes. There was a dead center situation in the beginning of that Congress. Of course, my father became ill in about April and really turned over the job of floor leader to a considerable extent to Bill Knowland. His connections perhaps with Lyndon weren't as close after that, although he kept in contact with what was going on in Washington until, oh, right up almost to the time of his death in July.

M: Yes. You were in the Congress at the time I guess Mr. Kennedy was assassinated and served through that transition in your first term.

T: That is correct, yes.

M: As a Congressman, and as you were a freshman Congressman with perhaps a more objective view than some of the people who have been around here a long time, could you tell a substantial difference in the way that the White House leadership of Congress operated between the two Presidents? Was there pretty much of a change after the transition to the Johnson Administration?

T: Yes, I would say that there was. Of course, the Kennedy Administration was fairly new still, and as we're finding out, I think, in the Nixon Administration, the liaison between Congress and the White

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House isn't the easiest thing in the world to perfect.

M: No. Right.

T: And I think that the Kennedy Administration had considerable trouble perfecting it. However, I think also that Mr. Johnson's obvious knowledge of how the procedures work in both the House and the Senate, his far greater experience than Jack Kennedy's, was used pretty effectively in the contacts that were made, and the feeling for him on the Hill was a pretty good feeling. They might disagree with him, disagree with him pretty strongly at times, but insofar as the personal treatment of members, their perceptions of the White House and this type of thing, I think that the feeling was really very good.

M: And the people, the staff people he had working for him in Congressional liaison reflected this appreciation that he had for the needs of Congress?

T: I felt so, very definitely, yes. I was of course as you say a freshman, so there wasn't particularly too much reason for the Kennedy Administration to be contacting me. But I think it was a little bit more of an inside Administration and less of a general approach insofar as the working with Congress was concerned.

(Interruption)

M: Did Mr. Johnson get involved in your political race in Ohio in 1964 at all?

T: I don't believe so particularly. No, the Senate race--

M: Was Stephen Young's opposition to the Vietnam War public by that

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time? It wasn't, I suppose, very pronounced by that time, was it?

T: No. The dominant factor in that race, of course, was the Goldwater situation, and I actually led the national ticket by more than a million votes.

M: You did?

T: Yes. So that the issues were national issues, but they were principally related to the Goldwater campaign and were factors of that sort rather than an individual exchange by the Senator and myself. It stayed on a reasonably nonpersonal type of plane, and I don't recall any factor in connection with Johnson other than one, which was really a dominant factor, in many ways, and represented on Young's part a very clever handling of a particular situation and a good assessment of it, without which I don't think he would have won. That was that in all of his advertising, billboards, bumper stickers, everything else, it was Johnson-Young, Johnson-Young. You might have thought Johnson was his first name.

M: But Johnson didn't come in and campaign in the state?

T: He did, I think, come in once or twice, but it didn't have any major impact that I can recall.

M: Would a candidate have done the same thing in Ohio in 1966 when you ran for your current seat; that is, try to capitalize on an association with Johnson, or had things changed by then?

T: Oh, I think things had changed a good deal, and Gilligan had pretty much attempted to cut himself into the Kennedy image in any event, and talked continually about John F. Kennedy and his associations

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with him rather than his associations with Lyndon Johnson.

M: What about by 1968? The Republicans swept everything, I assume, in Ohio in 1968. Was it largely an anti-Johnson vote? Would Johnson's presence on the ticket have changed anything in 1968 in Ohio?

T: Well, I don't think it would have changed it too much. Actually I think people wanted a change in policies, and it represented as much that as any personal feeling about the situation so far as '68 is concerned. The Wallace thing, of course, might not have materialized the way it did and it had a considerable impact, but I really think the results, had Johnson rather than Humphrey been the candidate, would have been just about the same.

M: So it wasn't a bitter, personal feeling against the President?

T: He was at a very low ebb in personal feelings, [with] the people, I think, early in the campaign. I think it's unrealistic to expect that during the campaign that the same sort of buildup wouldn't have occurred, a resurgence of strength. Campaigns have a tendency to do that in this country anyway. They get way out of balance, and then as you approach the tape you're likely to find them all of a sudden coming up quite close together.

M: Which is what happened just this last time.

T: Yes, yes.

M: Very much. You've been on the Foreign Affairs Committee, I guess, since you were elected in '66?

T: Yes.

M: Is that correct? That's been topic number one of Mr. Johnson's

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latter two or three years in office. Did he attempt to bring people such as yourself, fairly new members of the Foreign Affairs Committee, into the advice and consulting situation regarding foreign affairs?

T: Not particularly. There are one or two instances in which he did. Before going into that I might comment to the general effect, however, that the House Foreign Affairs Committee is not a very vital or active body under its present setup. The Senate tends to dominate the situation. There are one or two reasons, such as the constitutional reasons, for that, but I think that it could be a far more vital and active body than it is. The work of the Foreign Affairs Committee pretty much devolved down to the question of the foreign aid bill each year which we acted upon. The only other things of major importance I suppose . . . . One that I recall, which was a setback certainly for Mr. Johnson, was the Punta del Este Resolution, as to which I did help with Ambassador Linowitz and others work out language that was satisfactory to the House Committee. It might well have been satisfactory to the House floor, but the Senate was in the process of killing it off anyway at that point so that we never acted on that. So our role wasn't very great in that regard.

M: Now, don't let me get you off the subject here, but I was wondering if perhaps Mr. Johnson might not have tried to use the House Committee more, since he had some fairly outspoken enemies on the Senate Committee.

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T: I think this could well have been done and was not done.

M: It was not done? That's important.

T: It was not done. Whether he had a chairman or others who would have been very powerful voices I don't know, because one of the problems is that in some of these areas of foreign affairs the jurisdictional questions arise, and the jurisdiction of the House Foreign Affairs Committee has been whittled away to a great extent anyway. You find Ways and Means into the entire area of trade and trade restrictions and revenues, and then you find even in the foreign aid field that the Food for Peace program is over under the Agriculture Committee. You find that--

M: Certain appropriations subcommittees do quite a bit.

T: --military affairs gets into it, and then you get Otto Passman and his operation in this area.

M: John Moody [?].

T: And I'm not running down any individuals. This is just a fact of life, that the power that is in the Foreign Affairs Committee is pretty limited. Whether it could have been used for the broader scope of response that might have been necessary to be effective insofar as the Senate is concerned, I'm somewhat doubtful.

M: But at least it wasn't tried.

T: Not that I could see, that it was tried, no.

M: What about the division on the Foreign Affairs Committee? Was it substantially more favorable toward the President's policies generally than was true in the Senate Committee?



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- T: I would say somewhat, but there certainly is a very vocal minority on both sides of the aisle.
- M: That opposed, you mean?
- T: Yes, that would have strongly opposed the President's policies.
- M: So it wouldn't have been a certainty.
- T: I wouldn't say it was as dovish a group, however, on the whole, even though they might have been opposed. There were more on the hawkish side; some of the opposition might have well come from more hawkish views.
- M: Were there particular individuals on the Committee who were spokesmen for the extreme hawk or dove division who made their presence felt on Committee business?
- T: Well, as I said, the area of inquiry of the Committee would make it difficult to say that. Insofar as the floor was concerned at times when issues came up, I suppose you could so categorize some of the members, yes.
- M: You were going to mention some of the briefing impressions that you had, the times when you were brought in for briefings.
- T: Yes. One instance in which I was brought in for a briefing that I recall very well was in the case of the Pueblo incident. Within about two or three days the members of the Committee were called and informed fairly fully by General Wheeler and by the President about what had occurred in connection with the Pueblo.
- M: All the members?
- T: I believe all the members on both sides of the aisle were asked to

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be present at that occasion.

M: And then you had some conversations separately from that, I believe.

T: Yes, at a later date.

M: Oh, this was later. Then it is not a continuation of this other meeting?

T: Not at the immediate time. Now, I can't recall the exact date. We can check on that, because it was shortly after the passage of the foreign aid bill. I think it was also after I had made a statement in the Record with regard to the Pueblo incident criticizing the failure of the President and the Administration and the Secretary of State to put a priority status onto the Pueblo, insofar as I could see. In other words, I felt that there was a failure to interrelate our entire foreign policy to the solution of this particular problem, perhaps putting maximum pressure on the Russians and upon others involved in an attempt to do something about the Pueblo status. Also, another identifying time might be to tie it to the time that Mrs. Bucher came down to Washington. I did not take the lead in promoting her statements at this time, but it was about at that time that I made the statement.

Shortly thereafter the President and the White House called and asked me to come down. I went down and was first taken to a waiting room there outside the President's study, where I talked for a little while with Walt Rostow. [He] gave me somewhat further background on what was being done with regard to the Pueblo and tried to reassure me that everything that was possible was being

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done, without giving any detailed, at least, indication that the kind of approaches that I was suggesting were being made with maximum amount of pressure. After that we went into the President's office and sat with the President after the usual flurry of photographs, of one of which I have a copy or a couple of which I guess I have a copy of somewhere around. I think I've got one in my office in Cincinnati of myself and the President sitting on the sofa with Walt Rostow's toe sticking into the picture of the edge.

M: Okamoto made a slight error in his direction.

T: Yes, that's right. That's who it was, I guess. As a matter of fact, I guess the President was in his armchair. I said he was on the sofa, but I don't think he was. But we had a very pleasant talk, and he opened the talk by thanking me very much for the support that I had given on the foreign aid bill. I had taken a fairly strong position in committee and on the floor in attempting to keep the authorization levels that the President, or the Committee at least, had recommended, which were pretty much in accordance with the Administration's desires, at that time anyway. They'd been whittled down as a matter of compromise, as I recall. He thanked me very much for that and said that he agreed that it was a very necessary program in which we were engaged. I don't recall the particular countries involved; I believe I was talking primarily about India.

M: Major recipient countries.

T: Yes, yes. Then after that he went into the Pueblo thing, which

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Walt Rostow had already gone into, without any major elaboration of the details.

M: Was he trying to get you to do something?

T: No. My impression after coming out of the meeting was that, "He certainly thinks this is a hot political issue, and he may think that I'm getting ready to try to lead a charge insofar as the political aspects of the matter are concerned." Which I wasn't actually, I was speaking merely on what I felt might be a helpful direction insofar as the crew was concerned. And I didn't play it up, I had never intended to play it up or continue it particularly.

M: This was not, I take it, a very common technique. I mean the average--

T: No, it wasn't, and I was surprised.

M: --first or second term Congressman was not pulled down to the White House on the problem.

T: No, he was not, and I was surprised. I think at that time, too, as I mentioned earlier, it may have been one of the occasions on which the President talked about his relationship with my father. I think he felt some personal friendship for me because of his personal friendship with my father, and it wasn't in any sense an on-the-carpet type of operation.

M: You've been acting on the subcommittee on foreign economic policy, I believe, and of course Mr. Johnson's general trend in foreign aid went down considerably as the Congress appropriated less year after year. Are there any impressions you have of his general

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feelings or policy on foreign aid that you think might be--

T: Well, it wouldn't relate particularly to the foreign economic subcommittee. The subcommittee didn't do very much. It did make one recommendation that I think the Administration went along with, which was turned down in the Congress later, about additional financing of investigatory loans in the field in underdeveloped nations. But beyond that the subcommittee really didn't have too much to do with the overall question of the foreign aid bill. The trend on the foreign aid bill, I think, was one which was dictated to a considerable extent by public opinion, partly because it's been a very difficult program to administer. It's certainly resulted in some odd results, and there have been some, perhaps not results at all times, but certainly policies on the part of some of the recipients and administrative bungling on our own part that has hurt the program in the view of the public. I would say that insofar as committing himself to the bill or to the concept of foreign aid that he did not do so, certainly to the extent that John Kennedy had done so earlier, or I think even to the extent that General Eisenhower had. But this may be more a matter of the signs of the times and the realization of what the opinions are as anything else.

M: Some of the critics have said, you know, that given Vietnam and so on that the Administration more or less just gave up foreign aid and didn't really try the last couple of authorization times. You seem to more or less corroborate that.

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T: I do feel a little that way about it. At the same time, I'm not sure they could have done very much about it if they'd tried a great deal harder.

M: In other words they may be right, realistically.

T: Yes, yes.

M: I don't want to cut you off.

T: No.

M: And I don't want to persist beyond what your experience justifies either. Are there any subjects or areas about which you think you can--

T: No. I don't recall any others particularly, other than the fact that we went to a couple of the usual receptions at the White House.

M: That's worth comment anyway. So much has been made of Mr. Johnson's style, by his critics particularly. Was his style one that turned off someone with your background, Ivy League and so on?

T: Oh, I'm not that Ivy League. He didn't turn me off, no, not in the least. We found the receptions at the White House very pleasant occasions. I think I went there for dinner one other time just in the last year or so, not a regular Congressional reception, it seemed to have to do with, oh, a labor oriented type of group, and I think I was one of the one or two Republicans there. I never could figure out quite why, but I was.

M: Did he use the social aspects of the White House as a sort of leadership technique?

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T: I think he did, yes. I think so, and I think he did it quite effectively. As I was indicating earlier, I think it was well received, and the Congressmen and their wives generally very much appreciated going there.

M: It's been very kind of you to have us in the middle of a busy afternoon.

T: You're very welcome.

M: I appreciate it very much.

T: I'm glad to try to help out.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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