INTERVIEWEE: JOHN G. TOWER (Tape #2)

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

September 22, 1971

F: This is interview number two with Senator John G. Tower, in his office in the Old Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., September 22, 1971. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

Senator, we left off last time with Johnson coming into the White House and those early days, I don't suppose it made any great difference in your life in the Senate except that you did have a new President. And things were a bit torn up at that time.

T: Well, when I came into office I came in as the result of a special election that had been held after a Republican defeat in the presidential election and a reduction in Republican numbers in the Senate. I think that my election had something of a salubrious affect on the party, not because it was me but because after that defeat we had won an election in an unlikely place. And we were pretty small in numbers in the State in those days, I think there were 36 Republicans if I recollect correctly, and we were pretty much overwhelmed legislatively by the Democrats most of the time. Of course I think that Kennedy could have been considered pretty much of an anathema to Republicans and there was very little communication between the White House and the Republican members of the Congress at that time. We actually were in a position that is not too bad, as you know, being in power carries with it a great deal of responsibility, or being in even substantial numbers.

F: You have to answer for some things.

T: But we were so small in numbers that we could really play the role of very vocal opposition, without having to take the blame for anything ourselves, and so the period of '61 to the assassination of President Kennedy in November of '63, was one in which about all the Republicans did was carp at the Administration.

F: Did it give you trouble nationally to come from Texas in view of the fact there was this feeling against Dallas, particularly, and Texas in particular?

T: Yes, I think that was the grimmest experience I've ever had in my life, the aftermath of the assassination of President Kennedy. A lot of people blamed the city of Dallas for it. Of course Dallas was not responsible, and there was a hate campaign against Dallas, which I think weighed heavily on all of us from Texas. I think that that has dissipated now, but--

F: I notice the Washington Senators, not the U.S. Senators, moving to Dallas, which you couldn't have done seven years ago.

T: Yes, right, that's true. I think that this changed somewhat when Lyndon Johnson became

President, although Jack Kennedy had been in the Senate, he was not of the Senate. Lyndon Johnson was very much of the Senate, and I think because of his stronger personal ties to the Congress, and because of his greatest interest in the operation of the legislative branch, established much better communications with the Congress, not just Democrats but Republicans as well.

F: I gather some of his best friends were Republicans?

T: Yes, I think all of us felt a little closer to the White House in the Johnson Administration than we had in the Kennedy Administration. I think this was particularly true with men like Everett Dirksen, who had worked shoulder by shoulder with Johnson for a long time. Kennedy, during his term in the Senate, was always using the Senate as a platform for something he wanted to do, he was not a Senator's Senator. Johnson was; therein lies the substantial difference.

And Johnson didn't hesitate to call opposition Senators in to talk to them about things. As a matter of fact, on more than one occasion he called me in to discuss the situation of South East Asia, and did on one or two occasions invite me in for a debriefing after I had been over there.

F: I want to talk to you a little bit about that because you were quite active. How many trips did you make altogether?

T: I have been in Viet Nam six or seven times. I've been in Asia quite a number of times.

F: Did Johnson talk to you pretty straightforward on this, or did he seem to always be pushing for a certain type of answer?

T: No, he didn't try to elicit the kind of answer that he necessarily wanted. I think he was genuinely interested in getting the reactions of those of us who had visited over there, and what our impressions were.

F: Pretty well lay it on the line?

T: Yes. Usually the times I talked to him after I returned from [these trips], Walt Rostow sat in on the meetings.

F: Did you get a feeling that Johnson was unduly influenced by Rostow?

T: I don't think so. I don't think he was unduly influenced by Rostow, I think that Rostow was a positive influence on him.

F: Did you ever get the feeling that anything you recommended to the President may have

changed his attitude in any way?

T: I don't know.

F: That's hard to gauge.

T: My recall is not good enough for me to say that at any point in time I might have thought that what I said to him had some influence over him.

F: Do you subscribe to that feeling that we never got entirely the true picture of what was going on in Viet Nam?

T: I think that we did get a pretty good picture of what was going on there. I wouldn't say that our political and military intelligence was always up to speed, but I think that the President was kept pretty well informed about what was actually happening.

F: Was the line as tightly drawn between the so-called doves and the so-called hawks as the press made it appear, or were more people a little bit more--?

T: I think there were not inflexible doves, inflexible hawks, that clear dichotomy. I think there were a lot of flexible people in between. I think there was a grey area there.

F: Did Johnson ever talk to you about the possibility of an all-out push to get the thing over?

T: No, he didn't. He didn't suggest--nothing he ever said to me would lead me to believe that he was considering that kind of course. I was advocating doing more at the time than what the Administration was actually doing. My reasoning being that if you're going to commit troops to a military action, then your objective should be to achieve a successful military result at the earliest possible moment, so I was an advocate of closing Haiphong.

F: When you talked with him, did he tend to just listen, or to argue?

T: He tended to listen more than argue.

F: Did he ever play the devil's advocate with you?

T: No, I don't recall that he did. Now that's not to say that he didn't, I just simply don't recall it. I can't remember too much of the substance of my conversations with him because they were usually addressed to what was going on at that particular moment, and not to the overall aspect of things.

F: Now did he give you adequate time to state what you had seen and so on?

T: Yes he did.

F: This was never one of these five minutes in, five minutes out sort of thing?

T: No, I think on a couple of occasions I spent about 30 minutes with him.

F: So that you did get your views across. Did you have a feeling that the Administration was pursuing--I mean given its policy, whether you agree or not, that it was pursuing its policy with reasonable efficiency?

T: I don't think that it was, but I don't think that was the President's fault. I think that was largely Bob McNamara's fault.

F: That's another question that I keep running across. Did you have a feeling that he listened to McNamara more than he did most other people?

T: I'm afraid he did, and I think he was inordinately impressed with McNamara's brain. I can remember him taking me aside at a White House reception one time and pointing to McNamara saying, "You know that's one of the most brilliant men in the United States of America." I think he was tremendously impressed with McNamara. I think he finally came to the realization, however, that McNamara was not really implementing his policy, and McNamara's judgment was not really that good, and that's when he decided that McNamara would be a better banker than he would be a DOD Secretary.

F: In your own opinion, was McNamara in a sense diluting the President's policy, or was he--

T: I think McNamara was second-guessing the professional military men, which I don't think he should have done. But McNamara had a noticeable and apparent contempt for professional military judgment, and I don't think the President did. But I think that the President was rarely able to get much in the way of input from the professional military men because I think McNamara short-stopped them. Now, I don't know to what extent the President had much intercourse with his generals and admirals directly, but this was the impression that I got at the time. I think McNamara pretty well gagged them.

F: But most information would have fed through the McNamara-siphon into the White House?

T: Yes, and during that period the Security Council became ineffective, became virtually nothing.

F: You must have spent a fair amount of time listening to McNamara testify and talking with him about the problems. Would he listen to you?

T: No, he didn't. As a matter of fact very often McNamara was a little short with members of Congress. I got the impression of a man of considerable intellectual capacity, a man who had great facility for marshaling masses of facts, reducing them to manageable proportions and drawing conclusions. But also a man who was of such consummate ego that he refused to hedge against the possibility that he might be wrong. This was the great falling of McNamara.

F: Sounds like the all-powerful computer.

T: Yes.

F: You feed in the facts and you get back to solution.

T: Right.

F: Did you ever get the feeling from your visits with generals that they were, I won't say in a state of revolt, but at least they smoldered a bit under the leadership of--

T: Yes I think they did. As a matter of fact I can remember on some occasions Dick Russell, then chairman of the Arms Services Committee, ordering the generals and admiral in for executive session and ordering them to bring nobody with them. And we had some hair-letting sessions with them without any civilians present. Indeed, without even any other military men present. And we got some pretty straight answers from them, and we got some fairly good reflections of what they were really thinking, they didn't always jibe with McNamara. So this is one way that we could of course tell that McNamara was not in step with these professionals.

F: Other than being His Majesty's loyal opposition, what could you do to bring that gap, or to get generals' viewpoints across?

T: Well, I think there was very little I could do except on the very few occasions that I could talk to the President, I would give him my views and mine were probably more reflective of those of the professional military men than what McNamara was telling him.

F: Were the military men fairly much of one mind, or was there wide variance?

T: They were pretty generally together, they differed on some details as inevitably going to be the case when you've got the three services--

F: I get the feeling that Maxwell Taylor is a bit of a maverick in all of this?

T: I think he was. Taylor's role was never very clearly defined, and of course the people we talked to were General Wheeler primarily, and General Green, the Commandant of the

Marine Corps was the one that was always the most candid with us I think, and the least inhibited about giving answers that he felt might get in some--have some problem with him. And General Johnson, I believe, was then Chief Staff of the Army, and--I can't even remember who the Navy chief was--Tom Moorer came in during that period.

F: Did the military men tend to listen to Curtis LeMay? Or did they look on him as another generation?

T: I can't say with certainty on that to what extent they were influenced by General LeMay. Of course, General LeMay was highly thought of among the Air Force hierarchy.

F: Did it seem to make much difference who was the leading general in Viet Nam, or was the policy so tightly run out of Washington that the general in the field--

T: Well, of course, General Westmoreland was--I think he felt considerably hamstrung by the rules of engagement that were imposed by Washington.

F: Well, you had in Viet Nam--

T: Of course the people who were most frustrated by this were the Air Force and the Navy, the ones that were conducting the air strikes against the enemy.

F: Did you get any feeling that Johnson ever seriously considered either blockading Haiphong or bombing?

T: Oh, I think he must have considered it, certainly that was one of his options, and it was an option that in some point in time he might have made a decision to exercise.

F: Did you have any insight as to whether one general or another--I'm not using general in the general term, we can also go Navy on this--had more influence with him than another?

T: I couldn't tell, there was no way that I could make a determination like that.

F: Is the fact that you in a sense you have two United States representations in Viet Nam, one military and one civilian, cause much of a problem as you can see?

T: I don't think that it did. From what I could determine there was pretty good spirit of cooperation between the diplomatic mission in Saigon and the military.

F: But basically, though, you did have two groups representing one country there.

T: Yes.

F: Did you get the feeling that the pacification program was effective at all?

T: The pacification program didn't appear to me to start becoming effective until, oh, about the last year of the Johnson Administration.

F: Did you pay much attention to it yourself other than just generally?

T: I did. All I had was a layman, outsider's judgment on it.

F: You weren't directly involved in any way.

T: I was not.

F: Did you get the feeling that Johnson at any time was trying to wind down the war?

T: No, as a matter of fact he kept continually increasing our commitment until the peak period of about 1968.

F: Is it your opinion that the troops we had were not used as effectively as they might have been?

T: That was my opinion at the time and is my opinion now.

F: Largely because they didn't--they weren't as aggressive.

T: Well I think they were denied the opportunity to be as aggressive as they'd like. I think in particular we failed to make use of our air and naval superiority, this is what I think we did wrong.

F: At this juncture an aide came in and called the Senator away. He apologized and said he would not be able to get back today.

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