

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN G. TOWER (Tape #3)

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

November 1, 1971

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

Senator, we were talking last time about the war and talking sort of in generalities about it. In this stepping up of the tempo of the war, did the President keep Congress pretty well briefed on this, and particularly the Senate since it is in many ways the policy making body?

T: I think that we were kept reasonably well abreast, not normally through White House channels but through defense and state department channels largely.

F: Did you have the idea that the President knew you were getting it from defense and state department channels?

T: Yes, I think he did. We never had any problems getting the information out of DOD. We always did a little bit better with the professional military men when we got them into closed session than we did with the civilian chiefs over in DOD.

F: You've been here into three administrations now--two Democrats, one Republican. Is there any essential difference in the way information is fed under the Republicans and under the Democrats?

T: Not too much. Of course we Republicans feel somewhat better informed than we did under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations because it's quite natural for the White House to communicate more with their natural allies here on the Hill. And of course we get frequent White House briefings. We get frequent visits from the legislative liaison officers of the various departments, and I think that the liaison is reasonably good in that connection.

F: I rather gather that as far as secretaries of defense and secretaries of state went that it was the feeling of the Senate that perhaps Secretary McNamara was a little less forthright sometimes than--

T: The Senate came to feel sometimes that McNamara was somewhat less than candid; that he not only misrepresented things to us but left out pertinent things that he should have told us.

F: Is part of this current feeling against foreign aid--I know of course part of it is an assay of

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what foreign aid has not accomplished--but is part of it sort of a reaction to the activities of the Department of Defense and the state department?

T: You had two kinds of votes against foreign aid--the conservatives, who have never thought we should be dishing out money to the countries; and the liberals who wanted to proscribe the policy-making power and the implementation of policy by the White House, and of course opposed the military aid contained in the bill.

F: Going back to the events of the beginning of 1968, the TET offense, as you know, struck at least the political fan in this country.

T: Yes, it did. Because it was probably the best organized of any of the enemy's offenses. And it was of course by virtue of its intensity and the fact that it occurred in every population center over the country, the surprise element--all of this got quite a bit of coverage over here. But my feeling was that by any objective, military or political standard, the TET offensive from the enemy standpoint was a failure. It was a psychological success in this country. But when they failed to arouse the general citizenry against the government, to turn the general citizenry against the government, and they failed to hold on to any of the positions that they might have temporarily captured, when they failed in most areas to take over the towns and cities--their most notable success was Hue, and they were finally dislodged from there--when you consider all that and the terrible price that they paid in terms of lives and material and the heavy ratio favorable to us of KIA, they paid a terrible price.

F: I have wondered whether this couldn't have been a little bit like the Battle of the Bulge in World War II in which they threw it all in one last desperate effort, and at that point they were on the verge of collapse.

T: I think maybe if we had followed up what I believe was a military advantage following the TET offensive, that we could have hurt them more and could have severely limited their ability to wage war against us.

F: Do you think that there's some sort of almost stubborn refusal to see some things on the part of the press? I'm thinking about the fact that in general I do not believe that the TET offensive and its stalling has ever been portrayed as a failure.

T: It hasn't been adequately so. A few papers editorialized on it, I think, like the Wall Street Journal, and perhaps others that are fairly widely read--a few. But for the most part the American citizen was given the impression we had suffered some sort of defeat in the TET offensive, when indeed we did not.

F: Is this just some sort of reportorial blindness?

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- T: I think that there have been quite a few reportorial blind spots as far as the Viet Nam war is concerned.
- F: The thing is curious.
- T: And based on my own observations over there, there are a lot of things that they don't report. And they seem to place emphasis on the things that may put us in the worst light.
- F: You have made a number of trips to Viet Nam. Do the reporters do a fairly good job of getting out in the fields from your observations?
- T: Yes, I think they do a pretty good job of that; I've run into quite a few of them.
- F: They don't sit down in Saigon bars and talk about it?
- T: There are some who do. But we've seen them out in the field quite a bit. Of course some of them get right up where the action is, get out on the cutting edge.
- F: Did you have any idea at all how this was going to affect President Johnson, or do you think it affected President Johnson in his decision to renounce another term?
- T: I think that he was virtually hounded out of office by his own party. I think he didn't want to go through what would have been a vitriolic and divisive contest for the nomination. I think he might have reasoned that the party would have been left so weak and bloody as a result, and perhaps it couldn't be unified by election time, and the Democrats would lose by virtue of the fact that they were pulling themselves apart.
- F: We'll recognize that a President on his way out loses a certain amount of clout. But as far as peace making was concerned, did you think that hampered him, or do you think the fact he wasn't--
- T: Well, he wasn't able to pull it together. As well as the Democrats did in that contest, they did far better than I think most of us expected them to do. But if they had been entirely pulled together conceivably they could have beat us. But they were still a divided party. And Chicago, of course, I think pretty well left them in shambles. I think that the attractiveness of Ed Muskie had probably a great deal to do with the fact that they made as good a showing as they did, and Muskie's ability to articulate. Humphrey sounded a little bit shrill at times in campaign. Muskie sounded more reasoned.
- F: Why are we picking all our candidates now from the Senate? You know, a long time ago it was governors.
- T: It sort of goes back and forth between governors and senators.

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- F: I don't want you to be immodest, but are you getting the best men in the Senate?
- T: I think certainly you find as good men in the Senate as you do in the state houses.
- F: Is part of it the fact that we have been preoccupied with our foreign affairs?
- T: I think that you find more sophistication in national affairs in the Senate than you do in the state houses, so I think it's natural that you'd tend to pick your leaders out of the Senate.
- F: Let's drop back to 1964 and talk about that race. There are critics who say that no matter whom the Republicans had picked in 1964, that because of what had happened in Dallas and because of the fact that Johnson had provided continuity and the country probably felt he deserved a shot at it, that this was not in the cards to be a Republican year.
- T: I don't think it was in the cards. I think it's pretty much as Bill Miller, and if you don't remember him he was our vice presidential candidate, analyzed it very succinctly. He said, "The American people didn't want to assassinate two Presidents in a year."
- F: Do you think that Senator Goldwater realized the odds that were stacked against him?
- T: I think Barry knew he was beat from the outset.
- F: What was this, just a desire to do something for his party and philosophy?
- T: Well, I can't say strictly what his motivation was, except a lot of us had urged him to run. And after Kennedy was shot, the momentum was already such in the Goldwater movement, which had started almost two years before the convention in San Francisco, the momentum was great, it would have been very difficult to slow it down. And then there was the possibility that Johnson might have fumbled the ball as President, and we would have the opportunity and the right kind of environment in which to elect a President. We just didn't know. And so Barry called in most of his chief lieutenants in December of '63, and asked us what we thought he should do, and virtually to a man we advised him to stay with it.
- F: Now you were a prime worker in this campaign, and at precampaign strategy too. Did it give you a great deal of trouble to be put in this position? Because it's not a normal one, such as you had in '68 or are going to have in '72. You're running against a ghost, in a sense.
- T: I'm not sure I understand.
- F: Well, Johnson carries on with an assassinated President who gets an immediate sort of canonization by the fact of his death. We can argue all day that he was on a downhill slide

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and would have had real trouble in '64 and so on.

T: As a matter of fact, I believe it was a Gallup poll, or at least one of the reputable polls, that showed in October that Goldwater could have beaten John F. Kennedy if the election had been held at that time. It was just a slight percentage advantage, but it was pretty obvious that Kennedy was politically going downhill. And of course that was one of the primary reasons for his visit to Texas, to mend fences. So he was not in particularly good shape.

Getting back to the aftermath of the assassination and the time that we met with Goldwater about two or three weeks subsequent, too, we at that time weren't sure just how the general citizenry would view the idea of a Texan succeeding their fallen President when he had been assassinated in Texas. So that was another factor in our thinking.

F: What did this do to you insofar as fund-raising and getting support in Texas was concerned? You must have had a lot of overlap there between Texans who maybe weren't highly pro-Johnson and normally would have been in your camp, but at this time could see the advantages of a--

T: Quite a few that might ordinarily have backed us were silent, or didn't do anything. Some actually backed Johnson. However, we raised a considerable amount of money because Goldwater was a candidate that could inspire such a high EQ in his followers--enthusiasm quotient, as we call it in politics sometimes. And we generated one heck of a lot of money. We raised and spent more money than the Democrats did in '64; and on a broader base, the average contribution was smaller. So in other words the per capita contribution to Republicans was smaller than it was to the Democrats. That's an indication that just about everybody who was for Barry put their money into his race too. He had the ability to inspire that kind of loyalty.

P: Did you begin to get the feeling along toward late summer that it was going to be that broad a victory?

T: I felt it wasn't going to be too good.

F: How do you inspire enthusiasm in a case like that? Are you fighting for another year, and using this year as your--?

T: In this particular instance, again Goldwater drew big crowds everywhere he went. My own hometown of Wichita Falls, I got Barry to agree to go in there during the presidential campaign. When I was informed that they had gotten the football stadium for it, I said, "You're stupid." They said, "We'll fill it," and they did. And Barry talked to huge crowds busting out the seams every place we took him. For example, 12,000 people filled the football stadium in Wichita Falls, Texas, and Barry got about 12,000 votes from Wichita

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County.

F: Everybody that was for him showed his hand.

T: Everybody that was for him was there.

F: Has this made any difference in your own political career?

T: I was immediately written off by most people after that landslide. It was generally felt that I didn't have a prayer. One of my best friends came up to me in January of '65 at a reception at the country club and said--

F: Is this Wichita Falls?

T: Yes, Wichita Falls. Said, "John, I hate to tell you this, but you ain't got a cut dog's chance." But we recovered by '66.

F: What do you do, just quietly go back to work on something like this?

T: Oh yes. Just keep working at making your case and doing a little institutional sell. I tried to take on a somewhat more positive image because although I don't regard myself as a negativist, I'd gotten something of a negativist image, and so we worked on that for eighteen months.

F: Did you ever get the feeling that Johnson was trying to jockey you into a corner? Did he show any particular interest in the Senate situation?

T: He didn't. He didn't appear to show much interest in it. And so far as I can determine, Waggoner Carr got little more than endorsement from him. I couldn't detect any real effort on his part.

F: Waggoner wasn't his boy?

T: No. And it turns out he really wasn't anybody's. Although Connally tried to take him under his wing and tried to teach him the political facts of life, Waggoner made more mistakes than a man with his political experience should have made. And we exploited them all.

F: I don't want to inject myself in this, but I think he was about as unattractive a candidate, from my standpoint, they could have brought up. There's something about him that doesn't come across to so many people of all kinds of philosophies.

T: Yes.

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- F: Did the President work with you from the White House to try to improve the Texas situation in economics, politics, or what not?
- T: I think the President bent over backward trying not to appear too much of a partisan Texan, even though he surrounded himself with Texans down at the White House. I think he was always careful to try to avoid giving the impression he was showing any favoritism to Texas. As a matter of fact, sometimes I think he bent over a little bit too far backward.
- F: Did you have the feeling that he was responsible back there for getting the NASA installation down in Houston, or was this more Albert Thomas' work?
- T: I think probably both of them had something to do with it. And of course that was accomplished while Johnson was Vice President. I think maybe the groundwork for that, though, was laid prior to 1961. I don't remember when the original authorization might have been passed.
- F: It was consummated during the Kennedy years, but it had begun before then.
- T: Right. Probably Mr. Sam threw a little weight around on it too.
- F: Did you get much opportunity to observe the sort of coolness that developed between Fulbright and Johnson?
- T: It was very apparent that Fulbright was cool to him. I think Fulbright's coolness actually was a result of some bitterness on his part. And it's my belief, and I could be corrected on this--as a matter of fact Senator Fulbright might want to correct me--but I think he wanted to be Secretary of State in the Kennedy Administration and didn't get the appointment; and, therefore, became something of a thorn in the side of all Presidents; and I think was too much interested in trying to influence and formulate foreign policy in the Senate.
- F: Just in a sense transfer the secretary of stateship over to the Senate!
- T: Right, over to the Senate.
- F: Did you have any opportunity to observe the apparent coolness (now it never developed into bitterness), that developed between Senator Richard Russell and President Johnson?
- T: No. And I don't believe that there was ever coolness there. I think that Russell was disappointed with Johnson occasionally, but I don't think he really lost his affection for him. There was no frigidity there that I can recollect. But I can't say with any degree of expertise on that. I'm just trying to recall attitudes. I may be wrong on that even. I wouldn't attest to my own judgment on it.

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- F: Did you get the feeling from your fellow senators, and particularly those who were senior to you, that they felt that Johnson took an inordinate interest in the Senate as an ex-senator and failed to keep sufficient distance as the President?
- T: I don't think that there was a feeling over here that he took inordinate interest in the Senate. I don't think anybody resented his taking an interest in the Senate. I think there was a feeling that he only paid attention to some certain domestic issues that he was interested in, or felt were politically important, and left foreign policy and the conduct of the war too much to others.
- F: You must have known a good many of his staff at least casually before they became White House staff members. I'm thinking of somebody like Marvin Watson, whom I would think you would have run in to in the normal course of events.
- T: Yes.
- F: Did this give you any particular sort of conduit to the President in case you needed it, or did you ever choose to exercise it?
- T: Only a few times, and that was to sort of advise the President on some kind of consensus I'd gotten back home about some matter that affected Texas.
- F: Now even though you're a member of the other party, did the President always go through at least the courtesies of letting you know about appointments?
- T: He was very good about that. Much to my surprise sometimes, the boy would rush out of the cloakroom and say, "The President of the United States wants to talk to you." I'd go to the phone and he'd say, "John, I just thought you ought to know I'm going to appoint Ramsey Clark as attorney general." He sometimes called me personally, sometimes one of his staff would call, but he was very good about that.
- F: Did he ever sound you out on some people?
- T: Not usually, no. I don't recall that he ever sounded me out on anybody.
- F: But he also saw to it that you weren't caught by surprise--
- T: He saw to it that I was informed, right.
- [interruption]
- F: When we come on down to the summer of '68, you've mentioned the Democratic convention, I presume in one sense it eased your position a little bit not to have a man



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from Texas running, insofar as working for the national party was concerned and representing Texas.

T: A great deal.

F: Did you have a feeling that the President really was running the Chicago convention as his critics charged?

T: No, I don't think the President was running it at all. But I think some of his lieutenants were involved in it. I think he had a great deal to do with Humphrey's strong position at the convention. I don't know that he was even calling the shots, but I think his lieutenants were.

F: Did you have a feeling that he in a sense was walking away from politics, or that he had a strong interest in whom the Republicans might select? In other words, who his successor would be.

T: I think he could easily predict that Nixon would be the nominee. I think a year before the convention Nixon was the apparent front runner. I don't know that he had any particular interest in trying to influence the Republican convention, which he of course did not. But I think when he made his announcement in March of '68 that he would not stand for reelection, he was aware of who his opponent would be had he decided to go on and stand for another term.

F: Do he and Nixon have a fairly easy relationship?

T: They apparently do. Nixon calls him fairly frequently, I think. Oh, I don't mean regularly, but he occasionally does call him and consult with him.

F: Have you ever heard Nixon comment on Johnson?

T: I have heard him comment on Johnson, yes. I've never heard Johnson comment on Nixon.

F: What, just on issues, or on personality?

T: On a couple of issues in which the President supported him.

F: Do you think part of this periodic calling of Johnson is one reason that Johnson has never second-guessed Nixon, or do you think this is just part of Johnson's--

T: I think that's part of it. And Johnson has not criticized the President to any appreciable extent that I know of. But I think too that's partially because ex-Presidents have a peculiar feeling about Presidents. They understand the nature of the job, and the heavy

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burdens involved, and the difficulty in making hard decisions. I don't recall that Truman was ever very critical of Eisenhower, even though there had been some bad blood between them. And I don't recall that Eisenhower was ever publicly very critical of either Kennedy or Johnson.

F: I've always had the feeling probably too that Goldwater and Johnson rather liked each other.

T: Yes, I don't think that there was ever any animosity between them at all.

F: Did you get the feeling, going back to '64, that the unique fact that a man from Arizona is running against a man from Texas may have destroyed the geographical prohibitions except perhaps for the South?

T: I wouldn't even say that there's a southern geographical prohibition.

P: You think we've licked that primarily?

T: I think so. I think a southerner would have to be reasonably moderate in his views on civil rights. I don't think that you could take an avowed segregationist and ever get anywhere with him nationally.

F: There's something I've been curious about. Johnson was for the retention of the 27-1/2% depletion allowance. Yarborough, despite some of his other stands, stayed with it. And of course you've been with it. And now under what is--

T: I opposed its repeal, though, when he advocated repeal in '66. It got to be one of the minor issues in my campaign in '66.

F: That's what I wondered. How did this happen to come out in the current administration? You would have thought ordinarily that you would have reduced the depletion allowance back when Democrats were in the saddle.

T: I might note that the depletion allowance was reduced by a Democrat-controlled Congress, and it's something they had been shooting at for years, and had finally got a piece of it. And that the administration was opposed to the reduction of the depletion allowance.

F: Did Johnson ever talk to you about this?

T: I never discussed it with him.

F: Did you have any role at all in the nomination of Abe Fortas to the chief justiceship?

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T: Not an active role, no.

F: What about this attempt to keep Earl Warren in the saddle until January '69?

T: I didn't have anything to do with that either, that was the President--

F: That's outside your purview.

T: Right.

F: As the fall of '68 came on, as you know they began to get ready to have right on the eve of the election these peace talks in Paris, and some people have felt that was stage managed by Johnson for Humphrey advantage. Do you think that--?

T: I must say that that was a conviction of mine as well.

F: Is this just a guess, or do you have any reason to believe this?

T: It's a guess.

F: You have no information that he--

T: As a matter of fact, I don't know whether you remember or not, but Madam Chenault and I were accused after the election of having had something to do with throwing a wrench into the talks because the South Vietnamese weren't ready to cooperate at that moment. But I might say that the charges against Madam Chenault, and to a lesser extent the charges against me, were not well founded.

F: Does Madam Chenault wield that sort of influence?

T: No. They were doing what they considered to be in their own interests--the Saigon government. And so I don't think that anybody would have had any influence on that, that's just something they arrived at in their own minds that they should do.

F: Sort of the amount of influence we had in this current election.

T: Yes, I think that Thieu had arrived at that conclusion without anybody having to help him.

F: What I was getting at, they don't seem to be an easily manageable leadership over there.

T: No, they're not.

F: But you don't have any prime information that Johnson maneuvers this way--it's just that

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the facts, as they appeared, seem to fall in that kind of a slot.

T: No, I don't have any hard evidence, but my political instincts told me that.

F: You were of course at Johnson's so-called farewell address to the Senate and to Congress. Among the congressmen and senators, was there a sort of feeling that perhaps we had been a little hard on him, or is this the sort of sentimentality you allow yourself when someone you know is definitely leaving?

T: I think that there was a spirit of camaraderie for a former colleague, a man who had been in and out of the Senate, and there's a certain amount of sentimentality involved, certainly! There was no rancor, no bitterness in evidence on the part of either various members of the Senate or the President.

F: Again, drawing on your--

T: By the way, just to throw a little story in there that I think is sort of interesting and indicative of the Johnson personality and method of operation. At that reception, which was I guess the day before he left office, he said to me, "John, I'm going to be in the Federal Building down there in Austin. We're going to be in the same building. Hope I can drop in and see you some time. Hope you'll come in and see me."

I said, "Mr. President, I hope you will drop down and see us. I'd be delighted to see you when you're there. There's one thing though, Mr. President. They're taking all the parking places there at the Federal Building, and you've got my parking place."

He said, "I got your parking place? I wouldn't want to do that to you."

And so the very next day--the day that he left office--he called me and said, "I've straightened out that parking place situation down there in the Federal Building. You and Ralph both have got your parking places back."

F: That "still got the eye on the sparrow," huh?

T: Right.

F: Right till the last.

You must have observed his relationship with Senator Dirksen over the period of the presidency. And particularly I've always been intrigued by Senator Dirksen's working sometime what seemed to me against his natural political instincts to go along with presidency. You would agree that that happened?

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- T: I think Dirksen made a real effort from time to time to help the President.
- F: I'm thinking of issues like open housing.
- T: I think he put politics aside and decided to go along. But my guess is that perhaps from time to time he exacted a price, because Dirksen was a pretty good political horse trader. Of course he never held Johnson in awe as some members did, because they had been floor leaders together. My guess is that he talked to the President pretty plain from time to time. But Dirksen, as many Democrat senators confessed, was probably the single most powerful man in the Senate, even though he was on the minority side.
- F: You've observed now three Presidents from a particular, if you'll pardon the term vantage point [President Johnson's book, The Vantage Point, has just been released]. Do senators have a problem in getting to the President insofar as getting their ideas over? You hear all the time on both parties that the President is insulated against opposition; against, in effect, sometimes knowing just how strong certain strong opposition is, or what other directions he ought to be taking from the one is going down.
- T: It varies. And very often it might depend on the issue. I got to President Nixon very easily on the issue of school busing, but on some other things it has not been quite as easy to communicate directly with him.
- Johnson was probably less an insulated President than was either Kennedy or is Nixon.
- F: That's because he's more of an outgoing person?
- T: He's more of an outgoing personality, yes.
- F: Do you feel that Johnson is busy in Texas now in his retirement in trying to maneuver Texas politics? Have you seen any signs of that?
- T: I don't see any signs of it. He doesn't seem to me to be very active in Texas politics. The last time I visited with him was at a cattle sale down at LaPryor, Texas, back in May. We sat and ate barbecue together and chatted. He didn't talk any about the Texas political scene.
- F: Does he in effect pump you about what's going on in the Senate?
- T: Yes, he asked me questions about what was going on up here, and about the Senate attitudes. He still has a continuing interest, I think, in the Senate.
- F: Okay.

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John G. Tower Biographical Information: (U. S. Senator from Texas)

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