

INTERVIEWEE: CARL VINSON

INTERVIEWER: FRANK DEAVER

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V: The first time I recall seeing Lyndon B. Johnson was sometime in 1931, or perhaps in 1932, when he served as Administrative Assistant to Congressman Richard Kleberg of Texas.

He was a young, energetic, ambitious, good looking, tall Texan, who was very active in all aspects of Capitol Hill life. I can't say that I knew him well at that time, but I was impressed with his political knowledge and his amazing capacity to make friends.

He left Washington in 1935, and the next time I saw Lyndon Johnson was after he was elected to Congress in the special election in the 75th Congress.

He was assigned to the Naval Affairs Committee in June, 1937. He remained a member of that committee and later the Committee on Armed Services, through the 80th Congress--in fact, until he was elected to the Senate in 1948.

I should point out that right after Pearl Harbor Lyndon B. Johnson volunteered for active duty in the Navy. He was commissioned a lieutenant commander and was sent to the Pacific. Although he served for only five months, he was awarded the Silver Star Medal for distinguished service while serving in New Guinea. He left active duty only because President Roosevelt ordered all members of Congress serving in the Armed Forces to return to their posts in Washington.

Lyndon Johnson was invaluable to me as a member of the Naval Affairs

Committee. Even when he was a very junior congressman, I made sure he was placed on the right subcommittees where his tremendous capabilities could be utilized. He was a tower of strength and supported every one of my efforts to strengthen our naval forces. As a member of the Naval Affairs Committee, he demonstrated an unusual capacity for delving into legislative proposals or other proposals that were being investigated by the Committee.

Throughout his service on the Naval Affairs Committee, Mr. Johnson served on the Aeronautical and Ordnance Subcommittees. He was Chairman of the Aeronautics Subcommittee in the 78th and 79th Congresses, and Chairman of the Ordnance Subcommittee in the 77th, 78th, and 79th Congresses.

He had a strong interest and insight into matters relating to personnel. I appointed him chairman of a Special Subcommittee on Personnel during the 78th Congress. In addition, he served on some eighteen other subcommittees during his membership on the committee.

I will now attempt to outline some of the actions that Mr. Johnson was involved in during the time he was on the old Naval Affairs Committee that stand out most in my mind.

When the history of Lyndon B. Johnson is fully written, it will prove that he played a major role in the extension of the period of the draft which occurred in 1941, shortly before Pearl Harbor. In 1940 the Congress enacted a law making compulsory military service a legal obligation in peacetime as well as war. This was the first peacetime draft in our history. The law provided that all persons drafted would serve for a period of twelve months. In 1941 a bill was reported to the House which extended this period of service to eighteen months. The mounting threat of Axis aggression was poised against the United States. Lyndon Johnson knew that World War II was going to involve the United States. He knew, too, that the extra period

of training was urgently needed if this country was to be ready to meet its hostile threats. During the debate of this issue by the House, he knew that the vote in the House would be close. It may be that this was when he started arm-twisting. Anyway, I recall that he worked very hard for the enactment of this bill. The extension of the public draft period was carried by only one vote; I think it can truthfully be said that Lyndon Johnson had as much to do with winning that victory as any man in the Congress of the United States at that time.

Also in 1941 the Naval Affairs Committee acted on programs to expedite naval construction and procurement. During the consideration of these various programs, Mr. Johnson evidenced particular concern about potential sabotage of the defense program and repeatedly questioned witnesses before the committee about the employment of individuals of questionable character. As a consequence, the committee wrote legislation which made it unlawful for defense contractors to employ or to retain individuals who they had reasonable cause to believe were [of] subversive character. Naturally the provision provided safeguards to protect employees who were wrongfully accused. Mr. Johnson must be given a great deal of credit for his unrelenting pursuit to rid the defense industries, and the government, of persons who were not loyal.

I recall that in 1943 Mr. Johnson introduced a bill to cut absenteeism in the defense plants and in the government departments primarily concerned with the war efforts. During the course of the hearings conducted by the committee, it was brought out that during the month of December 1942 a total of almost thirteen million man-hours were lost through absenteeism in shipyards engaged in construction and repair of naval vessels.

This, of course, was just one small aspect of the overall program.

Mr. Johnson's bill provided that the various government activities and war contractors be required to maintain records showing the extent and cause why employees were absent from work. More important, the legislation stipulated that deferments under the draft for occupational reasons would be limited to a maximum period of six months, and each six months these deferments would have to be reviewed in the light of the absence from work.

This, of course, was a hard-hitting effort to assure that those men given occupational draft deferments for engaging in war work were truly shouldering their fair share of the war efforts. Mr. Johnson's concern, as reflected in the legislation, the hearings, and the report, was truly commendable. I am sure this action contributed immeasurably to insuring that the war efforts were carried forward efficiently, expeditiously, and economically.

In the 78th Congress, I appointed Mr. Johnson as chairman of the Special Subcommittee to investigate personnel of the Navy Department. Interestingly, Mr. Johnson selected Mr. Donald C. Cook as his Special Counsel for this subcommittee work. Mr. Cook went on to become Chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission and is now President of the American Electric Power and Services Corporation. I mention this as [an] example of Mr. Johnson's proclivities in selecting and surrounding himself with persons of outstanding ability.

The purpose of this investigation was to examine draft deferments in the Navy, and the utilization of enlisted personnel in Washington, D. C. The objective was, of course, to make certain that as many civilian employees of the Navy as possible were freed from their civilian duties to help fight the war and that the Navy enlisted personnel were being properly utilized. Mr. Johnson was tenacious in delving into this study. The subcommittee

recommended, with respect to the draft deferments, that a special office be established within the Office of the Secretary of the Navy which would be responsible solely for formulating and executing draft deferment policies, assuring that all draft deferments in the Navy were properly justified and essential, and instituting a replacement training program that would permit eligible men to be released for military service as soon as possible. The subcommittee recommended that requests for draft deferments from agencies throughout the Navy be processed through the Office of the Secretary of the Navy.

Mr. Johnson's investigation of the utilization of enlisted personnel in Washington, D. C. disclosed that the Navy had brought to Washington thousands of young men to perform clerical and related duties, and in his report he declared, "There is no apparent justification for this practice, and the retention in Washington of any substantial number of healthy young enlisted men seems inexcusable." He said this was particularly true in light of the then-existing shortage of men qualified and eligible for active duty.

In the year preceding the subcommittee's investigation, the number of sailors and marines stationed in Washington had more than tripled, from 1,795 to 6,556. The Navy, of course, had been authorized to bring enlisted men into the departmental headquarters only to perform necessary military purposes. In his report, Mr. Johnson said, "It is rather obvious, we think, that clerical duty can not properly be regarded as military purposes and that it is well past time to release these men." The report urged that the Navy step up its program for recruiting and training [Waves].

Mr. Johnson always evidenced deep concern about the national, social and economic ills. He made innumerable inspection visits to various military

installations and activities throughout the United States, and he never failed to point out the lack of adequate housing, and the extension (sic) [existence] of substandard working conditions. He made many recommendations which were adopted by legislation and regulation to provide a better way of life for the men and women serving in the Navy, as well as the civilians employed by the Navy and those working in defense industries.

Inasmuch as Mr. Johnson was a Texan, I made him my advisor on matters relating to Texas. He played a dominant role in setting up the Naval Air Base in Corpus Christi, the Naval Air Training Station near Dallas, and shipbuilding facilities in southeast Texas, Houston and Orange. He was instrumental in organizing ROTC units at The University of Texas and his own alma mater, Southwest Texas State College, and in establishing a V-12 training program at Southwestern University in Georgetown. He made interim inspections of all these activities and reported to the committee and to the Congress on the progress these facilities were making in gearing up for their respective roles in the war effort.

Lyndon Johnson always demonstrated a desire for knowledge and more knowledge. And he was almost ruthless in his efforts to extract information from witnesses, staff members, and others.

With all of his drive and ability and energy, if I had to single out the most important single decision that affected his career, I would have to say that it was his marriage to Lady Bird. I'm sure that even today she remains the balance wheel that took Lyndon Johnson from a freshman congressman to the Senate to the vice-presidency and to the presidency. Her ability to make friends, her natural charm, her amazing capacity--which she was careful not to demonstrate in any way that would detract from Lyndon's ability--made her a grand lady in my eyes, long before Lyndon became President.

After Lyndon Johnson left the House of Representatives, I saw less of him although we did talk frequently on the telephone. He was elected Democratic Whip of the Senate in 1951, only three years after he was elected to the Senate. And two years later, on January 3, 1953, he was elected Democratic Leader of the Senate. I think history will record that he was the greatest Majority Leader in the history of the Senate.

He was elected Vice-President on November 8, 1960, and became President of the United States upon the death of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963. He was elected President in his own right in November 1964 and remained President of the United States until January 20, 1969.

He left the presidency failing in one thing that he sought most to accomplish--a lasting peace through the world.

Lyndon Johnson remains my friend and I shall always be proud of my association with him.

D: Now, Congressman Carl Vinson, we're visiting in your office in Milledgeville and this is a statement which you have prepared, and very well prepared in anticipation of our visit today in behalf of the Oral History Project, The University of Texas, compiling the reminiscences of President Lyndon B. Johnson.

With your permission, sir, I'd like to pursue a few matters which you have mentioned here and perhaps add some detail. If we repeat a little bit that's quite all right. Perhaps we'll add some new subjects as we go.

You mentioned first that you first met Mr. Johnson in 1931, I believe you said.

V: That's correct.

D: When he was an aide to Congressman Kleberg. I think the calculation puts this at age 23 for Mr. Johnson. Do you have any further recollections of Mr. Johnson at age 23?

- V: No, the only recollection that impressed me to any extent was after he became a member of the Naval Affairs Committee. I knew him casually, like you meet clerks of other congressmen; I knew that was Lyndon Johnson of Texas.
- D: He went, of course, to that position directly from a schoolteaching job, which he held for one or two years. Now, I wonder if you see in his service any characteristics of the schoolteacher?
- V: Yes, I saw a great many of them when he became a member of the Naval Affairs Committee. He wanted to get the facts of every subject matter that was before the committee.
- D: And you and he served together on the Naval Affairs Committee?
- V: And then when the Naval Affairs Committee was incorporated into what is now the Armed Services Committee, with the Military Affairs Committee, we served together on the Armed Services Committee. When he left the House, he was a member of the Armed Services Committee. The old Naval Affairs Committee, as I previously stated, had been only part of the Armed Services Committee.
- D: Then you mentioned his service in World War II. Can you tell a little more about his interest--
- V: Well, he came into the office one day and he said he wasn't going to be sitting there in Congress with all this fighting going on. He was going to get in there and do his part. And the next thing I knew he had been commissioned a lieutenant commander in the Navy. He went out on the Pacific Fleet and was actively engaged in the activities of the Fleet and made an outstanding record to such an extent they decorated him with the Silver Star. Then President Roosevelt issued this order for all members in the service that were congressmen to come back to Washington. He came back and served then on the Naval Affairs Committee.

D: Were you aware of reasons of his particular interest in the Navy?

V: He was intensely patriotic and he was a great American, and he wanted to do his part.

D: But the Navy as compared with the other services?

V: He was familiar with the Navy because he was on the Naval Affairs Committee. If I had been a young man I would have joined the Navy myself, because I had been associated with the Navy. That's no reflection on the other committees because he didn't go to the Army or the Air Force. He just elected the Navy.

D: He entered, I believe, from reserve status. Are you aware of how long he had been in the reserves?

V: No, I know nothing about his reserve.

D: Then you mentioned his becoming the Democratic Whip in 1951. Can you tell me more--

V: That's in the Senate.

D: Yes, sir. Do you know more of the circumstances--

V: No, I do not know of any of the circumstances that brought him into the race in the Senate.

D: Two years later, when he became Minority Leader, are you acquainted with Senator Richard Russell's--?

V: No, I'm not acquainted with that.

D: ... involvement in that?

V: No, not at all. The House runs its affairs and the Senate runs theirs. We know of those things in a general manner; we do not know, properly, the details that lead up to the promotion of different individuals in different bodies and why it is done.

He had an outstanding record in the House, and because, as I pointed

out in my prepared statement, he was very effective in writing the extension of the draft. It impressed all the members of the House. Here was a brilliant, up-coming man that was going to take a leading part in Congress, and so therefore he was elected to the Senate and the senators [recognized] his outstanding qualifications as a leader.

D: Then two years later, of course, he became the Majority Leader with the gaining of control by the Democrats. In this connection, he and Speaker Rayburn made a very effective team. I'd like to have your comments and observations on their teamwork in this respect. You're very well acquainted with both of them.

V: Oh, yes. I think that was the strongest team that has been in during the fifty years I served in the House, with Rayburn Speaker of the House, and Lyndon Leader of the Senate. The most effective legislators that could accomplish things.

D: Do you recall specific characteristics that provided for such close affinity?

V: Well, not anything particularly needs to be recorded except they were masters of the subject matter with which they dealt and that had a profound impression. They were forward thinkers and were trying to meet the issues squarely and trying to bring about better conditions and accomplish something worthwhile.

D: Was their degree of cooperation unique, as compared to--the degree of cooperation between Rayburn and Johnson unique as compared to other Majority Leaders and Speakers?

V: Oh, yes, it was very unique, because in the first place both came from the same state. As a rule the Speaker and the Majority Leader of the Senate come from different sections--never been closely allied, closely associated--and so naturally they were not brought together working as effectively as people who lived on a different atmosphere.

- D: Two characteristics you mentioned of President Johnson that perhaps, with further reflection, you would expand upon. You mentioned his desire for knowledge and his insistence to gather the facts, and then again you mentioned his selection of good men to assist him. In either of these respects, do you think of specific instances that would be particularly noteworthy?
- V: I referred to one in reference to his selection of Donald Cook as his chief counselor of this subcommittee. He was very fortunate in sizing up people and he extracted competency from them. I wouldn't call it lucky, but he just knew how to get the right man for the right job.
- D: You mentioned his most important single decision in your estimation might be his selection of a bride.
- V: I think wives play a very prominent part in shaping the life of the husband. I know during the thirty years I was married, my wife played a very effective role in my life before she passed away in 1950, and this is '70. But I think Mrs. Johnson, as she was called Lady Bird, I think she had a profound influence on shaping his career. That's the reason I put it in my remarks.
- D: According to the writings of a number of people who have interviewed the Johnsons, Mrs. Johnson was very cautious about trying to protect her husband from too much frustration and from overwork. You have some recollection of that, I'm sure.
- V: She was a good safety valve to keep him from overdoing things. That's the influence of a good wife.
- D: We did not enter some of his personal characteristics or perhaps his philosophies--personal philosophies, political philosophies. What can you recall of Mr. Johnson that may have shaped his life, his thinking?

V: I think the first thing, he was a good Democrat. He wants to do things for the people. These measures come up and it enabled him to see the benefits that would accrue to the people, and so therefore he sponsored them. He had a very keen, analytical mind and was always probing for knowledge; of course, a most constant reader, just a great American.

D: You mentioned briefly in your prepared statement his service as Vice-President and as President. I wonder if you can recall some other qualities, or perhaps shortcomings, that you would honestly observe as Vice-President and then as President, characteristics that particularly shaped his life or the life of the nation for this period?

V: No, nothing particular I can do on that phase. Of course, I know he made a nice record, a good record as Vice-President. He met the responsibility placed on him by President Kennedy. I sat at the conference table quite frequently at the White House with other members of Congress who were invited to participate in reaching decisions, on being advised by the President about what decision he had already reached. Lyndon Johnson always spoke out in the meetings and other members there did likewise. He was keenly interested in meeting his responsibilities as Vice-President. And then, of course, when he became President he put through all of President Kennedy's bills that had reached the log-jam in the Senate--every one. Then he began to write his own policies which about that time I left Congress.

I left Congress on January 3, 1965, and he fussed at me for leaving. Said I should stay there with him. But when I reached eighty years old, I said I was going to retire, and I retired.

D: And that rounded out fifty years of service for you.

V: Fifty years and one month.

D: Did you recognize any particular change in direction in President Johnson's administration after his election to a full term in '64?

V: All I know about that was what I read in the newspapers, because I was back here at home. But as far as a legislator, he was very effective--as a President, because he wrote every bill and he passed everything he sponsored that he could put through. That's the reason the newspapers said he was arm-twisting. That's the reason I referred in my little statement to the fact that all his working so hard for the enactment of the draft law probably caused me to think that was the appropriate place to use the term arm-twisting, because he knew what to go after and he had objectives in mind and he sought to accomplish them.

D: You have alluded, as many others have, to his ability to accomplish a task. Are you acquainted in his early career with any tasks that he was frustrated in his efforts to accomplish, and how he reacted to this?

V: No, I am not.

D: What I was driving at was his ability to take a setback in stride and still to continue on.

V: Well, I know about his makeup--if he doesn't succeed the first time, then try again, as evidenced by his desire to go to the United States Senate. Some men would have been heartbroken and just dropped out completely, but he was determined. He had his objectives. He didn't float with the tide. He had an objective and he just fought it out. That's the way he was. If he didn't get the legislation through that he wanted, he wouldn't abandon it; he would keep on until he reached an agreement with the House or Senate.

D: And, of course, he and Sam Rayburn were very effective working together in this area.

V: Oh, yes, very effective.

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Gift of Personal Statement

By Carl Vinson

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

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