INTERVIEWEE: HENRY HALL WILSON (Tape #1)

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

April 11, 1973

F: This is an interview with Mr. Henry Hall Wilson in his office in the Chicago Board of Trade Building in Chicago on April 11, 1973. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

Let's start this out just by asking you when you first met President, Senator, Vice President Johnson. Incidentally, I've had two good sessions with Terry Sanford.

W: Oh have you! Good. I really first met him when he was Vice President, when I came into the White House. In the '50's he had spoken at a Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner in Raleigh and we had shaken hands there, but I never became acquainted with him until he became Vice President.

F: Did you see much of him during those Vice Presidential years?

W: No, very little contact.

F: What were these; mainly just social functions, or once in a while in a meeting?

W: Yes.

F: But not just face-to-face.

W: Not a great deal. Now and then we'd talk. He was aware of what I was doing, and I was aware of what he was doing.

F: He was of course an old congressional expert himself.

W: That's very true.

F: Did he take a great deal of interest in your maneuverings?

W: You mean in the Vice Presidential years?

F: Yes.

W: He doubtless had a great deal of interest in the whole congressional operation. Of course, his prime interest for twelve years was as a Senator, and I think in those years he primarily just looked to Mr. Rayburn for the House action. My involvement was not with the Senate but with the House, and I'm sure he took a great deal more interest in the Senate than in the House.

F: So you were not in a position of his sort of offering advice on whom you should see and how you ought to handle this, and that sort of thing?

W: Except for his interest in the Texas delegation, and we did discuss that several times.

F: As you know, there was some uncertainty in some of the Texas delegation about President Kennedy. Did Johnson sort of accept this as a fact of life and tell you how to encircle it?

W: We had the mutual problem. We were scrapping for every vote we could get. I think at that time there were twenty-one members in the delegation from Texas, and this was a genuine battleground. This delegation was constantly split on given bills, and very often the difference in passing or failing to pass a bill in the House of Representatives would depend on how many Texans we could get. So it certainly was a matter of mutual concern. I do not want to represent, however, that the then Vice President spent a great deal of his time on House votes.

F: Who gave you the most trouble from Texas in those days, or did you find them all approachable?

W: They were all approachable and all very pleasant. There were some who were of such a philosophy and from such a district that they would very seldom vote for a New Frontier bill.

F: Could you talk with people like, let's say, Clark Fisher or Omar Burleson, John Dowdy?

W: Oh sure.

F: But did you feel that you were getting across, or did you feel that they were just serving politeness?

W: They were being polite, and I don't think it related to personal hostility to President Kennedy either. It just was their philosophies. And their long records.

F: This wasn't a bill for their constituents.

W: That's right.

F: Where were you on that fateful November day?

W: That morning I had had an extremely pleasant and fruitful conversation with Wilbur Mills regarding the Medicare bill, which we had failed to get out of the Ways and Means. Mills and I that morning agreed to the essential features of the administration bill, but with some modifications. We were certainly approaching the end of the Congress, approaching the end of the year. He was to have a meeting on Monday of his committee, and we agreed that if I could get what elements we had agreed to hammered out, and I had jotted down some notes, by Friday afternoon--that afternoon--that he would do what he could with the committee on Monday.

So I walked from there over to the HEW Building and sat down for about an hour with Wilbur Cohen, who at that point was Assistant Secretary of HEW for congressional relations. Wilbur said he would bang away on it for a few hours, and then following lunch, I was to come back, pick it up from Cohen, and take it to Mills.

I came back to the office and answered some phone calls and went to lunch. While sitting at lunch in the White House Mess the telephone rang with the news from Dallas. Of course we did not know at that moment that the wounds necessarily were fatal. So we just sat. We just sat there in the West Wing all afternoon until, I think it was 7 or 8 o'clock, the helicopter came in from Andrews bearing the new President.

F: Did you tend to gather in a group or did you stay in your own office?

W: We just wandered around shell-shocked. We talked or we'd just sit there and stare. There was a picture in the New York Times on the following Sunday, and I have a copy of it at the house, of the shadows of several of us walking past the Oval Office to meet the helicopter.

F: What do you do--?

W: Let me just give you one more piece of that. That night I was talking with a group in Larry O'Brien's office, one of whom was Ted Sorenson. I related that story about the Medicare bill. Sorenson was so much impressed that that night he called Wilbur Cohen over and they put together a memorandum to the new President; it was considered to be that important to flag him on that night.

F: That's what I was going to ask you. You had an assignment and what do you do. In a sense you can't scrub it, because the work goes on, and so you did get right back to work on it.

W: Yes.

F: Before we leave the Vice Presidential days, was there sort of a West Wing laughter at Johnson as the papers portrayed, or was there a studied ignoring of him, or what was the general feeling?

W: I think there were some staff members who took that attitude but not by any means all, certainly not the President.

F: From what you saw and heard, the President's relations with him were--

W: Excellent. And always thoughtful, considerate, and these are the big boys talking.

F: Did you have any feeling that they might be planning to drop him?

W: No. I do think this: The story of the Bobby Baker thing broke, and I don't recall whether publicly or not, but we knew about it about two weeks before Dallas, and there was very grave concern about what this would do.

F: Did you know Bobby?

W: No, I really didn't. I knew him when I saw him, but I never had any dealings with him.

F: He's one person I haven't been able to get to agree to an interview.

W: Yes.

F: I wrote a very careful letter to him once.

W: From what I understand, he's writing a book. He probably wants to confine all his reminiscences to the book.

F: Let's finish up that day. You have spent the afternoon in a daze. Now you get the word that the new President is coming in. Was there kind of a required attendance out at Andrews, or did people just want to be there?

W: I don't recall any discussion about who would go to Andrews or whatever. I did not go.

F: Did you wait around to greet him when he came in, or did you go on home?

W: Yes, that's what I said. We met the helicopter when it came in on the south lawn. That's when that picture was taken.

F: Right. Tell me something about the remainder of that evening.

W: We sat around and talked.

F: About what?

W: About the event of course.

F: Did you talk anything about legislation, and what you needed to be doing?

W: I just don't remember, except for that one incident I told you about, that Medicare bill.

F: What was procedure then? Did you have staff meetings with the new President right away, or did the word kind of filter down through other people? In other words, how did your life get picked up again professionally?

W: Within a few days of Dallas, and I don't remember exactly the day, I did, as I'm sure every other member of the staff did, send in a letter of

resignation and I expected it to be accepted. He not only refused them all, he called us in one by one and gave an impassioned plea to stay with him.

F: He never did give a kind of coach's group, locker-room sort of talk to you?

W: No.

F: This was man to man.

W: That's right.

F: What did he say to you?

W: Talked about what heavy burdens he had and that he deeply needed help, and a kind of an obligation to the country to stay with him and help him. We had to roll on very repidly on the day after the funeral, or it may have even been the day before the funeral--the funeral was Tuesday, as I recall--no I guess the funeral was Monday.

F: It was Monday.

W: Yes. It was on Tuesday that the stage of House action on the civil rights bill was such that we had to take certain procedural steps to get it on the floor of the House. I think there were three stages that you had to do this, and seven days go by and you do that, and another seven days go by and another step. And so we proceeded with those steps.

F: Did Johnson sort of precipitate any change in your method of doing work, or did you just carry on like you'd been doing?

W: It was amazing to me, in dealing with the House of Representatives, to discover that the approach of the two Presidents was practically identical.

F: Now you're his man now, and of course he has a high priority interest in legislation.

W: So did President Kennedy, no less high.

F: Did this result in your seeing the President with some frequency?

W: Yes.

F; Did you have a regular routine of call and report, or did you do it just mainly through memos and calls when he felt like it?

W: I had a great deal more contact with him, both sitting down with him and exchanging memos, after O'Brien left for the Post Office Department, because he was the overall legislative man. My title was not Administrative Assistant to O'Brien but Administrative Assistant to the President. Nevertheless you did have to channel a lot of this stuff. After Larry left, I assumed the responsibility for preparing all the agendas for the weekly meetings with Congressional leaders attending. Larry, as Postmaster General, under the arrangement the President made, remained technically in charge of congressional relations, but nevertheless he had his hands totally full in that Post Office Department. I tried to keep him informed with memos. He did attend the weekly leadership meetings, but he was primarily Post Office.

F: How far in advance did you set up your agenda for the weekly leadership meetings?

W: It was a constant process. We had a regular litany of White House bills in which we had interest. I would fill the President in with lengthy memos on the state of the bills and what the problems were in the subcommittees, the projected vote count in the House and the conference problems. And so far as the agenda was concerned, we would cover all of the bills and where they were and what was to be done.

F: Did your type of memo change from Kennedy to Johnson?

W: No.

(F: There was an interruption at this point by the secretary who took him into an outer office to see someone whom he seemed to need to see desperately.)

Before we leave the Kennedy-Johnson bit, did you ever feel that Johnson had any lack of confidence in you because you were a hold-over?

W: I don't think it was any lack of confidence. I think that the first months after he became President, having so much at stake in the relationship of the White House to the Congress, that he observed our performance very carefully. But viewing me as a Kennedy man, a Kennedy delegate to the Los Angeles convention, and a Southerner, I don't think that there's any animosity on that score. It was just a question of--his confidence.

F: It was a question of seeing how good an employee is in effect.

W: That's right. And I must say that through all his years, even after his overwhelming electoral victory on his own, I don't know of one single former Kennedy official, White House, Cabinet, or anywhere else, that he either fired or made uncomfortable. To the contrary, he was constantly urging them to stay, and some of course he promoted. He promoted Joe Fowler, he promoted Wilbur Cohen, he promoted Larry O'Brien, all to the Cabinet. Joe Barr, same thing.

F: Well, he got a tremendous amount of knowledge out of the Kennedy people.

W: They were good people, and he knew it.

F: There were some disaffected ones who made more noise.

W: They left, and they left on their own.

F: And could have stayed.

W: Obviously.

F: On what type of issues did LBJ get personally involved, as far as legislation was concerned? Did you go to him and urge him sometimes, or was that necessary?

W: You mean to the degree he'd have a personal conversation with a congressman?

F: Yes.

W: I think people have a lot of misapprehensions about how that works. If the President were to call a member of the House of Representatives

before a tight vote and say, "I need your vote," then he'd have 434 more members of the House of Representatives saying, "Why didn't he call me," which makes for an impossible situation. And to the best of my knowledge it was a very rare thing that he called a member of the House respecting a vote.

I do recall one occasion, and I think this was a rent supplement bill, and about two hours before it came to a vote in the House I was jumpy about it and I knew it was just absolutely nip and tuck. So I wrote him a note and put a red tag on it--that's the way we indicated "read this now." I must say he was just great about these red tag things. He would interrupt anything to see a red tag, so I had confidence that he would see it. The remainder of the memos he would usually read overnight, take to his night reading, but he would read them overnight that night, even if they didn't have a red tag on them.

F: I found the number of memos that he could handle would be almost incredible.

W: Right. And a lot of them were things that he should not have been bothered with, especially Texas things.

On this day I said, "I've never asked you to do this before, but I'm jumpy about this bill, and would you call these four members? I think you could turn them." And that's about what it would take to turn them. So the time goes by and the vote takes place and I call him. I said, "Mr. President, congratulations, you really made the difference!" Of course I had other heat going on these members too. And he said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, those four people you called were critical, and we won this thing by two votes." He said, "What four people?" He had not seen that memo, and he was absolutely furious with whomever it was in the office who did not give it to him. I think he was talking to McNamara or somebody of that level.

F: You lucked out on that one, didn't you?

Where did the red tag come from? Is that time honored, or was it something that preceded you?

W: When I came into the White House it was a device which had been used for some time.

F: You read in the papers about Congress and certain congressmen being under almost intolerable pressure from the White House in certain key legislation. Was that overstated, or how do you put pressure on without causing it to react?

W: It's a question of judgment. The essential thing is that your relationship with the congress is completely a two-way street. They have things they need done for them, White House tours or projects or people appointed to the administration, some of which can be done and some of which cannot and should not be done. But from the White House level, when a congressman is after a department for a favor, the refusal of that department may or may not be valid, and we had to make the judgment and order the department to do it if in our opinion it could be done and was appropriate. Now, you'd never see anything so crude as a trade. You don't play that way. When a member of Congress came to me and said, "I need this," you didn't say, "I'll give it to you if you'll give me a vote on this bill." That's not the way it's done and that would be indeed offensive. On the other hand, we had our obligations to do what we could to enact the legislation that the President felt was good for the country, and the Congress appreciated this. I appreciated their problems in their districts or their past voting patterns which they'd have to break or their personal philosophies, and I would appreciate that maybe one fellow would give me one vote out of five, and it would be a great deal more appreciated than the next fellow giving me five out of five because it was easy for him. The second fellow would be out of character if he did not vote that way.

Of course when you come down to a big showdown, and we constantly had them, I wouldn't call the sure votes. We'd figure out what the sure votes were; we'd have to get a lay of the land by using basically departmental congressional relations people. But when it came down to the crunch I would select X number of critical votes and get with the leadership constantly, meet in the Speaker's office two or three times a week, and among us we'd figure out how do you persuade so-and-so to go with you. You couldn't go to the well everyday with the same congressman. You had to have some judgments about what he could do, if he just would sweat a little bit or a great deal. And you didn't push him beyond reasonable limits.

Now, the effectiveness of our speaking, in effect, for the President, urging that a given vote be given, related directly to the impression of the member that the President was speaking for national purposes, on maybe a critical point of the economy or the war on poverty or foreign aid or a trade bill, this kind of thing, and that he was at a level to know really better than the Congress what ought to be done. I can recall some votes, and this is the place where you get the most resistance, if the member judged the topic to be a bill about which the President did not know more than he did or if he decided it was not essential to the national purpose, then he'd tend to get very intractable.

I'll give you a couple of examples of it. One was a D.C. home rule bill. These veteran congressmen had lived in the Washington area for twenty years and they had very strong feelings about how it should be run, and they did not see that D.C. home rule related to the national purpose, and so we couldn't pass it. It's not passed yet.

Another, which was occurring about the same time, and I guess this was the fall of '66, was the Highway Beauty Bill. Those members just could not see that whether a billboard was up or down would make for national strength. There was a widespread feeling that this bill was designed to be a present by

the President to Lady Bird, and everybody was very jumpy about this because very many congressmen in their campaigns had had free space contributed by billboard people. They were not inclined to cut down their friends simply to make Mrs. Johnson happy. That's the kind of talk you'd get. Does that answer your question?

F: Yes. Did the President ever express himself on McCormack's leadership?

W: There was great affection between LBJ and McCormack. I think John McCormack was an excellent Speaker, and I think he was much maligned in the press. He was not press oriented, and he was not articulate in the way the press would like a Speaker to be.

F: He didn't seem to have that kind of gutsiness that Sam Rayburn had, for instance.

W: Nobody had. Sam Rayburn was one of the most remarkable men I ever met, and I only met him in his dying months.

F: But I think you build an image around certain people and if other people don't match the image, you tend to object to them.

W: That's right.

F: I presume that in Larry O'Brien's days there that Larry more or less handed out the assignments, that he ran the show and you and Mike worked around Larry; and then later on when Larry left the President was your taskmaster.

W: Larry certainly had the central authority in the congressional relations operation, but it really wasn't so much a matter of assignments and priorities. The priorities as to which bills you had to pass were set by the President, and we knew what work had to be done. The first year I was there I was the only member of the staff involved with the House. We added two more at the beginning of '62.

F: Did you go see the people that you knew were intransigent in their disapproval of particular acts, or do you in a sense waste your time on them as a good-will gesture?

W: There wasn't time for a lot of good-will gestures with complete intransigents on a given bill. I guess there were no members who never voted for any of our bills. You had to make your judgments on the issues. But essentially I would be dealing with the tough votes that I judged nevertheless to be possible.

F: You're really working the doubtful people.

W: That's right.

F: Do you have any problem getting to them?

W: Oh no.

F: They can find time.

W: Oh absolutely, with any member of Congress.

F: Looking at it from the other side, this is their way of keeping the pipeline open to the White House.

W: Yes.

F: You undoubtedly developed some real friendships.

W: Oh yes, very warm friendships all over the Congress.

F: Were you sort of the welcome visitor?

W: Yes.

F: I'm trying to say something that is abstract, but maybe we can get a judgment. Do you have a style or do you just move in and state your purpose and get out? In other words, do you vary according to the Congressman?

W: The style indeed varies with the Congressman. Some of them are "hail fellow, well met;" some are by nature fairly stilted in their relationship with anybody; some want to talk on at great length about their districts

or their thoughts on a given bill; some of them you can get your business over with quickly and that's it. It's a completely varied experience.

F: You never had that problem in your various assignments of Johnson giving two or more people in the same role to perform?

W: Absolutely not. No, we knew precisely where we were.

F: How do you work on somebody like Otto Passman who, of course, sits on foreign aid and is not exactly enjoying the situation on it?

W: In the case with Passman on foreign aid, the only thing to do is beat him, get enough members out of that subcommittee or the full committee to beat him. We seldom did. But at least we kept it close enough so that the cuts he initiated might be less than they would have been if we had not applied that pressure.

F: You induced a certain tenderness in it.

W: That's right.

F: Did you feel you sort of made any outstanding successes as far as he was concerned?

W: No. You mean on foreign aid bills?

F: Circumventing him.

W: The first battle we had was '61, and I think it was some special Latin American thing, some five or six hundred million dollars, and we won. But mostly we did not win.

There was another battle we won and I've forgotten the year now, '64 or '65; we got the votes and got it out. But that was a very, very tough area.

F: I presume you take all precautions not to embarrass a key Congressman by, in a sense, overriding him. You never gloated over any victory over Passman.

W: Oh no. And basically--and I think a lot of the public has a lot of misapprehension about this--of the committees of the House throughout the

years I was there, there were only two of the twenty chairmen who were opposed to the general direction of what we were trying to do in their committees. And that was Smith of Virginia, chairman of the Rules Committee, and Cannon of Missouri, as chairman of the Appropriations Committee.

F: So you generally had a cooperative team to work with?

W: Oh yes.

F: One of the first things that Johnson did that was noticeable was to put through that tax cut. Tell me a little bit about your role in that.

W: My role in that was very major. You would assume that a tax cut bill would be easy to pass; however, two things about it. One, most Congressmen pretty courageously had taken a career-long stance with their constituencies that they would not vote for a tax cut unless the budget was balanced. The other consideration was that the Republicans were attempting to impose as a rider on this thing a provision that the budget should not be more than a certain figure, and I think it was a hundred billion dollars or something like that.

F: It seems kind of quaint now, doesn't it?

W: Yes, it does. So this thing came to a showdown in September of 1963, and the showdown was the vote in the House on the Republican recommittal motion. We were having double troubles at that time. The two big twin legislative objectives of the administration were the tax cut bill and the civil rights bill. And the civil rights bill, plus the whole national mood--the marches and so forth--had the Southern Democratic Congressmen extremely edgy, upset, and uncooperative. These were perilous times. And I had the House counted right down to a gnat's hair, I knew it was going to be terribly close. This vote came up, I think, on a Thursday, and I believe on a Tuesday night President Kennedy went on television and made an appeal for support. I was dubious that it would

help. And I must say, in retrospect, that I didn't see a wiggle in one single vote--I had them counted that closely. But that vote was the back breaker for us, that vote in the House on the motion to recommit.

So it goes to the Senate. And Senator Byrd,at that time chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, chose to stall. He wouldn't even start hearings on it. Now after Dallas, President Johnson called in Byrd and made a deal with him that he would limit the budget to a given figure provided Byrd would start hearings. And Byrd agreed to do so on December 7, interesting Pearl Harbor-type date. So the President rather proudly reported this to O'Brien, and Larry said, "You didn't get a thing. I already had a commitment for the 7th," which made in the future for a lot more base touching before deals were made.

Then of course it took a long time. I forget when it came out of the Senate, it was over in '64 sometime.

F: What did you do to convince people that a tax cut was in order? Did you do it pretty well on this basis of "we'll hold the budget." Was that your principal argument?

W: No, and it didn't relate to holding the budget. We were trying to get away from those budget restrictions. The reason for it was--and it took a lot of convincing of President Kennedy to do this--our economists, the Council of Economic Advisers, and so forth, were convinced that there needed to be, right at that juncture, a shot in the arm to the economy, either by way of much more massive federal spending or by way of a tax cut. And they made the argument that if you do this tax cut--and it was a pretty good-sized one, I think it was eleven billion dollars that the resultant boost to the economy would result in there being more than enough additional tax coming in to make up for the cut. And this was a new concept very difficult to sell the Congress. They could just simply see this as another great big deficit in the budget. Of course, I think

everyone concedes now that what the economists forecast is precisely what happened, and that the handling of the economy, (and realize that we came into office in the midst of a recession in '61), the handling of the economy through the Kennedy years and through the Johnson years up to the time of the major Vietnam expenditures was beautifully handled. Inflation was kept in tow and there were no recessions, our productivity was good, labor was happy, the wage increases were moderate. And that's about the story of the tax cut..

(End of tape)

JBF: We had another interruption at this time and by the time that was over, we decided it would be better to go. I had gone in at five after nine, and it was now about 11:10, and it just wasn't a day for continuity.

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By HENRY HALL WILSON

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March 9, 1976

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The Lyndon Baines Johnson Library
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Sirs:

I return herewith the unrestricted Deed to an interview by me with Joe B. Frantz on April 11, 1973.

I enclose also a slightly amended version of the interview - amended solely in the interests of literacy.

I am the sole source of the need for the amendments. As a Southerner I tend to swallow the ends of sentences, and my syntax occasionally came out sounding like an Eisenhower press conference.

But I have altered the meaning of no sentence, and I stand fully behind what I then said.

Sincerely,

Henry Hall Wilson

Henry Hall Wilson

HHW/w