

INTERVIEW I

DATE: July 18, 1978
INTERVIEWEE: MILTON YOUNG
INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE
PLACE: Senator Young's office, U.S. Capitol,
Washington, D.C.

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Y: First you want to know when I first became acquainted with him?

G: Right.

Y: When he first came to the Senate, I've forgotten what year that was. He was easy to become acquainted with. He was naturally friendly. We had a lot of common interests. For example, he had a great interest in agriculture and oil. We're also an oil state. He loved politics. I think one of the reasons why he was so influential--he was very influential--was his sense of humor and his method of approach to people. He had a unique way of saying things that I think is in a way common to a lot of Texas people. They have more humorous ways of asking and answering questions. I had lunch with him quite often, usually with some Republicans, and he wasn't reluctant at all to talk about some of his problems with Democratic colleagues. He was that kind of a person.

I remember some instances. For example, when he was first running for president--that was when he was majority floor leader--he once called me over to his desk and he said, "I want you to get some delegates for me in North Dakota." I said, "How can I get

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delegates for you in North Dakota? I'm a Republican." "That doesn't make a damn bit of difference," he said, "I want you to get some delegates." I think I did help get one.

Another similar occasion happened when he was president. He was easier to see. I was over to the White House one time and had a visit with him, no particular purpose as I recall. He said, "I want you to go back and make a farm speech." I said, "Mr. President, a major farm bill already passed the Senate." "That doesn't make a goddamn bit of difference. I want you to go over and make a speech." So I worked quite a while on a twenty or thirty-minute speech and made the speech.

But skipping over a lot of years, the last time I saw him was at the funeral of Senator [Carl] Hayden when President Johnson and Barry Goldwater both gave wonderful eulogies for Senator Hayden. Afterwards they had a reception at the home of a relative of Senator Hayden. There was quite a long reception line and when I got up to him he gave me the darndest bear hug you ever saw. He just wrapped his arms around me. I believe he really did like me. That was the last time I ever saw him.

I got a wonderful letter from Lady Bird afterwards, mentioning some of our associations together and especially how much Lyndon thought of me.

G: Do you think he thought of himself as a westerner rather than a southerner?

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Y: Yes, I think more of a westerner than a southerner. Well, I think Texas is sort of by itself in that respect. It's a little different from all the other states. It's both western and southern.

G: Senator, when LBJ became majority leader in 1953 the numerical balance was so close between the Republicans and the Democrats in the Senate that any defections one way or the other could make the difference on a partisan vote. I noticed that Lyndon Johnson was able to get your colleague Bill Langer to vote with him on a number of occasions. Why was that?

Y: Well, Senator Langer was a very independent-minded person. For example, one day I recall, Senator [Arthur H.] Vandenberg, severely criticizing him. Senator Langer had made a speech on both sides of a bill and on the same day. Senator Johnson was sometimes called a wheeler and dealer. He wasn't beyond having some understandings with Senator Langer. If you had some problem he might help you out by bringing it up out of order to have it considered a little earlier than otherwise. This was something he was good at. This was something that most any good party leader often does. They don't have to trade with you, but if you have some important legislation you want considered they can either bring it up next week or maybe two or three months later. Consideration of that kind is perfectly legitimate. They can help you. Senator Johnson was that way. He was, as I said before, very personable and likeable. You couldn't dislike him.

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G: Do you recall yourself going to him to get some help from him on legislation that you were interested in?

Y: Yes, that happened quite often.

G: Can you recall any bill in particular where he was instrumental in aiding you?

Y: Well, I think on the farm bills he sometimes would bring them up a little sooner than he would have otherwise, but in the case of farm legislation he often was interested in it himself. There are quite a few other things such as confirmations of appointees.

G: Would he remind you of past favors if he were trying to get you to support him on some issue?

Y: No, but he would leave the implication that if you helped him it wouldn't be forgotten. He wasn't a wheeler and dealer like a lot of people thought he was. I think so many stories went too far. He was the kind of person who believed if you helped someone else with a legitimate problem they had some obligation to return the favor. And you can and should, if they have a good case.

G: Did he and Senator [Robert] Taft have a close working relationship? Do you have any insight on that?

Y: I think he had a great admiration for Taft. Taft wasn't nearly as conservative as a lot of people thought he was. He was one of the sponsors of federal aid to education, housing, and a supporter of cooperatives. In that respect, Senator Johnson, as both the floor leader and as president, probably sponsored more liberal social-type legislation than any other president.

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G: I gather that Lyndon Johnson and Bill Knowland didn't have quite the rapport that he had had with Taft before that.

Y: No, that's right. Bill Knowland didn't have much of a sense of humor, and Bill became more and more conservative. Lyndon Johnson was on the liberal side. He wasn't as liberal as some of them but he was on the liberal side.

G: I've heard that he offered more support to President Eisenhower on some issues than Senator Knowland did.

Y: Yes, I think this is probably true although I'm not too knowledgeable on that question. I think this could well be true.

G: Let me ask you, do you have any insight on Lyndon Johnson and Joe McCarthy and the vote to censure McCarthy?

Y: I remember the case well. In fact, I was a supporter of Senator McCarthy, probably largely because of his support of farm programs, which I was very interested in. I don't think Lyndon Johnson was really very active in getting McCarthy censured. He supported it but he wasn't one of the real hard-liners in having him censured. In fact, I don't think McCarthy would ever have been censured if he hadn't attacked the Select Committee the way he did.

G: I was going to ask you if you have any recollections of working with Lyndon Johnson on the Omnibus Farm Bill in 1954?

Y: He wasn't on the Agriculture Committee, but he was very sympathetic and his views were much the same as mine. Of course, one thing we had in common, as we discussed a while ago, he was a southwesterner and important in the farm area and I always had a close working

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relationship with southern senators, ever since I came to the Senate. Maybe it was because they were more supportive of agriculture. The South wasn't very industrialized thirty or forty years ago, so they had to depend more on agriculture. I had a warm relationship with southerners all the years I've been here. Senator [Richard] Russell was my closest friend in the Senate, and I think Senator Russell was probably also Lyndon Johnson's closest friend. I remember sometimes over at the White House I'd be walking out with Dick Russell, and President Johnson would tell him, "Why do you have to give me hell every time we see each other?" something like that. Dick Russell wasn't at all hesitant to criticize him, but they were always friends.

G: Do you have any more insights on their relationship?

Y: For some reason or other, they were very close personally. I think Lady Bird probably had quite a lot to do with it. She was from the Deep South. Personally they were very close. On military matters I think they agreed completely, as well as on farm matters. Dick Russell was more conservative and he was more opposed to too many government programs.

G: Do you think he would normally touch base with Senator Russell on legislative issues before he would take steps on them?

Y: I think they did quite often. That was one of the criticisms of Dick Russell. One night I heard the two of them visiting. The President had called Dick Russell to discuss important issues with him, but he later would pay little attention to his views. He

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[Russell] in effect would say, "Why do you call me if you don't pay any attention to me?"

G: How about Lyndon Johnson's relations with Everett Dirksen?

Y: Well, I think they had a good working relationship. Both of them had a great sense of humor and both of them loved politics. They knew politics and both were effective.

G: I gather where Johnson had been able to outmaneuver Knowland he was not able to outmaneuver Dirksen at all.

Y: This is true. He could outmaneuver Senator Knowland. Knowland wasn't too effective a legislator. He was very strong-willed, and he'd become more conservative all the time. As I said, he had little sense of humor, and in politics I never knew of anyone who was very effective unless he had a good sense of humor.

G: That's that important?

Y: Yes.

G: Let me ask you to look over some of these legislative issues, particularly when we get on. If you recall any of these votes, particularly this farm bill here.

Y: That was the farm bill of 1954?

G: This was in 1954 that we're talking about here. You voted with the majority of the Democrats on that.

Y: Yes. I don't remember much about this except I was very anti-Benson. I didn't think Secretary Benson was on the side of agriculture. Senator Johnson, as well as later when he was president, never liked Secretary [Ezra Taft] Benson.

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G: Why was that?

Y: Well, Benson was a real conservative. He believed in no farm programs at all. In the South they had to have a cotton program. We had to have wheat programs almost as badly. A lot of commodities don't need programs and with some commodities, they do more harm than good. A farm price support program for cattle, for example, would be no good, as well as for any perishable commodity. Senator Russell and I first became closely associated on price support programs when the Aiken-Hope price support program of 1948 was being considered. This was a flexible price support program but it did continue 90 per cent supports for one year. Senator Russell and I were successful in getting 90 per cent supports extended for about four more years.

G: That's great.

Y: The 90 per cent supports came in under the [Henry B.] Steagall Amendment during World War II to provide 90 per cent supports for the duration of World War II and two years thereafter.

G: I think the following year, in 1955, the farm bill was regarded as one of the most controversial bills and yet evidently Dick Russell was able to get the thing through.

Y: Yes. Senator Russell was highly respected. He was very knowledgeable on most every subject, especially on agriculture. Most senators greatly respected his views. I remember walking back with Senator Harry Byrd, Sr. one time, a very conservative senator. He voted for one provision that many conservative senators voted against. I said,

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"How come you voted for this, Harry?" He said, "Dick Russell said that was the best part of the farm program."

G: Is that right?

Y: Yes.

G: How about the establishment of the soil bank program in 1955?

Y: That was one proposed by Secretary Benson, and I think maybe the Farm Bureau had quite a lot to do with it. It had some things about it that were very unpopular, especially at first. It took too much land out of production which would hurt those smaller communities very badly. On the whole I think it did more good than harm.

G: There was also that year the farm disaster loans, lowering the interest rates on them from 5 per cent to 3 per cent. Do you recall any of the legislative history of that?

Y: No, I don't recall that so much, but one other thing that Secretary Benson sponsored was Public Law 480, which we still have with some modifications. The Farm Bureau was instrumental in that program, too, about the only two good farm programs that Secretary Benson supported that I can recall, but he even turned against Public Law 480, the food-for-peace program in later years.

G: How about any of the power projects, like the Hell's Canyon project? Did you work with him on any of those?

Y: Yes, some, but not as much as with Senator [Robert] Kerr. Senator Kerr was very active on water projects, especially on the authorizing end of it. Senator Johnson was very strong for these programs and he was able to secure several for Texas. While we're mentioning what

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he did for Texas, he was able to get some sizable industries to go there, especially defense-related and military installations.

G: I gather he was also able to get the support of, say, Senator George Malone on a number of bills.

Y: Yes.

G: How was he able to do that?

Y: Well, again, Molly Malone, George Malone was an ex-prize fighter, but he had a good sense of humor and I think he appreciated the attention that Senator Johnson gave him. He was not too partisan politically. He voted quite independently.

G: Do you think Lyndon Johnson's heart attack in 1955, when he was majority leader, changed him much? Did you notice any perceptive change?

Y: He slowed up some for quite a while, but he wound up smoking and drinking again. He was still a good operator; it didn't bother him in that way. I think he restricted his working hours a little more and the public functions that he would go to. He was still very effective, as was President Eisenhower, but President Eisenhower followed the doctor's instructions very carefully. I remember eating with him at the White House. If he had roast beef, he'd look carefully to see if there was a little strain of fat in it and if there was, he'd send it back.

G: Do you think Lyndon Johnson was happy as vice president?

Y: No, I don't.

G: Why?

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- Y: Well, Lyndon Johnson wanted to operate more on his own. The vice president wasn't his cup of tea. A vice president is supposed to listen to the president all the time and do what he wants him to do, run errands for him, speak for him, whatnot. Vice President Johnson was a little bit too independent as to be parroting ideas that the President wanted. I think they got along all right, but there was some cleavage.
- G: Did he ever talk to you about these problems?
- Y: No. I never got into anything like that with him.
- G: Any insight on his role in the space program?
- Y: He had a major role in that. I remember he was on the committee that handled that, at least one of them. That big space center in Houston, I think, was located there almost entirely because of President Johnson. He was also on the Armed Services Committee. He'd make some great speeches on military preparedness.
- G: After he became president you seemed to continue to have a close relationship with him, particularly for a member of the opposite party. I gather that perhaps due to your strong contacts in the Department of Agriculture that you would sometimes get information before your Democratic colleague Senator [Quentin] Burdick would, and be announcing these things. How did you do that?
- Y: Well, I was very close to all these southerners, especially Lyndon Johnson and Senator Russell. And, I voted quite independently myself at that time. I don't vote nearly as independently now as I did then. I was sort of a maverick myself in a way.

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G: Do you think that was partially due to his influence?

Y: Yes, I think so, because I sort of believed as most southerners did. I remember one time I said to Senator Russell, "You people in the South are much more military-minded than we in the North." He said, "If you had a general like Sherman march through your state you would be too."

G: If the President wanted your vote on a particular measure--I'm talking about Lyndon Johnson--would he call you himself or would he have a legislative aide do it or how would he go about this?

Y: He would usually call himself.

I got to know Bobby Baker quite well when I first came here. He'd go out of his way to try and help. If I was home in North Dakota, during my first two or three years, I'd call him when I wanted some information on a bill, what was going to happen to it. He was very cooperative that way. I wasn't around him much in those later years when he became more deeply involved. He was secretary of the Senate, when I first came to the Senate.

G: When Lyndon Johnson was president you would attend these congressional leadership meetings.

Y: Yes, quite often.

G: What were they like?

Y: Well, he was a real leader, expressing himself freely and would get in plenty of arguments with both the Republicans and the Democrats. That was when we had bipartisan leadership in the Senate.

G: Was there a good deal of give and take in those meetings?

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Y: Yes.

G: Really?

Y: This was true of President Nixon, too, but President Nixon wanted to do most of the talking himself, more so than some other presidents.

G: And President Johnson did not?

Y: No. He'd listen. He was a good listener. He studied people. He made a point of understanding every senator, their peculiarities and their thinking. He knew them very well.

G: I guess he knew which arguments would appeal to them, didn't he, and what their crucial interests were?

Y: That's right. He knew about how you were going to vote or about how you planned to vote.

G: In your case was it mainly agriculture?

Y: Well, agriculture and military things, as well as anything affecting the oil industry and foreign matters. I supported him in the Vietnam War. I was opposed to getting into it in the first place but I felt that it was something that we couldn't run away from. I didn't think cutting off appropriations or crippling our military effort was the way to end the war.

G: You went to Vietnam in 1966, didn't you, on a congressional tour?

Y: Yes, and I was there in 1954. I was there three times.

G: Did you talk to the President after that second trip?

Y: Yes, I did. You might want to look through some of my news releases of that time. I remember I dealt with the Vietnam War. I attended meetings twice with President Johnson. We were trying to figure out

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whether he should go ahead and go all out and win this war or what he should do. He called in groups of members of Congress. I, for some reason or other, was at two of them and at both of them I said: "We have to have a lot of help from our allies or we'd better stay the hell out of there." This happened twice, but I think this was about the time he made the decision to go all out.

It was a war that I don't think he was responsible for. He inherited it. I think that it sort of broke his heart to leave the presidency that way, because it was probably the sole reason he decided not to run again.

G: Do you think the war was a mistake in retrospect, the way it was conducted?

Y: Well, I always thought we couldn't win a war in a jungle area such as this. I followed the French War in Vietnam and how even the French Foreign Legion, their best fighting force, was beaten at Dien Bien Phu. This was after the French had been there about ninety years. I didn't see how we could win there. I didn't think it was that important to us. Secretary of State Dulles at that time believed in that domino theory. He was the one that thought that Vietnam was awfully important to us. And, then President Kennedy followed him. By the time that Johnson became president we were pretty deeply involved.

But I think the reason why he held those meetings I mentioned to you was he thought there was still a way of pulling out of it. I think he probably made the right decision at that time. At least we

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can look back and say we didn't run from that war. We didn't win the war, we didn't lose it either. We didn't have to retreat anyway.

G: You had some contact with him during the Abe Fortas nomination for the chief justiceship. I gather that you felt that some of that Republican opposition was more a reaction to Chief Justice Warren than actually to Fortas. Is that right?

Y: Yes, I think that's about it. I remember it but I don't remember the details of this controversy over Fortas.

G: It looks like a number of the southern Democratic senators decided not to support Fortas, particularly after Senator Russell seemed to change his mind on it. Is that the way you remember it?

Y: Yes. In a situation such as this, Senator Russell had tremendous influence.

G: Really? I gather that during this period they had a falling out.

Y: Yes, they never were quite as close afterwards. Although the President would call him, they'd discuss matters, but I don't believe Senator Russell ever had as much influence with him afterwards.

G: Do you relate it to the Fortas nomination?

Y: Well, that would probably be part of the reason.

G: Do you know any other part of the reason?

Y: Well, some of the many domestic programs that President Johnson sponsored were very liberal and went beyond what Senator Russell believed in. Of course I was very pro-Senator Russell. I think he

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was one of the most brilliant men who ever served in the United States Senate and probably would have been the most qualified to become president. If he hadn't been a southerner he would have been nominated and elected. In fact early in 1952, I met some of the press as I was leaving the Senate Agriculture Committee. This was on a Friday afternoon. There were three or four newsmen and I didn't even know who they were. They wanted to know if I didn't have a good story for them for the weekend. I said yes, I had a damn good one. I said, "If the Democrats have sense enough to nominate Dick Russell for president, I'd support him." It wasn't so much of a story until some of the Republican Party officials in North Dakota started reading me out of the party and then it became quite a national issue. I was up for election that year and about all I did was defend Senator Russell and I got a big vote.

G: Is that right?

Y: Yes.

G: Is there anything else that we haven't covered?

Y: No, I can't think of anything, except that Lyndon Johnson as floor leader was different from any other floor leader I knew of. He'd argue with a lot of them, his own Democrats. He'd get a little tough with them at times, but with the sense of humor he had he would usually bring them around.

G: What arguments would he use on you if he were trying to get you to support him?

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Y: Usually on the merit. He never suggested a trade or anything with me. He was a very persuasive fellow. Of course, he and I naturally thought about alike on so many things. My major interest--of course as a farmer all my life--was farm matters. I just always believed, long before I came to the Senate, in the need for having the most modern equipment possible for the military forces. He and other southerners thought the same way. I think that's the main reason why I've become so closely associated with them. I still am to a large extent. Sometimes people ask me why and I say, "I come from the southern part of North Dakota."

We were lucky we didn't run into a vote.

G: Well, Senator, I certainly do appreciate it.

Y: I don't know whether I gave you anything very helpful.

G: Yes. I wanted you to take a look at this one other thing here.

This is a list of your contacts with President Johnson while he was president, the meetings at the White House that you went to. See if that triggers any memories.

Y: You've got a pretty good record here. Foreign affairs briefing, this is 1965. A signing ceremony, I'd go to some of those. I went to even more briefings when Eisenhower and Nixon were president. During this period, too, I was a secretary to the Republican Conference, which puts you in a leadership position, one I held for over twenty-four years. I didn't seek re-election. I was over at the White House quite a lot, wasn't I? Hurriedly looking over these they don't bring back any particular thought.

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G: You can keep that for your files.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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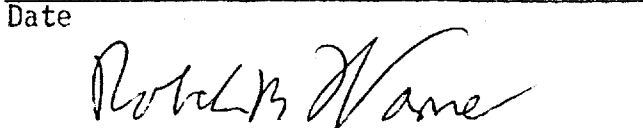
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