

LYNDON JOHNSON AS MAJORITY LEADER

Interview #3

Thursday, May 10, 1990

ELSON: Well, where do you want to start?

RITCHIE: I thought we'd start today with Lyndon Johnson, and I wondered if you would give me your impression of Lyndon Johnson when he was majority leader of the Senate?

ELSON: Well, you know he was minority leader first. He really was bigger than life when he was up here both as minority leader and majority leader. When the Democrats took over, as I recall the margin was only a couple of votes, maybe two. It was very close, so he had to put together coalitions to move any legislation along. He had the distinct advantage, of course, in working in the leadership position because Rayburn was Speaker of the House so they had a good coordination.

I always thought he surrounded himself with good staff people, too. For instance, Walter Jenkins was more his AA and personal assistant. Poor Walter, he'd work twenty-four hours a day for Lyndon and another twelve hour a day for Lady Bird. I don't know how he did it, and what a gentleman he was. He was really a fine guy. Then I thought one of the ablest men over there, who was on the Policy Committee, was old Harry McPherson, a very fine man and a very able guy, very bright and loyal. He was exceptional, I thought. And of course, over there in the Policy Committee, does the name Pauline Moore ring any bells with you? She was over there, she sort of ran it. Of course, in those days the Policy Committee wasn't that much. I think there was only a couple up there, but Pauline sort of kept track of everything, she was exceptional. Her husband was assistant secretary of the Interior, I think, or head of oil and gas leasing. I know he was down there during the Kennedy days. But quite frankly I didn't think that much of [Jack] Valenti or [Bill] Moyers.

But Lyndon had some pretty good people around him. Of course, Bobby Baker was over there as his floor man. Bobby as secretary [of the majority] was an exceptionally

good vote counter, and he worked at his job pretty damn well. I mean, he was good, there's no question about his doing his official duties. Well, he grew up in the Senate. He came as a page and loved politics, and always wanted to run to be governor of South Carolina, but then got into his difficulties.

I was always impressed with Johnson's tremendous abilities to analyze personalities, their needs and shortcomings, and keep this in his head, and master the art of the possible. He was just an exceptional leader. He could bully, he could be persuasive. He knew how to caress you when that was necessary, and also threaten you, the people around him. But he in any political fight, particularly on the Democratic side, he always knew that he was working from a position of strength, that for the most part he could rely on men who carried a lot of weight in the Senate. For instance, Dick Russell, and Carl Hayden, and Bob Kerr, and people like that, members who were big and powerful. They normally were always in his corner, so he had this strength to work with when he went into any really hairy legislative battles. And he was exceptional at working with the minority, with [William] Knowland, and then was it [Everett] Dirksen who followed Knowland?

RITCHIE: Yes, in 1959.

ELSON: They got along well, and knew each other, and they respected each other, and they got a lot done. I think there were problems there with Knowland, when he was leader—this of course was still during that period of McCarthyism, and the Cold War era—but I was always amazed at how well he ran things. But of course, you have to remember in those days too, when you came out of committee, and we didn't have the Sunshine laws in those days where every mark-up had to be in public, so when you came out of committee the chairman and ranking minority member pretty much agreed on everything, both on the legislative and appropriating committees. So when you hit the floor you didn't have the type of writing of legislation as you do today, actually on the floor. Of course, I blame a lot of that because they couldn't sit down together in private.

I don't know how many, not that many, but a lot of times, going into mark-ups particularly of the Appropriations Committee, or the Rules Committee, or some of the others, where I'd see Carl Hayden—again I'm digressing, but in a mark-up session a

senator would have a real problem. He'd say, "I've got to have this amendment, or this money." And Senator Hayden would say, "Now, we can't do it in this bill, but when the Supplemental comes along I'll take care of your problem." Well, it gave the senator who had the problem a chance to save some face, and there wasn't embarrassment, you didn't get into a big fight. So when you came out of committee, except for maybe a few amendments that you knew were going to come up on the floor, things moved along pretty well. That was, in a way, helpful to any leader who was operating in those days, where today, man, I don't envy any of them when they get out there because you never know what someone's going to offer!

From that standpoint, the rules and the procedure I think facilitated a lot of Lyndon's being able to maneuver, and he knew how to handle that. But as I said, to me he always had this base of strength. Though again, in '59 when that big group of senators came in, it was a little harder to do the same type of things because that particular crowd started not wanting to play the game the way it had been played. But I think he was an incredibly good leader. He looked out for individual members. He knew what their needs were, and what he could do. He was great at sizing up people's strengths and weaknesses. He just loved the game, he relished it. It was all consuming. He worked at it twenty-four hours a day. The damn man was on the phone night and day. You never knew when you'd get a call from him.

RITCHIE: What types of calls would you get from Johnson?

ELSON: Well, he'd call the Senator at home, or at the office. I never received personally that many calls, because I always pretty much went through his staff, or to Bobby on the floor when it was a legislative matter. I'd talk mainly to Baker or to Walter Jenkins or someone like that on his personal staff. But I think Lyndon had the feeling that the entire Senate belonged to him, that all staff members should be working for him, and a lot of people did things that I'm sure they wouldn't normally do because of that attitude. He just felt that by God they're here to serve him as leader. And he got away with a lot of that. That doesn't mean I liked the son of gun particularly, because I think he at times took shortcuts that were unnecessary, and he, I think, felt that the ends justified the means on too many—not too many occasions but on a number of occasions.

I remember there was a two-volume work on the rules of the Senate, it was up through 1939 or '40, and I picked it up at some used book store. What was the author's name? Anyhow, it was a classic I know in talking to a couple of parliamentarians, they were well aware of it. But I was reading it this one week, just was curious about it because I had just picked it up. It so happened that Lyndon was trying to pull some legislative maneuver that just wasn't right. I know Carl Hayden didn't like it. We were talking about it this one morning—as I told you, we would meet every morning, the senator and I—about whatever this little legislative maneuver Lyndon wanted to pull. I said, "Well, you know, it's really against the rules." He said, "How do you know that?" I said, "Well, I just read about it in this book." He said, "Show me that." I brought the volumes in with me and I pointed to this, and he grabbed the book and went over and saw old [Charles] Watkins, who was the parliamentarian at the time. He said, "Hey, is this right?" He checked it out and sure enough it was accurate and still the reigning rule at the time. So Carl Hayden went to Lyndon and said to him, "Lyndon, you cannot do that. You're not going to get away with it." Lyndon got really irritated and pissed at the senator. He said, "Why can't I?" And then he quoted the rules from this precedent.

I think Carl Hayden got a great deal of delight out of that one little incident, because Lyndon had a way of not liking to be stopped in his legislative maneuvers, particularly when he thought he had it all put together, and this came up at the last minute. The only way he could have won that would have been to have appealed to the Senate and overruled that precedent, but then that would have exposed him to what he was trying to do. I know the senator felt good about it, and I felt good about it at the time. [laughs] This would have been in the late '50s, probably, '58, '59, somewhere in there. And Lyndon would not—because Carl Hayden knew the rules as much as anyone, he was around here long enough to know them damn well, and I think Lyndon had a great deal of respect for him and didn't want to get into a fight, because he knew that probably in something like that Dick Russell and Kerr and some of the others would have supported the senator rather than the leadership. It was a minor thing, but I know that in that one instance the senator got a big charge out of slowing down Lyndon's high-pressure type activities.

You look back to the stuff that was going on during the Eisenhower administration, I would say that prevalent at that time was a lot of criticism of the Eisenhower

administration, particularly on domestic affairs, that they wouldn't make a decision, everything was being studied. We would go round and round. In defense of Eisenhower and his administration, I would say probably Eisenhower had a sense of the mood of the country better than anyone that they had retired from the war. We sort of needed a rest from all the activity that was going on. He had a good sense, and maybe he was right that way, although it did have its drawbacks. For instance in capital investments in your country's resources, the lead-time in building dams or highways are considerable, so you had to make some decisions, because from the time you made one in those days to the time you could get on line with a power dam or something like that was about seven years. Now it's about fifteen. So there was a lot of criticism of the administration for this. I think because of Lyndon being in his leadership position, and with Rayburn on the House side, both of them though they worked with the administration still articulated a Democratic policy on issues that was quite good. It kept them in the forefront. I mean, there was an opposition party, where sometimes today you feel like the Democrats are acting like good Republicans. It's hard to distinguish the difference sometimes.

During those years, didn't they pass the interstate highway act in 1956? Well, there were a lot of things happening in the '50s that you sort of forget about, or I forgot them, but that moved along. The only reason I remember that one was because really Carl Hayden was the father of the interstate system. The Hayden-Cartwright Act sort of set up some of the initial formulas back in the '30s, which later went into the interstate highway system.

Well, to answer your question, I just think he was one hell of a majority leader. Some of the tragedy came—well, Bobby hadn't gotten into trouble at that time, if we're still talking about the '50s. But they started some of the civil rights legislation back in the '50s. Of course, you had *Brown vs. the Board of Education* come down, and "all deliberate speed" came the following year by the court. So even then he was starting laying the groundwork. We did pass a civil rights act. . . .

RITCHIE: In 1957.

ELSON: '57 was it? You've got to give him a great deal of credit for moving that along, particularly when the southern senators were still very, very powerful. For

instance, I still believe that if Dick Russell hadn't been from Georgia he'd have been president of the United States—in any other time, or now. But to take on the [James] Eastland's and some of those that you had around here, you didn't have too much room to maneuver politically with the way the feelings were running at that time. I think it was sort of miraculous that they even moved that early on something like the civil rights bill. You've got to give Lyndon lots of credit for sensing the mood, knowing how far he could go in getting compromises and at least making some progress without losing the battle, which I used to criticize a lot of the so-called liberal Democratic senators around who'd rather lose the fight and go down on principle than make a half-step or take a little gain. I can give a number of senators along that line who seemed that they would rather lose than make a little progress.

RITCHIE: Did you have anybody particularly in mind?

ELSON: Oh, I was thinking of [Paul] Douglas, and even [Hubert] Humphrey, though they certainly supported what was enacted and helped get it enacted. But on other occasions they liked to make the issue and fail. Lyndon knew that art of compromising and what he had to work with, and what he could get done. He had a great sense for this body. And of course, I think Bobby Baker who was his assistant at that time had that same feeling for the body and was really very helpful to Lyndon in moving legislation on the floor. So all in all during that period I'd give him exceptionally high marks, seeing it from a staff position and working with people around him, and watching him operate. When we get into the '60s and my own personal experiences with him—I think I told you the story before, do we have that one tape? Yeah, we do.

RITCHIE: About the dinner in Arizona?

ELSON: Yeah, about the dinner for Carl Hayden and all that. He came out and campaigned for me too in '64, when I was running against Paul Fannin, who was then a three-term Republican governor of Arizona. He came in on a Sunday to go to church with me. Well, I didn't belong to any particular church out there at that time. [laughs] I remember he was flying from Cleveland or somewhere, and called from the airplane. I guess it was Moyers on the line. He said, "The President wants to come, but he wants to go to church with you on Sunday morning." I said, "Jesus, Sunday's a lousy day to

be campaigning. That's no time to be campaigning." He said, "Well, don't you want him to come." I said, "Well, Christ, if it's the eighth day or whatever, yeah, sure." But as a result of his coming out on Sunday, Paul Fannin got as much exposure as I did, because as governor he sort of greeted him and we both—well, I rode in the car with him, but Fannin was also there, and we all went to church together. It was just—ah, you know, ridiculous. [laughs] But he was quite a man.

Of course, he too liked the ladies. In fact, after Kennedy was elected and Johnson became vice president, we had a hell of a time. Lyndon wouldn't give up his space up here that he had when he was majority leader. Poor Mike Mansfield. Johnson gave up some of it, but he kept an awful lot of it. Down in the terraces he had seven or eight rooms down there. He thought he was still running the Senate, and I felt sorry for poor old Mike Mansfield as a result, because he still had a whole bunch of Johnson's people around here. After President Kennedy was assassinated, Carl Hayden as president pro tem, after [John] McCormack, was in line of succession. Well, we inherited not only the entire payroll that the vice president had, but all of Johnson's people and all the offices. I got the blame for kicking all of them off the payroll eventually, because he thought he was going to keep the payroll and the president's too, and everything else. We finally forced a change, but for a long time we had a lot of people who were down at the White House on that payroll.

I then took over all their space, too, for the senator. We were going to keep that supposedly for the next vice president, whoever that was going to be after the '64 election. I remember we had inherited this beautiful seven-room suite of offices overlooking the Mall, over in the terrace in the Capitol. I kept for myself the room, I think it was ST-15, that Johnson had fixed up, with a couch that opened into a bed, a bar, and all the other stuff. I kept that for my room, because . . . I thought if it's good enough for him it's certainly good enough for me! [laughs]

When we included his space plus all the space that Carl Hayden had hidden around—then I had a lot of people on the vice president's payroll for that eighteen-month period, from November '63 until January '65—I think we had forty rooms. I couldn't even get around to them in one day to see what was going on. I had a personal hideaway in the Old Senate Office Building, one over next to the Judiciary Committee

in what was then the New Senate Office Building, which is now the Dirksen Building, and then I kept this one in the Capitol for myself, and we used the others. But that didn't make me too popular with them when I kept saying, "Get off the payroll." Like we had Johnson's cook, what was her name? [Zephyr Wright] The black lady and her husband. Both of them were nice people, but we kept them on the payroll for a long time. Typical of Lyndon Johnson, he thought he'd just keep that payroll too! [laughs] It didn't go on for that long, but longer than it probably should have. But that was a sad period in American history. Anyhow, where were we?

RITCHIE: What would you say were Hayden's relations with Johnson?

ELSON: Oh, very good.

RITCHIE: Close?

ELSON: Yeah, close. Interesting thing about it, I sort of noticed this about a lot of effective members of the Senate, Carl Hayden really did remind me of Kipling's "If," because I don't think he let anyone get really that close to him. He was friends with Lyndon Johnson, with Dick Russell, with [John] Stennis, with Rayburn, all of them, but only up to a point. I don't know whether it was never letting yourself get vulnerable, or showing any weakness, or what it was. But a lot of them were that way, that were not only effective but had a longer sense of history, and a sense of the Senate and tradition. I found that true of a lot of them.

But their relationship I would say was very close. I know the senator thought Lyndon was one hell of a leader of all the leaders that he had seen—and he had certainly been around long enough to see a lot of them.

RITCHIE: He'd been in the Senate for twenty years before Johnson even arrived.

ELSON: Yeah, he came over in March of '27. And I think he liked Lyndon. First of all, he was a Texan from the West. They had a lot in common that way. And Lyndon was also fighting some of the same battles that Carl Hayden fought over the years developing Arizona from a territory into a state, with the utilities versus the public utilities and things like that, schools, and roads, and all those things for his

district in Texas. So I think there was a lot of identification and understanding and appreciation for each other. I feel very certain from everything that I saw that Lyndon also respected Carl Hayden the same way, and knew that—there was something about Carl Hayden, he was totally fearless. No one frightened him. He didn't mind picking up the phone and calling the president. In those days they had telephone operators, and you'd say, "Get me so and so." He talked to anyone at anytime. So from that standpoint I think that there was a great deal of respect for each other and a real warmth. And of course, Carl Hayden was very fond of Sam Rayburn because he met Sam back in 1913 when Rayburn came to the House of Representatives. They became friends then and all through.

Carl Hayden in those days was really behind the scenes—he was president pro tem for a long time—with anything involving the Capitol, the buildings, the grounds, and all the things that went on. The comity between the two houses, it was normally between Carl Hayden and Sam Rayburn. They sort of worked that out. I used to like to tell the story about how here were two men who were hardly sick a day in their whole lives, until the very end of their careers, and they were the ones who kept the Capitol physician, who mainly was an aspirin dispenser for the most part. This goes back to the '40s and '50s, this was Admiral [George] Calver. I used to marvel because I swear the only reason that office at that time ran well was because Calver was at least smart enough to get some very, very bright young naval officers who were doing their term in the military as his assistants over there. A doctor here in town was there at one time, Warren Brill, who is still around; Dr. Weintraub, who is a cardiologist; and then a world-famous doctor who I grew up with, actually, in Arizona, and one of my closest friends, a guy by the name of Roman DeSanctis, he was over there as assistant Capitol physician, doing his term in the navy.

I used to say, Calver probably killed more members than he saved. The only reason that he stayed there was that the guy really understood power and politics, and he kissed both Rayburn's and Hayden's [expletive]. And Calver used to go over there and see Mrs. Hayden after she had had her stroke in the late '40s, and sort of hold her hand. Oh, he was fabulous at that sort of thing. But Rayburn and Hayden pretty much ran those sort of things, with the Architect of the Capitol. On matters like extending the East Front, the West Front, and all that, that was more Hayden and Rayburn than the leadership particularly.

But, to answer your question, I think there was a genuine liking of each other, and I know the senator liked and supported for the most part the way Johnson ran the Senate. He also supported him on practically every piece of social legislation that was ever enacted into law while he was majority leader, and in his way helped bring whatever support he could.

RITCHIE: Was Johnson generally deferential towards Hayden?

ELSON: I would say so. He had respect for his elders, and I think he probably put him in that category. Not in the same relationship as Sam Rayburn, because they were almost like father-son in many ways, but certainly in the great respect that everyone held Carl Hayden in those days and all through his career. He knew how able he was, and how honest he was. I never saw Johnson ever try to directly approach the senator on anything that would be questionable. But again, Hayden was such a closed man, had such a tight mouth, I mean tight in revealing anything. And of course you've got to remember, back in those days, all during the 1950s' that say for instance on the CIA watchdog committee, there was only the chairman and ranking minority members of the Appropriations and Armed Services Committees, there were about six or seven members on the watchdog committee, so Carl Hayden of course was a member with the leadership. So there were all those sort of meetings going on, and they were very close in knowing what the hell was going on, not only in the country but internationally. For the most part, there was some bipartisan foreign policy, and unless there was a real question the leadership pretty much supported Eisenhower on the things that he wanted to do. But I would say, yeah, he was a little deferential to him.

RITCHIE: People always talk about the "Johnson treatment," and I always get the sense that that was reserved for senators who weren't powerful chairmen of committees.

ELSON: Well, I think that's probably true, because as I mentioned earlier, he always had the power. Like Denny Chavez, for instance, who was head of the Armed Services Committee, I think, at that time, or [Harry] Byrd, for instance, on Finance. Though sometimes Byrd thought that the leadership were spendthrifts, if he had his way he wouldn't have spent money on anything. But at the same time the chairmen of the committees, like Russell and Stennis and Kerr, he knew for the most part that

he would always have their support. When you had the committee chairmen behind you, you had a lot to work with, and he knew how to use that. So his "treatment" for the most part would fall on the younger members and those that he had to persuade. But God, he could really lay it on! He could twist. I don't know how he kept it all in his head, so much of knowing who their supporters were, who their financial people were, what the issues were, how they got there, but he did.

He spent so much time at it. On both sides of the aisles he could give the treatment, it wasn't just the Democratic side. He'd work his magic on some Republicans, and he sort of knew how to get certain Republicans' support. Again, back in the mid-50's the majority until that big class change in 1959, he didn't have that much to work with in just the Democrats, and a lot of those he couldn't rely on say on civil rights, so he had to work coalitions with the Republicans. And he managed to do it, because he just studied everyone and then he would use whatever he thought it took to persuade that person. It was not unusual for him to call one of their supporters back home, or their financial people, or lobbies downtown and say, "You'd better get so and so in shape," "get him on the right track," "get him on board." He could threaten retaliation, he used every trick that there was, and he was a master at it. And he knew the system of government so well, where to go, how to get things done. He was always trying to place people in positions too, move them on where he could call on them later, which was a real good trait to have, and not all of them have done that as well as he did.

RITCHIE: One of the nice things you can do for somebody is get them an appropriation for something that they want. I assume he must have come to Hayden as chairman of the Appropriations Committee. . . .

ELSON: Oh, no question about it, on many, many occasions. And of course the great thing about Carl Hayden, he had a very broad view, particularly for the West, on hydropower and reclamation and all those things. It wasn't a selfish interest just limited to Arizona, but the entire West. He believed in building the country in multiple uses of its resources, and handling the growth. Gee, I could tell you about some of the projects with Lyndon. The senator only in his later days when we were fighting over the Central Arizona Project, he would always accommodate him, particularly if it was something that needed resources to build. Hayden did it in such a way that he was

always laying the foundations in an appropriations bill for having good hearings, laying the record, getting the bureau to make the studies, or whatever the agency was. And Lyndon knew how to ask properly. He looked after Texas, of course, really well, for instance in getting the space center for down there in Houston, and getting—what was it, the big fight we had with General Dynamics on TFX. Lyndon, on things like that, he'd lobby the Defense Department and use some things I could never get Carl Hayden to do to look out for the interests of Arizona. He just didn't think they were proper.

RITCHIE: What kind of things?

ELSON: Well, I meant Johnson threatened to cut off, or made trades on legislation, or patronage, or all sorts of maneuvers to convince them. And he used his position very well as leader to help the state of Texas and get things done. He was good at bringing the heat on lobbyists, or people that had other interests or other legislative interest, suggesting that something may not happen, it may be buried in file thirteen if they didn't help. He was good at working with administrative bureaucrats—he could frighten the hell out of them. I could never get Carl Hayden to do that, though he wasn't fearful particularly of talking to anyone. I just couldn't get him to use the type of threats that Johnson was certainly capable of using, and accomplishing some things.

I remember when they set up the space committee, Aeronautics and Space Committee, back in '57 or '58. My memory's not too bad. I tried to get Carl Hayden to go on the space committee, mainly because here was Arizona in between southern California and Texas, where this new industry was developing. I said, "Senator, just get on the committee and I'll guarantee you Arizona gets a lot of subcontracts and work in the aerospace committee." He said, "I don't know anything about aerospace and I'm not going to get on there." I said, "Well, we could really do a lot of things, and you wouldn't have to do any work—I'll do it." But I couldn't convince him to go on the committee, and of course Johnson became chairman of that.

RITCHIE: While he was majority leader.

ELSON: Yeah, while he was majority leader [laughs], which was a little unusual to say the least. And he used that position, of course. But I remember at that time

Carl Hayden told me while I was begging him to go on that committee, and with his seniority and everything else he could have very easily if he had wanted it, he said, "Look, Roy, I'm chairman of the Appropriations Committee, and sooner or later everything gets down to money. Secondly, I'm on the Rules Committee and there isn't a senator or a committee that doesn't have to come before the Rules Committee to get their expenditures approved, space locations, all those little things. Third, you should know, since you're the clerk, that I'm also chairman of the Democratic Patronage Committee. Now, between patronage, space, resolution control, and money, why do I need to be on the Aerospace Committee?" And I didn't have much of an argument to counter that. Then he said, "No, I don't think I'll go on it." But as an aside he said, "But you still work at getting Arizona its fair share." I said, "Thanks."

So that's what I sort of meant about Lyndon, as majority leader and then taking over that new committee. Of course, at that time you remember, the Democrats made that change of giving major committee assignments to the new members, where the Republicans were still—in fact it took them a couple of Congresses to catch up in that respect—because their junior members still had to serve their terms in limbo. At the same time, that was a typical Johnson practical maneuver, particularly with that new group that came in.

RITCHIE: You mentioned patronage again. Did you have any dealings with Johnson when you were clerk of the Democratic Patronage Committee? How did he use that committee?

ELSON: Well, he didn't.

RITCHIE: He didn't?

ELSON: I mean, that wasn't his.

RITCHIE: That was Hayden's.

ELSON: That was Hayden's. That was controlled—well, actually, between the Secretary of the Senate's office and the Sergeant at Arms and I was the clerk, but Hayden really controlled that. We gave something to every senator, and Johnson had

certainly his own patronage as majority leader and through his committees, and he was good at building little empires and bringing people in. But he really had no control, in fact, I don't think that the leader really got control of the Patronage Committee until Carl Hayden retired and left in '69, when we turned over the patronage books to Mike Mansfield. Then things changed. Johnson got more than his fair share, I would say, of patronage from us, but he had no control over that whatsoever. Of course, the Sergeant at Arms was a big Lyndon man, that was Joe Duke at the time, and Skeeter Johnston was close to him, so Lyndon got a lot more than most members. I'm sure that they bypassed me a number of times in temporary assignments or these sort of things. Of course, having the Secretary of the Majority under him, that's sort of patronage.

When I'm talking about patronage I'm talking about those positions which were the mail carriers and the elevator operators, police privates. But as I said, from the time I took over the patronage books from Darrell St. Claire, and I think Darrell has confirmed this, the Secretary's office we pretty much started moving out of patronage, and by the 1960's most all of that was out of the patronage system and turned into professional staff. So Lyndon really didn't have it, but he certainly found a way to use committees, the Policy Committee and others, to take care of his needs and his staff arrangements. I don't think he missed a trick in that book. I don't think we ever had any quarrel with him over the way we handled the rest of the patronage thing.

I don't think he was ever satisfied, there were never enough people that should have been working for him, and he wanted them working for him twenty-four hours a day. He expected them to work as hard as he did. For some, it was an impossible task. I felt so sorry for poor Walter. I saw him down at the White House just before that thing broke, and Walter had become a total nervous wreck from working so many long hours. I remember those yellow pads and sheets and sheets of notes. He was supposed to do everything. What a gentleman, though, what a polite and good man. I don't see why he didn't break sooner than he did from all the pressures that Lyndon put on him, and I don't know—it seemed like, and this was also true of Carl Hayden, the more you did, the more they expected of you. And they wouldn't necessarily pat you on the head when you needed it. They just expected it. If you did a good job, well you're supposed to have done a good job. I sometimes wonder if they ever thought about it. They were, I think, alike that way, Carl Hayden and Lyndon, because I know

for the longest time with Carl Hayden you were just expected to do good work. He'd let you know if you weren't, but very rarely did he commend you on something that he thought you might have done particularly well.

For Lyndon, I don't think anything but a total commitment, total loyalty would do. Though he could be very kind, yet he could be so mean too. I sometimes wonder if he thought anyone had a family life. I don't know where he thought people were supposed to get together to produce these kids and make a marriage, feed them, and do all that. I'm still impressed today with the blind loyalty of some of his former staff people. They're really making a god out of him. But of course, I think old George Reedy, his book about the presidency sort of sums up what we've done to the presidency of the United States, we've made a king out of the office. We have to have our royalty now. But Lyndon Johnson knew how to use power, loved power, and I think for the most part his intentions and the use of that power were good, and good for the country.

RITCHIE: Do you think it was the fact that he knew how to use power that attracted other people to him? That they saw him as a conduit to power?

ELSON: Oh, sure. In fact, that's what politics is all about. That's why you get interested in it. It amazed me when I first came back here, and all during this time that you're talking about, for instance we talked about Roy Cohn, and how I thought I was dumber than hell when I found out that people were making exceptionally good notes and I thought my memory wasn't too good, but I found that politics, and when you're around powerful people, and the Senate being the institution that it is with its tradition, mystique and everything else, I found that it's attracted some of the brightest, ablest people you'll ever meet, and it's also attracted the shittiest, I mean some really bad people. Power does that.

It's just like with women. Kennedy was known as a womanizer, certainly Lyndon was, and George Smathers, Christ, they couldn't keep their eyes off any good looking thing that was up in the gallery. But women are attracted to it, outside the system, but even those in it. It's almost hypnotic what power does to people. So, yeah, that's what politics is all about: power and the use of it. And I'm sure the continued use of it in accomplishing things, meeting your goals, or getting something through, that's how they get their kicks. It's almost an orgasmic sort of thing. That's what makes it

difficult for people to leave it, and why a lot of them never return home, and why ex-members stay in town, because they miss that thrill and excitement of being part of the action. And when you think that there's only a hundred of them here at a time—and of course some are more equal than others, an Orwellian statement, but it's got to be heady to them and to anyone around them.

I know it had that effect on me, but as I say it was unusual the way I came back, because most members did not select their staff members the way Carl Hayden did, by going to the university. I wasn't in his campaigns, or didn't have a wealthy relative or someone like that. I was selected after being interviewed and being recommended. That was a little unusual because most everyone else had either been attracted to it, or had been part of a political machine, or had come up through the system. But I know once I got here I recognized real quickly what power was all about, and who had it, and who could use it, and who was very good at it. It's just hypnotic, and it's fun, exciting. To know that you're involved with some of the big events that are making history, and the fights that go on to bring about our system of government, it's really a wonderful experience. It's hard to get it out of your system.

RITCHIE: Who had the power in the '50s when you were there. Who would you say were the real power centers in the Senate?

ELSON: Well, when I first came McFarland had already been defeated. Certainly there was Russell, Bob Kerr, Stennis—I'm thinking about Democrats right now, then I'll go to Republicans—of course Lyndon, Magnuson, Jackson, what a one-two punch that was. They were something, they were good. Let's see [John] Pastore in his way. Gee, I'd have to look at the list to refresh my memory, but some of those stand out. Of course, there was such a big turnover in the late '50s, so I'm thinking of pre-'58 and then afterwards.

RITCHIE: Some of those people you mentioned were chairmen, and some weren't. I mean, Jackson hadn't become a chairman yet, Kerr hadn't become a chairman yet. Was it more their personalities?

ELSON: Yeah, their personalities, the issues they selected, and the way they played the game. As I say, what impressed me in those days particularly was if a

member gave his word to someone, that was it. You didn't have to get it in writing, or trap him into embarrassment or anything, if they made a commitment to you on a legislative matter or something like that, they would honor it. So you had this closeness that way and you got respect that way. As a result, they build up over a period of time the respect of their peers, and there was a lot of back-scratching that went on, of course. And then some although they might not have been a committee chairman they might have been a subcommittee chairman and the issues just so happened to come about at that time. Then of course you've got to include in there Eastland, who was always a power in the South. I'll have to refresh my memory.

RITCHIE: What about Clinton Anderson?

ELSON: Oh, yeah, Clinton Anderson for lots of different reasons was respected. He could be a [expletive], though, he was almost as bad as Lyndon.

RITCHIE: In what way?

ELSON: Oh, just that he could be very petty. Of course, he made much of his reputation over the [Lewis] Strauss nomination as anything, that was what, '56?

RITCHIE: 1959.

ELSON: Was it that late? He really started that and talked it long enough until they got enough members to reject him. Of course, he used his position well on the Atomic Energy and all that. But I know Clinton Anderson was a power. Of course, he had already been Secretary of Agriculture. You realize that he was born in South Dakota and went out to die in New Mexico, just like my mother was sent to Arizona. They went out there and got well and moved on from there. But yeah, he was very powerful. He was on the leading edge on a lot of issues, but that Strauss thing really made him a force to be reckoned with. He also was in on the early Medicare legislation and took the lead on a lot of that, even when it was defeated the first time. When did we pass that, '58 or '59.

RITCHIE: No, later.

ELSON: That would be '62, you're right. But there had been the fight all along. And then he was on the Interior Committee. Very definitely I'd put Clint Anderson up there.

RITCHIE: You haven't mentioned any Republicans. I was wondering what your impression was of Styles Bridges who was ranking on Appropriations?

ELSON: And he had also been chairman and president pro tem, not that that matters. The Republicans I think feared him a lot because he ran a tight ship. He treated all Republican patronage like it was his own personal patronage. He didn't give it out like Carl Hayden did, everyone got assigned something. When he granted it, it was his, and he dispensed it at his whim. He either withheld or gave to keep members in line. He was powerful man, but I wouldn't have trusted the [expletive] as far as you could throw him left handed. I knew a lot of his people, he had some good staff members. Bridges reminded you a little bit of Lyndon, except he wasn't as persuasive and he wasn't as good at doing it. He could be mean.

RITCHIE: He was more of a backroom man than out front.

ELSON: Yeah, he wasn't very particularly articulate, but he was behind the scenes. He was a tough customer. I don't know that members quite trusted him the way they should have for the position he was in.

RITCHIE: What were his relations with Hayden?

ELSON: Quite good. We got along famously, and our staffs did too. His AA, what the hell was his name—got killed in an airplane crash, he was down at the Interstate Commerce Commission, on that Piedmont crash in New York. His staff and our staff, even on the Appropriations Committee, got along pretty well. Our personal staffs did, I know that. Oh, like on Inaugural Committee activities, all sorts of things, we got along quite well. But you just sort of had the feeling about Styles Bridges that he might be a little crooked. That's not kind, but you just had the feeling that he might be willing to take something under the table, or something like that. You just had that feeling about him.

I blame a number of things on him. For instance, the [Lester] Hunt suicide. He and Knowland, I think, they were threatening to expose Hunt's son as a homosexual, to force him out of the race. Finally he announced he wasn't going to run again, but he still blew his brains out. As I remember the time period, you sort of knew what was going on behind the scenes, and later some of it was confirmed. You could never really put your finger on it, but I think that the pressures that were put on him, particularly by those two gentlemen, caused him to break.

RITCHIE: Did you say that Mike Manatos told you that story?

ELSON: Mike told me, and then some other people were around at the time. Mike was here and then he came back with [Joseph] O'Mahoney. Mike had been with O'Mahoney when he was here the first time, and then when he came back to take Hunt's seat, Mike came back with him then. I'm trying to think who else told me some of the background on that. Oh, Wiggins, Chet Wiggins was Bridge's administrative assistant. I think Chet one drunken—I mean one day when we had a few drinks—made some comments that sort of confirmed the politics that were involved at that time. I think it was Chet, anyhow, Chet was the one who got killed in the airplane crash. Bridges died after Chet got an appointment down at the ICC, but he was friend of the office, and Tom Shannon who was with Bridges as a staff member, and was on the Judiciary Committee too, so we knew a lot of his people. Off the top of my head, that's my reaction to Styles Bridges.

RITCHIE: The newspapers used to write about the "Inner Club" of the Senate in the '50s. Was that a reasonable description of the way the Senate operated?

ELSON: I think there was an "Inner Club." I guess that's what I'm talking about when I said that there was this circle that Lyndon knew he could rely on, and some on the Republican side. Some because of their personalities and friendships, and others because of their position, but there was a feeling, nothing formal of course about it, but there was this sort of thing that ran the Senate, and ran it pretty damn well, I thought, made things get done.

RITCHIE: You hear from administration people later on, in the Nixon administration and afterwards: "In the old days you could call up one or two people on Capitol Hill and get things done." Was that really the way things worked?

ELSON: I think that was quite true. And I know people have told me, have said how powerful I was, and I really didn't realize it. They'd call from the administration and they'd want something done, and unless there was some big objection, yeah, and you tell the senator and it would be done. You didn't have to check with nine thousand different places. I think very definitely that's changed. There were people that you could go to, say it was a defense matter, if it was funds or a project, and if you checked it with the senior members of the Armed Services Committee, the chairman, or the subcommittee chairman, if it was military construction or appropriation, Christ you only had to talk to less than a half dozen people, and most of them for the most part were staff people that you would call. Then they'd either get it, or if there was a problem you'd get the members together and the secretary or whatever, and things went pretty fast.

A lot of it you didn't need a lot of paperwork and memoranda and all this, so much of it you could rely on the verbal responses. Then you'd put through the paperwork and draft the legislation and whatever was needed, but you didn't get twenty memoranda justifying what you were trying to do. So, yes, there's no doubt in my mind. That's all changed, where you could pretty much check with the chairman and the ranking member and move things along pretty well. Now, if it was real controversial, no. Then you had to put together your coalition and you could still have your legislative fights, but you didn't have these Sunshine laws where you had to do so much out in the open. You could still maneuver behind the scenes and get some things done without having to get into a lot of the battles. It seems like today they're out there fighting the wrong wars. I mean, it's over inconsequential matters that are part of a piece of legislation, which you would never have gotten into if it had been sent out there and you were concentrating on what the real problem is. So, yeah, that definitely has changed. It's true that you could do that in the '50s and '60s.

RITCHIE: One thing I get a sense from looking at the way Johnson operated was that he moved a lot of the action off of the Senate floor into the cloakrooms, into the committee rooms. He didn't want the fight to be fought out in public.

ELSON: Exactly. No, he was very good at that, and of course he could do that a lot easier in the '50s, again until that new class came in which made it more difficult. But that period when

he was minority leader and then became majority leader and up through the early '60s you could still do that. No, in fact, probably only when you really didn't have the votes, or when you needed to make a record did you ever want to get into a fight on the floor. So much of it was done in the cloakroom or in committee or behind the scenes. From the standpoint of moving things, I know so many times you just wouldn't get anything to the floor, it wouldn't get cleared by the Policy Committee or you wouldn't get there because you didn't want to have a big fight there when you weren't sure of the votes. But this is where he was a master at counting, and had a lot help from Bobby Baker, who was very good.

RITCHIE: Tell me about Bobby Baker. He's another fascinating person, but not one I have a clear grasp of.

ELSON: Well, I think we ought to take that up the next time. This is probably a good place to stop.

RITCHIE: All right.

ELSON: I certainly have strong impressions, and I still consider Bobby a friend, but I certainly didn't condone some of the things that he did while he was Secretary of the Majority. But I'll tell you about that when we get to it.

RITCHIE: Okay. Thank you.

End of Interview #3