

Interview with Rep. Clarence J. Brown (R-OH), Republican Committee on Committees

March 1963

“We don’t want anybody who will just spend and spend and spend. We ask ourselves, will he be—I don’t want to say conservative—but will he be as thrifty with other people’s money as he is with his own money? Is he a sound business man? If this were his money, would he invest in this bank or in this program? Don’t you see what I mean? We can’t spend more than we take in,” etc., etc.

“The leadership—and I’m in the leadership, I and three or four others—begins to talk about this right after election. We don’t just go by the fact that he’s been elected. We go back in his community, and we ask around. Is he able? What’s his background? Has he got the stuff to stand up under pressure? Or can he be gotten to by other interests? We go into that pretty thoroughly. We make up a sheet on each man—his biography, his votes in the election, the recommendations he has from here and at home.”

The executive committee of the Republican Committee on Committees consists of the large states plus one from the freshman delegation and one from the small states—these two are added, “so they won’t say they’ve been shut out.”

“Then we report back to the full committee. Now they could make a fuss there and change this and change that, but I can’t remember when that has happened. That’s because we’ve done a pretty good job, if I do say so. Then that committee reports back to the [Republican] conference. They could change the result there, too, and claim that this man or that man had been treated badly. But no changes have been made there for years.”

“We want people of maturity. Sometimes we give it to a person who has been standing in line for some time. Bill Minshall [R-OH] is a good case. He had been serving on the ---- committee and on government operations, where he had been getting into some of the defense aspects. I thought he was about ripe—he had had about four terms of experience. I thought he was ready. So I called him into my office one day, and I said to him, ‘Bill, I know you, and I knew your father before you. I know what stock you are made of. I know your background, your experience, and your character. I think you are ready to go on the Appropriations Committee.’ I knew he was unhappy because he felt he wasn’t getting anyplace. I said to him, ‘I have only one question about you. God damn it, if I put you on that committee, will you work? Will you go in there and word hard? Will you start early in the morning and burn the midnight oil if necessary?’ I said, ‘I’ll talk to George Mahon [D-TX]—he’s a good friend of mine and a pretty able fellow, he lives in the same apartment building as I do—and I’ll get you on his defense subcommittee. And I’ll ask him to keep an eye on you and bring you along slowly even though you are of the opposite party.’ Well, he’s on that subcommittee now. He’s out in that foreign car of his jumping the puddles at seven o’clock every morning, and he’s working at it all the time until he gets that bill of his out.”

Regarding Rep. Louis Wyman (R-NH)—he stressed his background. Lawyer, experience with Sen. Styles Bridges (R-NH), colonel in the reserves, state attorney general, “a middle-aged man”—“he was a freshman, but he wasn’t really a freshman in terms of experience. If we have to pick a freshman we pick someone who has served in the state legislature or who has had experience like that.”

Regarding a safe district: “We made up a chart on his vote margin in past elections. If we put a man in from a close district, his committee assignments could defeat him in the next election. On Appropriations, he would have to say no to all those requests. Maybe he couldn’t stand up. We need someone who can do what he thinks best, who has the backing and whose district will say, ‘we’re with you no matter what you do up there.’” We also mentioned that this was a requirement for the Rules Committee, namely himself. And he also noted that one could not put a man on the Education and Labor Committee who came from a big labor district.

Regarding Rep. William Henry Harrison (R-WY), he stressed his ancestry and said, “He was a natural.” Regarding Rep. Ben Reifel (R-SD), he said that he knows the west, he knows the lands, and that’s important—he took out his booklet including the biography of each man, his background, the vote margin in his elections, notations on each man who recommended him from his state and from Washington.

He said that we don’t usually stack committees, but “this year we had to get strong men on the Banking and Currency Committee. We had a weak committee. The chairman on the other side is a little batty and we’re in for some hard fights this year.” “So I asked Bob Taft [R-OH] if he would go on that committee.” Then he asked Taft if he would do “double duty” on Education and Labor. Taft said he would, that his father took strong stands and he would too, etc.