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LLOYD BENTSEN ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW I

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By LLOYD BENTSEN

to the

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ACCESSION NUMBER 76-11

INTERVIEW I

DATE: JUNE 18, 1975

INTERVIEWEE: SENATOR LLOYD BENTSEN (Tape 1 of 1)

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Senator Bentsen's office in Washington, D.C.

G: You were elected to the House of Representatives in 1948, I believe, against the Parr machine, is that correct?

B: Yes, I was elected against the Parr machine or organization up and down the Rio Grande. I guess I was the first member of Congress from that district to have been elected over the opposition of all of the organization.

G: And you became close to Sam Rayburn, the Speaker at that time, is that correct?

B: Yes. The Speaker always liked to have one or two young men around him, and I qualified in those days, along with Homer Thornberry, who was also quite close to him. We would often meet down in the little "Board of Education" room that was named by [Vice President John Nance] Garner actually, I believe, to meet after the day's session and talk about some of the issues that were before the Congress, or for the swapping of stories, a visiting period, a socializing period. Often Charlie Halleck would come over, and Wright Patman. Lyndon Johnson would come over from the Senate.

G: Were many decisions made there?

B: I don't recall a great many major decisions that were made down there. It was more of a socializing time than anything else. We would often go from there to go out to have dinner at Hall's or one of the other restaurants at that time.

G: Was the Rayburn-Johnson relationship at that time one of mentor to protege, or did they treat each other as equals?

B: They were very much equals. Lyndon Johnson would speak in deferential tones to him, but there was no question but what Johnson was very much a power in his own right, very much so. But he showed respect to Rayburn, and Rayburn expected it. It was a matter of courtesy more than anything else, I think, and the great affection that he had for Rayburn. Rayburn always felt that he was holding up the position of the House as against the Senate insofar as its power and its prestige and its status, wanting to impress that on Lyndon Johnson and any other senator who happened to wander by.

- G: When did you first feel that Lyndon Johnson had decided that you were someone he wanted to support or work with, an ally more or less? Was it before your election in '48 or afterward?
- B: It was after the election in '48. He used to have B. A. and me over to his home on Sundays a lot. I can recall that he used to always want to listen to Drew Pearson. Drew Pearson carried a lot of influence in Washington at that time. [Johnson] would have a small group over, it seemed to me almost every Sunday. Many Sundays if we were in town we went by. It was kind of an open invitation almost to come by. We got to be good friends. Sometimes we would take weekend trips together, go down to the Greenbriar with our wives and he would have other couples along. Or we would make trips together, sometimes in Texas. I became a friend of his, a good friend, and he was always very kind in his attention to me and to my family, considerate of us.
- G: You supported Lyndon Johnson in 1956 over Allan Shivers when they had the convention fight.
- B: Yes, I did.
- G: Do you have any recollections on that?
- B: Yes, I have some recollections on that. I recall that I went up to Austin to help set up the office for Lyndon Johnson, along with others who also participated. At that time the story was that Allan Shivers was going to support the Republican nominee. I felt that we should keep the delegation committed to whomsoever the Democratic nominee was going to be. I urged Johnson to lead the forces to keep the delegation Democratic in supporting the Democratic nominee. I recall that Johnson really didn't want to get into that fight. He avoided it in any way he could. I recall working very hard trying to get people to support his position, calling around the state and calling for Johnson in Washington to come down and help. I also recall that there was a breakfast meeting--I think it was over at Jim Nash's--where they tried to work out the differences between Shivers and Johnson and thought that they were worked out, if I remember correctly.
- G: Were you there at that meeting?
- B: No, I wasn't at that breakfast. Then Johnson flew back to Washington. I don't know what made it fall apart, but it was very soon thereafter that Shivers started again with his attack on Johnson. I remember calling, and Johnson finally wouldn't answer the phone and didn't want to come down and get in a fight. I recall calling Sam Rayburn and saying, "If he won't come down and defend himself, there is no sense my staying here and trying to keep this delegation within the Democratic Party at the general election. I'm going to go home, and some others around here are, too." I told that to Sam Rayburn, and Sam Rayburn obviously talked to Lyndon Johnson. And Lyndon Johnson the next day was on a plane and came down. I recall he came in and wanted to know what had been done, and we were showing him on the map, several of us who were working there, what we thought had been done in the way of organization. I remember he said, "Well, what do you have in El Paso?" I said, "We haven't been able to get anything done yet in El Paso."

I recall that he exploded in anger and wanted to know what in the world we had been doing down there. I told him that I wasn't on any salary of his and wasn't an employee of his. I was a businessman that had come up to volunteer my services, and I told him what he could do with it. I was mad and left the room, told him to go to hell. I remember he followed me out, threw his arms around me, and in about five minutes had soft-soaped me into coming back in. He was a very persuasive fellow, and within five minutes I was back working just as hard as I had before. He had a great ability to persuade. I recall we used to say that if you were a friend of Lyndon Johnson's you had to have your tailor strengthen the lapels on your coat, because he would really get up and grab hold as he tried to persuade you. He wanted it face to face, and he wanted it right in your face.

G: Was it his idea to have your wife selected as a committeewoman?

B: I don't know whose idea it was. The telephone call came from John Connally, who said that the Senator wanted that. I assume that that's where it originated, that Senator Johnson wanted my wife to be the Democratic National committeewoman. I recall telling John Connally that my wife had no such aspirations, had never given it any consideration, nor had I, and let us think it over and we would call back. In a little while, we did. He assured me that time was of the essence; we had to call back. I called back, and I said, "If there is any kind of contest, she's not interested at all. She's not interested in getting in any fight. That's not her nature. If this is something that's been agreed on by all the elements of the party, that's fine. Otherwise, she wants no part of it." I remember being assured that it was all agreed and there would be no fight over it, that all the diverse elements of the party had agreed to it. Which obviously was not the case when we got there. Or at least if there was an agreement, it certainly came unglued..

G: Did LBJ seem genuinely surprised when the liberals . . .

B: Oh, yes. Oh yes, I think he was totally sincere when he transmitted that message. I think he was shocked and surprised that what he apparently thought he had in the way of an agreement was not carried out. So it turned into a fight.

G: He really had opposition from both the right and the left in that convention.

B: Apparently. Apparently

G: Senator, don't want to overstay my welcome.

B: No, go ahead. Go ahead

G: In 1960 you were secretary for the Committee for Kennedy and Johnson in Houston, is that correct?

B: I headed finances, as I recall. I was secretary of the committee, but I was also chairman of the Finance Committee for Harris County.

G: Did you work with the candidates at all in that campaign, raising money?

B: No. We raised it all locally. In fact as I recall, we raised as much money in Harris County as they raised in the rest of the state. But we did not see the candidates until the night John Kennedy came to Houston. Unfortunately I was scheduled out of the state at a board meeting of a company and could not be there for it and had to receive word [of it]. I remember President Johnson called my home and talked to members of my family, trying to find out where I was--he was Vice President then. I couldn't be there that evening, unfortunately.

G: I understand that in 1964 he tried to discourage you from running against Ralph Yarborough, is that correct?

B: I never talked to President Johnson on that issue in 1964. A lot of people thought I had, but I did not. I did know from some of his associates that he preferred that I not run, but there were never any threats to me or any pressure exerted. It was a decision I made for a lot of personal reasons, that I didn't run. I had some substantial debts at the time, and I felt it was a very difficult time for me to go into public life and finally decided not to do it. I gave it very serious thought and explored the idea, but the more I looked at it, the more I felt I was not in financial circumstances, with the debts I had at that time, to do it.

G: I have the impression that during his presidency you were more of a personal friend than a political friend. Would that be accurate?

B: I was one who did not in any way try to use my association with him as a friend. In fact, I did not call on him the whole time he was President unless he sent an invitation to me. I never sought a meeting with him the whole time he was President, and yet we had been quite close friends before he became President. I thought that the President had a lot more important things to do than to socialize with me. The only times I saw him were when he would invite me up to some function, and then my wife and I would come. Those were the only times. After he was out of the presidency, then we were together quite a bit again.

G: Did he talk to you much about the presidency or his experience in the White House?

B: I recall the second time that I thought about running for the Senate. You might be interested in that.

G: Yes.

B: That was in 1970, and I talked to President Johnson about it. This was after he was out of the presidency. He said to me, "Well Lloyd, you know I think a great deal of you. But I watch

Senator Yarborough. I still pay attention to politics. Senator Yarborough comes down here every weekend, makes two or three speeches. He has kept his fences mended. You know, he has even sent me commemorative stamps. I guess if he sends me commemorative stamps, he must be sending them to everybody. Lloyd, I just don't believe you can beat Ralph Yarborough." I said, "Well, Mr. President, I can't if I don't try. I've made up my mind I'm going to run, and I just wanted to let you know I was."

G: Did he give you any advice on how to run it?

B: No, he sure didn't. In fact, he stayed out of it, which was appropriate, until after the primary. Then he assisted me in the general election by attending a rally of mine and was very effective at that rally. He did an excellent job.

G: During his retirement, was there anything in his reminiscences or conversations with you that would lead you to either seek the presidency or not seek the presidency?

B: I would say most of them reminiscing would have caused me not to seek the presidency. Yes, I think there was a great sadness that dwelt in him because of the way he was treated toward the end of his tenure of office. [There was] a constant trying to justify his actions in Vietnam and prove what he had done was correct. This was on his mind a great deal. He had a great reverence for the office of the presidency. I think he was disappointed he hadn't been able to achieve a number of the things that he wanted to do. I personally felt it was a tragedy the way he was treated. There were so many good things he did that it's a sad thing that this terrible war is what people choose to remember rather than the contributions he made to our country.

G: Do you recall anything that he said he wished he could have done more in terms of?

B: He always had a great compassion for the poor, a concern to try to help them. In spite of the feelings of a lot of so-called intellectuals, he really did relate to their desires and he was concerned about them, and was despondent he hadn't been able to do more.

G: Well Senator, is there anything else you would like to add to this recollection?

B: Not for the record.

G: Thank you very much.

(End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview.)