

Interview with Rep. Silvio Conte (R-MA)

April 1964

When I asked the question about change he said that there wasn't any, that the philosophy of economy still dominates. "They've got the same philosophy of economy."

"You don't have as good a working relationship between [Appropriations Chairman Clarence] Cannon [D-MO] and [ranking member Ben] Jensen [R-IA] as you did between Cannon and [John] Taber [R-NY, former ranking member]. Taber used to sit ex officio as a member of all subcommittees, but Jensen does not. He thought he was going to be ex officio, and he gave up his seat on the Interior subcommittee. He'd been on that for years, and it was very dear to his heart—being from the west. But he gave it up and gave it to [William Henry] Harrison [R-WY]. When he went to the first meeting of the subcommittee, he found he wasn't ex officio. That really shook him up."

"I think I'm back in the good graces of Mr. Cannon again. That's because of my fight on silver. He's very interested in silver. He came up to me afterward and commended me and said I did a good job. I nearly fell over. It's the first time he's ever spoken to me. I didn't think he knew who I was. I fought him a few years ago and beat him on the floor on the junk mail. I fought it in subcommittee, in the full Committee and lost; and then I roll called it on the floor and beat him. He was very bitter about that."

Regarding his personal situation: "It's gone from bad to worse with [Foreign Operations Subcommittee chairman Otto] Passman [D-LA]. That Passman is a jackass. He does his homework, I'll give him credit for that. But he's a jackass. Take yesterday—[Secretary of State] Dean Rusk was up there testifying. He had to leave that very evening for the Far East on a ticklish security problem. You could see that he was pensive yesterday. He was worried and not full of good humor. But Passman just gave him the same old harangue. He went through all the things he's said before. He lectured and lectured and lectured him. He didn't give him a chance to answer. There were no policy questions asked of him at all. This went on from two to five o'clock. Rusk had to sit there and take it. When it came time for the other members to question, I turned to John Rhodes [R-AZ] and said, 'this is terrible. He's got to go to the Far East. He's got to go back, pick up his papers and talk with the Security Council. We can't keep him here.' Rhodes thought it was a good idea and he suggested that we call Rusk back later. Passman bought it. Rusk practically ran out of the room. It was disgraceful."

It's been a frustrating five years. I've been an outsider looking in the whole time...the only plus is that I've worked with the administration and been able to salvage a few things. But that has only fanned the fire inside the Committee. He (Passman) knows it."

There's an interesting situation coming up on the Treasury and Post Office subcommittee." Subcommittee chairman J. Vaughn Gary (D-VA) is retiring. Passman is next in line, Tom Steed (D-OK) is next and that's all. Instead of filling the Hugh Alexander (D-NC) vacancy with a liberal, Cannon cut off the post and cut the

subcommittee from seven members to five. This is maybe why Cannon cut off so many positions. He would have had to have given them to the new liberals. “Passman wants that chairmanship real bad. He’s fighting like hell for it. He says he’ll give up Foreign Operations—that it’s taking too much out of him anyway, etc. He won’t get it. Cannon has promised it to Tom Steed. But Steed is chairman of the legislative subcommittee. And the next man in line there is [Charles] Joelson [D-NJ]. I’m positive he won’t let Joelson be chairman of the subcommittee. He’ll merge it with some other committee.”

“Jensen is a lightweight. We’ve got some real light wood at the top of our Committee. When they leave, the Republicans will be very, very strong. The best men in the House on the Republican side are on the Appropriations Committee— [Melvin] Laird [R-WI], [Gerald] Ford [R-MI], [Glenard] Lipscomb [R-CA], [Elford] Cederberg [R-MI], [Charles] Jonas [R-NC] —we’ve got a strong middle section, real strong. But the top is light with Jensen and [Walt] Horan [R-WA]. When we get rid of them, the Republicans will be in good shape.”

Would he change his subcommittee? He’s thought about it. He thought about Independent Offices, but then he would be junior to Louis Wyman (R-NH) who is a freshman. He says he’s moved up one place on foreign operations. He speculates that maybe it would be worth it to move to Independent Offices. He says that Jensen and Taber made subcommittee assignments in the same way.