

**Interview with Rep. Silvio Conte (R-MA)**

May 29, 1959

General remarks—young, critical, cocky—but senses the difference between old and young in terms of their roles.

Why on the Committee? 1) He learned from his Massachusetts experience that it was powerful. 2) He thought it would be helpful for his district – “a provincial reason but an important one.” 3) He was concerned about spending and wanted to see what the story was.

How get on the Committee? He supported former Republican Leader Joseph W. Martin (R-MA) in the floor fight [that deposed Martin earlier in the year], and he worked with the other Martin supporters on the Republican Committee on Committees—Mrs. Katharine St. George (R-NY), Leo Allen (R-IL), Clarence Brown (R-OH), and Dick Simpson (R-PA) — “what it came down to was that they needed a man from New England on the Committee. The one in line was Perkins Bass [R-NH] but the Martin supporters didn’t want him” (He was the only one from New England to oppose Martin)—“Of course I had to convince John Taber [R-NY, ranking member on Appropriations] that I wasn’t a wild-eyed spender or anything like that”—his arguments were 1) his experience in Massachusetts. He sat on more committees than any other Massachusetts senator 2) Mr. Richard Wigglesworth (R-MA), the only New Englander on the Republican side had just retired and gone off the Committee.

Regarding his role: “I try to pick up what I can”—“You just hope you hit on something,” he said, relative to the fact that he doesn’t have too much information as a younger man—“I hate to keep going back to this, but my experience in the Massachusetts senate—the jungle as I call it. Some of these old men still don’t know how to get right down to a question. They say [that] your first years here you should keep quiet and listen, but I’m asking a lot of questions...the subcommittee chairman has made some insinuations that the committee has gotten along fine long before I got here, and I guess they’ll get along after I’m gone.”

Why does the House always cut? Each bureau has its own point of view that “its program is a sacred cow;” the Appropriations Committee, however, sees the whole picture—it has “the greatest sense of financial responsibility of any group in the House”—“even the most liberal person gets an instinct to cut after he’s been on the committee”—this particular point, that the closer you get to it the more likely you are to cut, is made again and again.

Regarding House action: “there is a tendency to follow the Committee.”

Regarding the full Committee action—he mentioned two cases this year, two boosts by John Fogarty (D-RI), chairman of the Labor, Health, Education and Welfare Subcommittee.

Regarding the subcommittee chairman: “He’s the boss. He gets about what he wants” he has a tremendous advantage—he has the clerk working for him all year round—at question time the chairman asks pages of written questions—just reads them off—he (Conte) doesn’t like this—Otto Passman (D-LA), chairman of the Foreign Operations Subcommittee, had scheduled hearings at night the following week on foreign operations appropriations (FOA) — “he’s got a motive. It’s not to get through with the bill, it’s attrition. He’s hoping that the other members won’t show up, and he’ll have things his way.”—Passman runs the hearings by calling on all the Democrats first—J. Vaughan Gary (D-VA), chairman of the Treasury and Post Office Subcommittee, goes crisscross according to seniority—

Regarding markup— “here again the chairman has a tremendous advantage. He and the clerk work for two weeks setting the figures. The other members of the committee, especially the minority, are kind of lost. They come in and say cut 3 million here, 1 million here, and unless you follow pretty closely and do your homework, you don’t have much of a chance.”

Older members come to the hearings with set ideas. Younger members come to get the facts—he made this distinction.

Regarding the FOA Subcommittee—very few other committee members are attending the hearings—he pointed out that Mr. Taber seldom came—usually it was only himself and Mr. John Rhodes (R-AZ)—“I’m having a field day asking questions on our side. I’m asking as many questions as Passman.”

Mr. Gary and Mr. Gordon Canfield (R-NJ), ranking member on the Treasury and Post Office Subcommittee, “get along famously” —regarding Canfield “he hasn’t got the courage of a snail, he’s afraid of labor and other pressure groups.”

Taber has seen better days. He’s out to pasture now. It takes him an hour to get a word...he still has power though. Around here you build up power through seniority.”

Regarding the success and failure of bureaus—“the members of the Committee have their pets. It was nauseating for me to sit and hear these older men talk to some of the people telling them what a good job they were doing—almost apologizing for having them come here” —he says that Gary and Canfield were amazed when he wanted to ask some questions of the Coast Guard—a good education here for him as a new member— “I used to come back here and say to Bill, I don’t understand it. It nauseated me”—“over the years they build up friendships, they travel around the world together, go to dinners together—a mutual admiration society” (the older committee men and the agency people).

“We went to New York to look at customs and we held a press conference. Gary said, you let me do the talking, and he painted a rosy picture. Some of the rest of us on the committee, if they’d asked us, [we] would have given them a different picture”—The

Coast Guard and the Customs Service he mentions as pets, but Internal Revenue Service is not a pet.

Regarding the attitudes of other members—they think Appropriations is too powerful—there is “jealousy”—somebody’s pet project gets cut.

“I used to think the Senate was the more conservative body. When I got down here I found it wasn’t so, the House is.”

Regarding his subcommittee assignment. Taber just told me “he was just putting me on those subcommittees”—foreign aid and treasury—he wants defense or public works, but he is glad he didn’t have those “big ones” his first year.

Regarding communication with bureau people—he said that the older members may have some, but he doesn’t.