

Interview with Rep. Winfield Denton (D-IN)

May 29, 1959

General remarks: considerably partisan, interesting because he is quite clearly not “in” with the Committee leadership—he does not identify himself with the Committee to the extent that, or in the way that, most other members do.

Why on the Committee? “I didn’t;” when he came here he was on the Judiciary Committee. John Dingell [D-MI] on the Ways and Means Committee looked after Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio men in committee assignments. Someone came and wanted to be on the Judiciary Committee. Dingell took Denton off, and since there was a vacancy on the Appropriations Committee he put him on— “The first thing I knew about it was when I was reading the committee assignments. I talked to Mr. X, and he said you go over there and raise hell with them. On the way over I met [Majority Leader John] McCormack [D-MA] who said, ‘I’d keep quiet and go along if I were you. This is a better committee, you can help your constituents a lot more.’ So I did.”

Do you regret it? “Some ways I do, some ways I don’t. When the other boys are out having a good time you have to work”—“but I’m through now,” he added with some visible relief—later he said, “It’s a prize assignment...but I wouldn’t advise anyone to go on Appropriations” (too much work I guess).

“They’re a hard working bunch”—it’s interesting to note the frequency with which he referred to them as “they”—he probably doesn’t work as hard and for that reason, among others, may not identify closely with them.

He sees Appropriations as not of the “aristocracy of committees.” “Ways and Means is the aristocracy. It’s a hierarchy.” He also placed the Rules Committee above Appropriations.

Regarding selection: “[Ranking Member] John Taber [R-NY] picks pretty carefully on his side.”

“There’s a certain amount of padding in every budget...they expect to be cut...we don’t find the half of it, we know that.”

He was on the Foreign Operations Subcommittee—says that he and Mr. William H. Natcher (D-KY) were in the middle—4 Democrats said “nothing”—2 Democrats and 1 Republican said “give em all”—He and Natcher were in the middle—he spoke at some length, and in some detail, of the tremendous pressure brought on him from the CIO Council (Congress of Industrial Organizations) via a man to whom he was obligated from back home, by the National Farmers Union lobbyist, and by the Chamber of Commerce—he was removed from the subcommittee— “[Subcommittee Chairman Otto] Passman [D-LA] wanted me off the Committee”—so Mr. Clarence Cannon (D-MO),

Appropriations Committee Chairman, did it—“You could raise hell about it, I suppose, if you can stir up a revolt, but they won’t back you against the chairman.”

He says that the Foreign Operations Appropriations (FOA) was “spoon fed by the executive”, “a favorite of the executive”—not cut by the Budget Bureau—he said that he was the best friend the program ever had because I guess he made them justify their requests.

Mr. Albert Thomas (D-TX) apparently did once organize a revolt when Mr. Cannon took away his subcommittees, and he (Thomas) got them back—Mr. Thomas and Mr. John E. Fogarty (D-RI) don’t get along with Mr. Cannon too well, but the other subcommittee chairmen go along with him (Cannon).

“The chairman has tremendous power. Of course he has had the experience.”

Between the Budget Bureau and Appropriations— “great antagonism there.”

The minority party caucuses before the markup—the chairman presides—“He sees what the Committee will agree to & does a little trading”—then the line is set for the full committee.

Of Mr. Thomas he says “he’s pretty sharp with the knife.” This is highly complimentary. He sees much in partisan terms. President Dwight Eisenhower’s budget is a phony—the Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) budget was “brought in to be raised”—so as to embarrass the Committee—you can tell a conservative by where he comes from, and he went through the list of committee members designating liberals and conservatives on the basis of geography—fairly simplistic.

He talks about the reasons why people want to get on the Appropriations Committee. First, you get the overall picture and can coordinate. Secondly, you keep the House the most important body so long as you hold the purse strings. Thirdly, if the executive branch has to come to you for things they will be respectful when you go to them for something—otherwise, “it’s like talking to a wall” to go to the executive. Example, he relates a story of a highway he is trying to get in his district—he has had no luck thus far— “If they had to come to me for appropriations I’d get it just like that—no question about it.” These reasons refer more to the general importance of the Appropriations Committee than why get on the Committee. The last two reasons he described as “petty” but important.

Regarding health, education and welfare—the Public Health Service “talks around” and tells people they want more than the Budget Bureau will allow them— “They’re a professional outfit and don’t care about what they say.”

“Of course it’s easier to cut Labor than HEW”—why? The southern Democrats and the Republicans don’t want it—especially the Wage and Hour Division—the southerners are

“50 years behind the rest of the country” in wage policy, and the Republicans don’t like Labor so they hit the Wage and Hour Division.

The Food and Drug Administration “always comes in with a tight budget. After working with these agencies for 10 years you know which ones bring in a tight budget and where you can find some padding.”

They look for personnel—and for automobiles, about which he said, “We always look there.”

He says that in the Indiana State Legislature he was on the committee that drew up a legislative budget, and he learned how budgets were drawn up. He repeats that he learned much of this in the Indiana State Legislature—he received many of his attitudes there apparently.

He spoke of pressure from Ford, General Motors, and the Auto Workers to boost the Bureau of Labor Statistics commodity index—he spoke of letters on the rural library program and of public health.

On the Labor, Health, Education and Welfare Subcommittee he spoke of the division of labor—example, Mr. Fred Marshall (D-MN) on Indians, hospitals.

He spoke of “judicial capacity.”