

Interview with Rep. John J. “Jack” Flynt, Jr. (D-GA)

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Did he want to go on the Appropriations Committee? “Not especially.” The Georgia delegation wanted him to go on. An inner circle choice. He didn’t get on the first time around, and the newspapers in Georgia said that he had tried to get on but couldn’t. He decided that he had to prove them wrong, and that the only way to do it was to go after the Committee next year. He said, “it might have been the only issue in the campaign in 1962. I didn’t want to get beat over the head with that by someone who didn’t know what he was talking about. And no one in the world would have believed me unless I went out and did it.”

He told the story of 1961. “I didn’t especially want to go on. But the state delegation wanted me to. It’s very important to a state like Georgia to have a man on the Committee – and we’ll get on the Committee in our first term, maybe Illinois, but not Georgia. The people senior to me had positions, so I was it. Well, we got embroiled in the Rules Committee fight [Speaker Sam Rayburn’s challenge of Rules Committee Chairman Howard W. Smith (D-VA) in 1961]. I had it put to me directly, ‘If you want to go on the Appropriations Committee, you should vote for the enlargement of the Rules Committee.’ I said, ‘I don’t want it that bad.’ And I might have said, ‘I don’t give a damn whether I get on or not.’ I was happy where I was on Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee. That’s a good committee, and I had to give up my seniority.” Then Bob Stephens (Rep. Robert G. Stephens, Jr. [D-GA]) came along later and said that John had been on two important committees and that he gave up Interstate and Foreign Commerce “because it was good for the Georgia delegation. He sacrificed seniority for the good of the delegation.” Stephens and Rep. Arthur Winstead (D-MS) stopped by – Stephens taught at the University of Georgia.

He said he was just put on the Foreign Operations Subcommittee, that there was no chance to pick or choose. He said he expected to get another subcommittee assignment in addition. He thought a man who had seniority in the House should have at least one departmental subcommittee. He complained that “eight or maybe twelve members of the Foreign Operations Subcommittee have one subcommittee assignment and one member has four.” “That wouldn’t have happened when Mr. [Clarence] Cannon [(D-MO), Appropriations Committee Chairman,] was younger and knew his Committee members. But I don’t think he even knows who I am. I can’t remember that he has ever spoken to me. I may meet him and speak to him and he mumbles something back. But he doesn’t recognize me. He knows his subcommittee chairmen and the members of his own subcommittee. But I’ve heard several of the men over in the Committee say that they didn’t think he knew who they were either.”

He went on to say that Cannon was probably the most astute of all members of parliament when he was younger. He asked me who I thought the best men were. He said Cannon and Rep. George H. Mahon (D-TX) were the best. “It’s very close between number one and number two on our side.” He thought Rep. Gerald R. Ford (R-MI) was

best on the Republican side. He said this after I had said Cannon and Ford. Then we got into a discussion of the seniority system.

Regarding the seniority system, he said that it was better than anything proposed. He also said that if you destroy the seniority system you destroy the independence of Congress from the executive. "We've got precious little as it is." His point was that every other system would inject the executive into the selection of the committees. He also agreed that internal conflict would result.

Regarding Committee decisions: "There's no mumbo-jumbo about the process. Some of it comes as close to mathematics as you can get. You can take a slide rule, providing you know the standard specifications of the agency and figure out almost exactly what they need." Yet, it is almost impossible to cut back any going program, he admitted. He said that the Committee looks at the increases and not the whole program each year.

"There's a situation on our Committee that would be funny but for the fact that it nearly killed one man, so it's a tragic comedy. But it never would have happened if that man had had a modicum of understanding of how the committee operates. It's about the Dawson peanut laboratory [a research laboratory that Senator Richard B. Russell (D-GA) attempted to include in the agriculture appropriations bill]. It's killed Rep. E.L. Forrester (D-GA) mentally and it's nearly killed him physically. He's going to retire. It became a vendetta between him and Jamie Whitten [Rep. Jamie L. Whitten (D-MS), Chairman of the Agriculture Subcommittee], and Jamie couldn't care less. He wasn't in favor of it, but he could have been won over. I'm the man who will have to offer the amendment in the full Committee to restore that item. I don't want to do it, but I have to do it so Forrester can't say that a motion wasn't even made in the full Committee. Maybe we've got the votes to pass it; I don't know. It's been budgeted and authorized, but there's been no appropriation. Whitten even beat Dick Russell three times on that, and when you've done that you've done a man's chore. Jamie said there won't be any agricultural bill unless the Senate gave in on that, and they did.... If you want to be stubborn you can keep anything out of a bill you want. You may not be able to get anything in that you want by being stubborn; but you can keep anything out. And that's the way it should be."

He spoke of the Veterans Employment Rights Division in the Department of Labor. They had in their early days lots of work and a small budget – 1946. In 1956 they have no work and a big budget. Rep. John E. Fogarty (D-RI), Chairman of the Labor, Health, Education and Welfare Subcommittee, is using it as a dumping ground where he puts people from Rhode Island that he wants to appoint to federal jobs.

He objects to the work of the Appropriations Committee as being so "confining." "The subcommittees are virtually autonomous, more so than on any other committee. And the work in there is so confining. When you come on the floor or to the full Committee with your subcommittee bill you have to know all there is to know about it. The work of the Appropriations Committee causes a man to neglect his district, his constituency, and his duty to the House of Representatives. Appropriations Committee members work on their subcommittee bills, and they are reluctant to enter House debate or anything else. The

result is that the work of the Appropriations Committee robs the House of some of its ablest members in debate...there's a tendency on this Committee for people to think of themselves as members of the Appropriations Committee first and members of the House second. That's wrong." His point is that the House Appropriations Committee men are very able and they don't participate in debates as much as they should.

Rep. Carl Vinson (D-GA) wanted to get on the Appropriations Committee. "The dean of my delegation told me that [at the time all appropriations jurisdictions were] returned to the Appropriations Committee in 1920, his preference was to go on the Appropriations Committee. But Mr. Lee [Rep. Gordon Lee (D-GA)] exercised his seniority and went on the Committee instead."

"I never saw a time when he [Cannon] didn't support his subcommittee chairmen. He always votes with them. Well, once I saw him when he opposed a subcommittee chairman [Rep. Albert Thomas, D-TX, Chairman of Deficiencies Subcommittee (1963) and Independent Offices Subcommittee (1963-1964)]. He whipped him in the Committee. But the vote was overridden on the floor." (This may have been on the space budget or on the public works acceleration program – he seemed confused as between these two.)

He says that Cannon abolished the deficiencies subcommittee because President Lyndon Johnson had submitted big supplementals so that he could keep the budget below President John Kennedy's for fiscal 1965. Tricky bookkeeping and Albert would have gone along with the Johnson request. He wouldn't have cut them back. So, this added an impetus to Cannon's desire to abolish the subcommittee.