

Interview with Rep. Robert N. Giaimo (D-CT)

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“Cannon doesn’t bother me [reference to Appropriations Committee Chairman Clarence Cannon (D-MO)]. I don’t care what he thinks of me or whether he gets mad at me or not. But it’s those other subcommittee chairmen. Some of them are very influential guys, and if they get mad at you they can finish you. That’s what soberes me. I don’t want to fly off like a loud mouth and get in trouble with them. I’m just looking around and feeling my way. I want to know where I’m going before I flywheel off in public. It’s strange and mysterious.”

With regard to Rep. Otto Passman (D-LA), chairman of the Foreign Operations Subcommittee, trying to sell the Committee on his resolution objecting to a transfer of funds made in the foreign aid program: “Those subcommittee chairmen just cut him up. Cannon didn’t say a word. He just sat there. They were with him [Passman], but they told him he wasn’t going about it in the right way, that he ought to take it back to subcommittee. Thomas, Flood, Whitten, Mahon, Rooney, Sikes, they all got into it [references to Albert Thomas (D-TX), Daniel Flood (D-PA), Jamie Whitten (D-MS), John J. Rooney (D-NY), Robert Sikes (D-FL)]. They just let him talk, and the more he talked the more he defeated himself. Passman’s the kind of person you’d like to have as a lawyer for the other side if you’re in a case. He hurts his own case, but he just can’t help it. What smoothies those other men were. They are real artists. I just sat there. What a show. Why, it’s better than the theater. I’d pay one hundred dollars a week if I could see a performance like that.” The feeling that he was in new company, the feeling of respect and even awe came through in this commentary.

With regard to his question to me as to how he ought to behave on the Committee: His frustration and, yet, his realization that legislative success depends very much on playing along with the system. “You’ve got to look at the long pull. I based my whole legislative career on that. You can’t shoot your mouth off and be effective. You have to learn what you’re doing, and keep your mouth shut. I know that’s why I got on the Committee. They want sober people on the Committee. But it’s frustrating as hell. You feel shut out – and you are! Now, maybe it will be different when our subcommittee meets, and we get into the bill. If I can learn a little bit about that bill, I may feel differently.”

With regard to Chairman Cannon – “You meet him in the hall, and he says, Hi, and waves, and he’s very friendly, but the boys who’ve been around here say it doesn’t mean a thing. He’s very flowery that way. When I wrote him and said I wanted to go on the Committee, he wrote back – Dear Bob, ‘no finer selection could be made’, etc., etc. Hell, he didn’t even know me.”

“The fellows who have been around tell me you can’t trust him. He deals by rewards and punishments. He’ll tell you one thing and do something else.”

“I couldn’t decide whether to go in and ask for a subcommittee or not. The fellows who have been here told me that if you want a subcommittee assignment, the sure way not to

get it is to ask him for it. I debated it for a long time and decided to leave it to the subcommittee chairman I was friendly with. John Rooney wanted me for his State, Justice, Commerce, and the Judiciary Subcommittee. I know he did, and he went to bat for me. But I don't even know if that helped me. It may even have hurt."

Giaimo said he got a pretty good subcommittee assignment [District of Columbia], considering that except in the case of Mrs. Julia Butler Hansen (D-WA), Cannon went pretty much by seniority. Regarding Rep. John M. Slack (D-WV) and Rep. John J. Flynt (D-GA): "he kept them hanging there for a whole year by putting them on that permanent subcommittee that did nothing".

He talked a good deal about the recent turnover on the Committee, and he said that, in view of the great number of new men, changes might come. "I hear some of the young men are going to kick up a fuss at the Committee meeting Thursday. They are talking about it anyway."

He was very much impressed with subcommittee power, and the first question he asked me was how Cannon kept his power over those people. He decided that "I think it's because he gives them freedom in their narrow area of activity, in return for which they give him freedom in his." He also talked with regard to Cannon's knowledge of the rules and his various powers over the subcommittees. He wondered out loud if Cannon really knew what he did, or who he was.

"We're going to take up the interior bill on Thursday in the full Committee. So, I asked my secretary to get me a copy of the committee print. And I couldn't get one. Now, how am I supposed to go in there and vote intelligently on that bill? I suppose you could do it by taking the hearings and going through each section. But you wouldn't get any cost figures. Maybe there are reasons why you can't release the figures prior to the meeting, but I haven't heard them."

With regard to backdoor spending: "I had some doubts about it before. But since I've been on the Committee, they have been reinforced. What else have we got in Congress but the power over spending?"

Dick Donohue of the Congressional liaison office in the White House called up and asked for help on the export-import bank bill and help against the expected attacks when the bill comes up for renewing the bank on the basis of backdoor spending. The White House and the leadership were expecting Republican opposition. Giaimo said, well, I don't know. Donohue said, what's the matter? Do you have some deep psychological objection or something? Giaimo said, you're ***** right, I have."

He speaks of career plateaus: "I'm a freshman all over again" on the Appropriations Committee.