

Interview with Rep. John J. Rhodes (R-AZ)

May 23, 1959

General remarks: Perceptive about tradition; talks good sense about what's been done around here for a long time, a good contrast with Rep. Silvio Conte (R-MA) in this respect; seems extremely competent.

On cutting the budget: "The Appropriations Committee is a club. As one of the younger members of the club, there are a lot of things I don't understand. You don't understand them, but you sure can feel their presence – like cosmic rays;" "a lot of the older members feel that they have to go before Congress and say they cut the hell out of this budget."

"There are a lot of things around here that I'd change. But I've been around here long enough to know that you don't rush in here and say, do this and that. It takes time and timing."

He kept saying at several points, "they've always done it this way around here, and I guess they'll keep on doing it as long as Mr. Cannon [Appropriations Committee Chairman Clarence Cannon (D-MO)] and Mr. Taber [Ranking Member John Taber (R-NY)] are around. The impact of these two personalities goes deep into the Committee."

How get on the Committee? "When I first came here I wanted Interior and Insular Affairs [Committee], and that's what I got. I didn't even ask for Appropriations. That shows how little I know about it" – once again, the early local orientation, in terms of committee assignments.

He decided that Appropriations was the focal committee, so in the 86th Congress (1959-1961), "I went to Mr. Simpson [Rep. Richard M. Simpson (R-PA)] and Mr. Taber and others who were influential in the Committee on Committees, because they came from big states, that I wanted Ways and Means or Appropriations, and [that] I didn't care which. I have always admired Mr. Taber. I don't say that we were super friendly, because a man of his age and a man like me don't have that kind of contact, but he was overjoyed – I don't mean that, I mean, pleased – when he heard that I wanted to get on the Committee, and that's how I got on the Committee. Mr. Taber has a lot to say about who gets on and who doesn't get on the Committee" – earlier he mentioned that there was "no trouble in my case."

The Republicans on the Committee went along with a \$100 million boost in health – "some Republican members criticized them for this, but I know why they did it. They agreed with Mr. Fogarty [Labor, Health, Education and Welfare Subcommittee Chairman John E. Fogarty (D-RI)] that if they accepted the figure, he wouldn't go out on the floor and ask for a boost. If he had done that, it would have ended up \$250 million, so they sold out for the lowest figure they could."

On getting rolled on the floor: With respect to the prison issue – he doesn't know why, but he said it would have to be obvious to anyone that we needed prisons.

He says that cutting depends on the state of public opinion or on a project: He mentioned Rep. Hamer H. Budge (R-ID) and the 14 roll calls, and he says that very crucial to this was the personality of Mr. Budge – he called him “a rugged little guy” – that was the last “flurry” of cuts.

The story of his minority clerk on District of Columbia Subcommittee: Paid for by the Committee since he is a ranking minority member, but the clerk is given no office, so she works in his own office. She is not allowed in subcommittee hearings – one day he took her over to subcommittee hearings; “they said, who's this? I said, she's the minority clerk. They said, what's she doing here? I said, she's coming to the hearing. They said, ‘the committee only has one clerk.’ The only time she got inside the committee room was when she signed her oath of office, so now she's back here writing letters. It's stupid.... The Appropriations Committee has its idiosyncrasies, I can't explain it; it's just that they've always done things that way.” He has a strong sense for tradition; it is also interesting to note, and relevant to the role of the ranking minority member, that he was given this clerk because the clear understanding is that the ranking minority member does more work than the ordinary member of the subcommittee.

He talks of “pets” and “sacred cows” among bureaus.

The personality of the subcommittee chairman is most important in subcommittee activity: “some chairmen act like God Almighty. Others work with the members.”

He said he had no trouble in learning the ropes: Several terms of legislative experience in the House helped him; “I did have one surprise, though; the committee members were not as informed on the technicalities of legislation as I thought they would be...we have a good staff, but it's an inadequate staff.”

With respect to the decisions of the group, he used the words “hit or miss”.

Why does the House always cut? “[I]t's a conspiracy, conscious or unconscious;” they cut appropriations bills and then go into deficiency in supplementals and get it all back. It was at that point that he said it was an unconscious conspiracy because of the desire of older members to cut, and it was at that point that he got into the material on the closet.

Rep. Albert Thomas (D-TX), chairman of the Independent Offices Subcommittee and Special Deficiencies Subcommittee, especially does not like the Budget Bureau, and he does not like its director Maurice Stans, in particular, why? 1) “usurping the functions of the Appropriations Committee;” 2) they raise it too high and approve too much, that is, the budget; 3) they impound funds.

Regarding interest group activity, “they say there is, but I haven’t seen any;” he cites the Limestone Institute as a successful group, but “the NEA [National Education Association] is stupid, just plain dirt dumb.”

Regarding the conference committee: The House puts in an amount knowing that the Senate will raise it, and then they’ll get a compromise in conference (both Rhodes and Conte said this); “a game;” rather foolish he thought, but that’s the way it’s always been done.

Regarding the attitudes of other members: They think we’re too powerful; there is a “built-in conflict here” between the legislative committees and the Appropriations Committee.

On his subcommittee assignments (District of Columbia, Foreign Operations, and Independent Offices): Ranking Member John Taber (R-NY) just called and said that “a situation had developed,” so that I was being put on the foreign aid subcommittee, so he went on foreign aid. He didn’t ask for independent offices either; he was just put there.