

Interview with Rep. Sidney R. Yates (D-IL)

June 24, 1959

General remarks: Most reflective man I've talked to, at least in the egghead sense; seems to articulate a middle position between old and new men.

Why on the committee? "When I got to Congress, I didn't know anything about Appropriations – never having been in a legislature before. Some of my friends told me that it was an important committee. At the time, there was one member from Illinois on the Committee, Thomas O'Brien [D-IL], and he had just been asked by the leadership to go on the Ways and Means Committee.... [My selection] was a sort of *quid pro quo* for O'Brien's going on Ways and Means. None of my senior colleagues from Illinois wanted to go on, so I went." He spoke of himself as a "rarity," getting on the Committee his first term.

"I'm not moving very fast on the Committee. I'm not going to move much faster either, because there are Southerners above me. Lots of the people who came in with me are chairmen, ranking minority members, or high on their committees. [He mentioned several by name, Interior and Insular Affairs Committee Chairman Wayne Aspinall (D-CO) was one.] I'm number fifteen after ten years. You just have to wait your turn. It's like the vice president – you know the [Charles] Dawes story – 'Every day you get up, look at the weather, and inquire about the state of the President's health.'"

How cuts are made: He stressed the irrational nature of it. "They act through the viscera;" "by guess and by golly." "It's not a scientific process. It can't be." "But you wonder sometimes whether you've done right or wrong."

Do members get more conservative? "Yes, it's true. I can see it in myself. I suppose I came here a flaming liberal, but as the years go by, I get more conservative. You just hate like hell to spend all this money. It's an awful lot of money.... I used to look more at the program, but now I look at it in terms of money.... These figures are so large and so impersonal. It's hard to think of the ideals and aspirations of the dedicated men who plan these programs.... So I just pick out a few darlings now – like medical research in the VA [Veterans' Administration]. I insist that they be given adequate funds." "You come to the point where you just say, 'By God, this is enough jobs.'"

"Yes, the Committee is a tightly knit group. We don't leave each other [in voting] very often.... We do things for each other, and for friends of each other." He says he left the Committee on HR 8002 and backdoor spending, which they don't like.

"But there's an even more closely knit group – the Chairman and the subcommittee chairmen. They are the lords, with their fiefs, their duchies, each with power over his area of appropriations.... There's a power elite on this Committee. And these subcommittee chairmen are as powerful as other legislative committee chairmen," i.e., Defense Subcommittee Chairman George Mahon (D-TX) is as powerful as Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Vinson (D-GA); State, Justice and the Judiciary

Subcommittee Chairman John J. Rooney (D-NY) is more powerful than Chairman Thomas E. Morgan (D-PA) of Foreign Affairs.

Re. subcommittee markup: Subcommittee chairman “carries the ball;” he is the “prime mover;” he and the clerk get together and get figures which are presented to the subcommittee; not usually a vote – but he remembers when he forced a vote once, and presumably this could be done.

Re. Rep. Albert Thomas (D-TX), chairman of Independent Offices Subcommittee and Special Subcommittee on Deficiencies: “can be ruthless if he wants to;” he quotes, with agreement, the description of a subcommittee hearing under Thomas as “a combination charm school and snake pit;” Thomas says, fine statement, very good, etc., to a witness, and then BOOM. “He was an expert trial leader.”

In the full Committee: Not too often a change, though he did cite several from the Deficiency Subcommittee last year.

Why was the Special Deficiency Subcommittee created? “Mr. Cannon [Appropriations Committee Chairman Clarence Cannon (D-MO)] doesn’t favor the mutual security program. Mr. Thomas [subcommittee chairman] doesn’t either.... I think Mr. Cannon thought he could save some money.”

When he first came to Appropriations, he was on the subcommittees for the District of Columbia and the Marshall Plan (Foreign Operations). Cannon took him off Marshall Plan. “The reason he took me off was because I was in favor of the program.” “I asked to go back on the committee [foreign operations subcommittee] last year, and the Speaker [Sam Rayburn (D-TX)] intervened for me, but he [Cannon] said he had to put someone else on the committee. That was crazy....” But that subcommittee is Cannon’s preserve.

Sometimes the subcommittee chairmen squabble with the Chairman of the full Committee. “A few years ago, Cannon tried to take away some agencies from Mr. Thomas’s [Independent Offices] Subcommittee. Mr. Thomas made a real fight of it, and, as a result, only a few were taken away. We had a roll call vote on it. I didn’t know whether to vote with my subcommittee chairman or my Chairman. I voted with my subcommittee chairman. I don’t know whether I was right. My relations with the Chairman [Cannon] haven’t been the same since. Oh, he’s polite and smiles at me, but when I ask for things, I don’t get them. But I do get things from my subcommittee chairman – a new federal building, for instance.” A very perceptive account of a difficult situation.

“It’s a tradition on the Appropriations Committee to cut.”

“The Budget Bureau puts a ceiling on an agency, and we don’t have to cut below the budget. We rarely go above it.”

Re. Thomas's power and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA): "That agency's fortunes will rise or fall depending on the chairman of the [Independent Offices] Subcommittee. Thomas is a much more ruthless chairman than Prince Preston." [Preston (D-GA) was Commerce Subcommittee Chairman.] When under the Commerce Subcommittee, they were encouraged to add men: "We kept clubbing them to add men.... This year they came in and asked for 5000 more men. We gave them 500." This was the effect of a change in subcommittee handling of FAA (previously Civil Aeronautics Administration) budget.

Re. conference: "Albert Thomas dominates that committee [the whole conference committee]. He knows what's in that bill."

Re. Senate: He, too stresses the time spend and the superior knowledge of the House people; on the Senate side "the clerks run the committee." The Senate members are more closely knit and take care of each other; he describes them as "more lenient." When one Senator leaves the conference room, the others take care of him.

How learn the ropes? "You listen to the justifications and to your senior colleagues. It's like everything in the House – you just learn by yourself."

He complains about: 1. lack of staff and 2. the ignorance of the full Committee. The subcommittee report doesn't lie over so that the full Committee can see it; the subcommittee chairman and the clerk write the report, and no one on the subcommittee sees it most of the time. Occasionally, they see the proofs. But the full Committee never sees the report of another subcommittee until it comes to the full Committee. You have no time to read it, or gather arguments, etc. "Take the Defense Subcommittee report – it's 65 pages long. The chairman of the subcommittee [Mahon] starts to explain it, and he may say, 'Read page 8 for an explanation.' Well, you look at that briefly, but you don't have time to think about it, or check it with the hearings."

Re. minority report: On building a nuclear reactor for aircraft, he filed a minority report with the subcommittee, the full Committee, and onto the floor. "It's the only time I ever heard of a minority report in the Appropriations Committee. It's a custom here not be – you reserve in subcommittee, but you don't file a report.

Re. omnibus bill: He said there was much less interest. "Nobody was on the floor. The whole budget, government in action, was involved, and no one was there. The floor was empty."

Re. backdoor to the Treasury: He opposed the Appropriations Committee on the housing bill. "They were opposed to it. And you say to yourself, 'Somebody's got to look after all this money. Then you realize what will happen to the program if it comes to the Committee; so you keep it away from the Committee.'"

The rest of the House members see the Appropriations Committee as a “very conservative group” – and he agrees they are. “There may be a revolt against the Appropriations Committee some day, but not yet.”