

Richard W. Bolling, Oral History Interview – 11/1/1965
Administrative Information

Creator: Richard W. Bolling
Interviewer: Ronald J. Grele
Date of Interview: November 1, 1965
Location: Washington, D.C.
Length: 66 pages

Biographical Note

Bolling, Representative from Missouri from 1949-1982, discusses his work with John F. Kennedy (JFK) on the Landrum-Griffin labor bill, his and JFK's relationship with Speaker of the House Samuel Taliaferro Rayburn, the 1960 presidential campaign in California, and the process of reforming the House Rules Committee, among other issues.

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Suggested Citation

Richard Bolling, recorded interview by Richard J. Grele, November 1, 1965, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Richard W. Bolling

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Richard W. Bolling

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Oral History Interview

with

Richard W. Bolling

November 1, 1965

Rayburn Office Building Washington, D.C.

By Ronald J. Grele

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GRELE: Congressman Bolling, do you recall when you first met John F. Kennedy?

BOLLING: Yes, I do. It was back in 1947. I had very recently been elected the Vice Chairman of the American Veterans Committee, which was sponsoring a Housing Conference in Washington that year. The American Veterans Committee had been heavily infiltrated by members of the Communist Party of the United States. We were at

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that moment engaged in eliminating them from the institution, but they still had very substantial power. They still had members on our national board and they still had control of a few major areas of the American Veterans Committee. One of them was New York, and this Housing Conference had been set up with other veterans' organizations in the hope that we would be able to generate some real interest in housing. The then new Representative, John Kennedy, was one of two congressional cosponsors; the other one was now Senator Javits [Jacob K. Javits]. I discovered that the "Commies" planned to come down in great force and to march on the White House and parade on the Capitol grounds, and that it was going to be potentially a very destructive situation. Although I was the Vice Chairman, the Chairman

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was on vacation and I had the responsibility of going and warning these two people. I knew enough about politics to know what this might mean to them.

I had a very curious reaction to Kennedy at that time, considering my attitude toward him later. That was when he was still sick—he obviously was sick. He seemed very indecisive and very upset by this, whereas Javits was very decisive and not the least bit worried. I formed, I would say, a rather bad opinion of him in that meeting in 1947. I didn't know the history of him then well enough to really evaluate it. I was just the guy under pressure and this guy didn't respond very well. Just as a matter of interest, we figured out among us all—I've forgotten who did the figuring out—how to divert the Communist

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plan. We rather amusingly made them march a long, long way and got them very, very tired but not around the Capitol or the White House so that it was not politically embarrassing.

GRELE: You say you were disappointed in his response. What was his response?

BOLLING: He seemed very indecisive. He didn't seem at all sure of himself; he didn't have any idea what to do and he just looked worried. He looked to me—I now realize, having seen him since a number of times—I now realize that I was talking to a very sick man who hadn't quite made up his mind where he was going.

GRELE: What kind of Representative was he when you served together in the House? Was he still indecisive?

BOLLING: No, he was less indecisive. He still seemed sick. He was not very much of a

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participant in the House, really. It seemed to me by the time I got here, in 1949, that he was already running for something else. He was pleasant and attractive, but he just wasn't much of a House member. That has often happened with House members who have their eye on the Senate or a governorship. I'm not being particularly critical of this; he was just another vote, you might say, and sometimes that was a very independent vote. I think that would be the one characteristic I remember about him then—that he voted the way he damn well pleased.

GRELE: Do you feel that he was his own man or that he was influenced by his constituents, colleagues, family?

BOLLING: Oh, I think he was always his own man. Even in those days, I think it was clear that he more than most politicians was his own man.

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I'm sure he was influenced by everything; by his family, but not overwhelmingly; by his constituents; by the political situation in Massachusetts and in the United States. I think by the time he ran for the Senate he'd pretty well made up his mind where he was headed for, and I think that probably is the reason—that, plus the fact that his health became so much better, really....

One of the things I never am able to get out of my mind—since I happen to have been very fond of him, too, before it was all over—was the contrast between the man I met in 1947 and the man I met, or saw, in a conference that the two senators from Missouri and I had with him about his coming out to Kansas City, as I remember it, just a few weeks before he was killed. The contrast was absolutely fantastic. Without any exaggeration, as I said earlier, he was a

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frail, sick, yellow man when I saw him in 1947, and when I saw him those few weeks before he was killed, he was anything but that. He was robust and had a high color, lots of color about him, and very decisive.

GRELE: Did you ever cooperate on any kind of legislation? Do you recall any particular votes of John Kennedy that enforced your impressions of him at that time?

BOLLING: No, I don't. It's just the general impression as far as the House is concerned.

GRELE: Did you have any contacts with him outside of that?

BOLLING: No.

GRELE: Your path and that of John Kennedy crossed many times when he was a senator, particularly on the Landrum-Griffin Bill.

BOLLING: That would be the time that it crossed most. You see, again I'm expressing an opinion that

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I think also is a fact. In the Senate, until he got very much involved in that labor bill, he really didn't involve himself in too many pieces of legislation. You could say that for a time in the Senate he wasn't really much of a legislator again. But he took on this labor bill thing back in 1958, I guess it was. Maybe it started even earlier than that. But as far as the legislative course, in '58 he took it to the floor and, as I remember, passed the bill in

the Senate, and then nothing happened in the House. At that stage of the game, because of the fact that I was basically a Rayburn [Samuel Taliaferro Rayburn] operator on major legislation, we began to have direct and indirect contacts.

The person who worked with him most directly on this particular subject was a friend and colleague of mine with whom I work very closely on a variety of things, named Frank Thompson [Frank Thompson, Jr.].

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Thompson is the one who had most of the direct contact. But during the process of those couple of years which started out with their passing a bill in '58, the House doing nothing; with their passing a bill, our passing not so good a bill, then the terrible complications of conference, he and I were involved in the same effort. I was not a member of the conference; Thompson was. But I was in the background working with Rayburn to see what we'd stand for in the conference—what we could get in the conference—and this was a case of not only people in the conference being there, but an awful lot of people who were not in the conference committee were involved, like the present President of the United States [Lyndon Baines Johnson] and the then-Speaker of the House of Representatives [Samuel Taliaferro Rayburn] and all of us who worked with them because it was important to all of us, not just

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Kennedy, that we come out of that as best we could from a political point of view as well as from an objective point of view. So while I had some contact with him, I never had a lot of personal contact.

GRELE: Do you recall anything about Landrum-Griffin that you would like to add to the record besides what is in your book, *House out of Order*?

BOLLING: I think most of what I know is there. There are obvious gaps in that chapter, and one of the major gaps is that I've never understood why the labor movement behaved like it did. But I don't think anyone knows that except maybe George Meany.

GRELE: In what way?

BOLLING: Well, I just thought that they were unrealistic in their assessment of what the House could take, it could do. If we had had the ability to bring the Elliott bill to the floor, with

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a little bit more enthusiasm on the part of the labor movement we might have been able to survive with the Elliott bill which was, of course, a middle bill. It was a little bit rougher than the Senate bill from the labor point of view, but it had all the real reform proposals in there

and it had just a few of the labor management type issues in there. What the conversation was about was always that we really ought to stick to a bill that just dealt with union democracy and reform and so on, and not change the balance of labor management relations by other provisions. Now we knew we couldn't do this in the House. We couldn't sustain it. So we came out with a middle-of-the-road bill. My memory is maybe Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] came out for the Elliott bill, Rayburn worked very hard for it, but we couldn't hold it. The mystery to me that I

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don't have in my book and don't understand is exactly why the labor movement couldn't be more foresighted.

GRELE: Do you recall how John F. Kennedy worked on this bill? Was he effective in pushing for the Senate bill?

BOLLING: He was enormously effective. I think the first time I achieved a major understanding of how much he had changed, or how wrong I had been in 1947, was in his performance in that conference. This is all second hand. He started out, I take it, very upset and nervous and he saw that he had, I guess, the crisis of his political life on his hands, and he came through brilliantly. They tell me he was just as tough as a boot and just as effective as he could be. Of course, he had very able advisors; he had Archie Cox [Archibald Cox] and, I guess, some others working

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on it. But he had to carry the ball, and I'm told that he did a brilliant job on that conference. I was told by people that I believe, so I believe that he did a brilliant job on that conference.

GRELE: What were your opinions then of the conference bill?

BOLLING: I still didn't like it, but considering the facts of life, what the Senate had passed and what the House had passed, I thought we'd come about halfway back up the hill. I don't know how you'd quantify something of this sort, but I thought we did damn well on the conference.

GRELE: Do you recall Speaker Rayburn's opinions on the conference bill?

BOLLING: I think that's the way he felt. I think he felt that perhaps we'd come back more than halfway.

GRELE: In your book, you attribute the defeat of the Elliott bill, of the committee bill, and the

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success of the Landrum-Griffin bill to the crucial vote of the Texas delegation and the role that Lyndon Johnson played in that delegation. Others have told me that it was Speaker Rayburn who did not take the floor.

BOLLING: No, that's.... I think I can say that I know more about what Rayburn did on that bill than anyone living or dead, except for Rayburn. I worked with him on that bill from long before it ever came out of committee. There are people who have always assumed that when Mr. Rayburn had to get the Texas delegation, he could. Well, he couldn't. And the person who undercut us in that—and I don't think there's any question about it—was the present President. And he did it by making a casual remark that he didn't see, "how a Texan could vote for anything except the toughest possible labor bill." I know Rayburn, and Rayburn was a shrewd and subtle man, much more shrewd and

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subtle than most people know. But he was not kidding on that bill. He was just plain not kidding and he couldn't get them. And the record will also show that he very often couldn't get them; that the Texas delegation is all over the lot even when it has a president.

GRELE: Did you then feel that John Kennedy exemplified leadership that would promote him to a higher office?

BOLLING: At about this stage I began to feel that he had the qualifications. I would have to confess that until West Virginia—and this was a bad piece of evidence that didn't prove the point I thought it did at the time—but until West Virginia I didn't really think he could be elected president. But after West Virginia I became convinced he could. But at this stage of the game, in '59, I was convinced that he had the potential.

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GRELE: Do you recall your opinions then of his attempt to secure the vice presidency?

BOLLING: I didn't have any opinions. I made it a practice not to go to conventions. I've been a complete specialist as far as the House is concerned. I've never had any interest in any other aspect of politics except this one. I don't think I even watched that Convention. I read about it, of course, and if I'd been there and been a delegate I think pretty surely I'd have been for Kennedy, unless I'd been instructed otherwise because I, perfectly frankly, didn't like Kefauver [Estes Kefauver]. I wasn't very excited about the '56 Convention.

GRELE: As a member of the Missouri delegation in Congress, did other members from Missouri who attended that Convention tell you anything about the

crucial vote that Missouri cast in the Convention?

BOLLING: No, I didn't hear anything about it from

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them. I heard some conversations which I don't remember very well from both Speaker Rayburn and the Major Majority Leader John W.

McCormack [John William McCormack] later on, say in '57 and '58, about what had happened in that Convention. What they said was that all the charges that were made about what Rayburn did and what McCormack did just weren't so. I never knew whether that meant anything or not, but that's all I knew about the '56 Convention—casual conversation over a drink.

GRELE: In 1960 you were mentioned as a possibility for appointment as Permanent Chairman of the Democratic National Convention to be held that year in Los Angeles.

BOLLING: That was never a possibility. I got a lot of mention on it but I, as a reasonably intelligent politician, knew it couldn't happen for a very simple reason. A man from Missouri was also running for President,

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and he was running as a dark horse, deadlock candidate. The last person who would ever be Permanent Chairman of the Convention would be the man whose senior senator was running in that way. No sane person would really think that I had a chance, and I never thought I had a chance. I never was interested or even excited about it.

GRELE: Did you attend the 1960 Convention?

BOLLING: No, I did not and I'll tell you why. Maybe that'll be interesting. I don't know. Mr. Rayburn asked me to. He asked me to go out there and work for Johnson. At this stage of the game I wasn't for Johnson; I was nominally for Symington [Stuart Symington, II], but I expected Kennedy to win. So a person who has his senior senator a candidate, who is very much against another candidate, who is very much of the opinion that a third candidate, namely Kennedy, is going to win,

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the only place for him is as far away from the Convention as he can get. And that's where I was.

GRELE: Were you at all aware of the possibility of the vice presidential nomination going to Mr. Johnson?

BOLLING: No. Nothing could have surprised me more.

GRELE: Did you expect it to go to Mr. Symington?

BOLLING: No, I didn't expect it to go to Mr. Symington. I didn't have any idea of where they were going to put it. I did know this—that I thought by then I knew them reasonably well in terms of their operations—I knew that the vice presidential nomination would go to the man they thought would be most useful in carrying the country. Now it never occurred to me that they would offer it to Johnson, or that Johnson would take it.

GRELE: Did you ever confer with anyone on it?

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BOLLING: No, no. You see, I stay out of.... For obvious reasons in that particular situation I stayed out of them, but generality I stay out of them. I don't fancy myself a national politician in that sense.

GRELE: During the campaign you served on the Congressional Liaison Committee of the Democratic National Committee?

BOLLING: Yes, I was the Chairman of that committee.

GRELE: What were your functions? What did you do?

BOLLING: I had a variety of chores at that time and this is the one I worked on. We set up a committee with the approval of the Speaker, the Majority Leader, and the Chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, Mike Kirwan [Michael J. Kirwan]. Our appearance was—and this is the only part that I'll put off for a little while, somewhere in that legal agreement—our appearance—what we said we were trying to do—was

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to help members of Congress get elected. What we really were trying to do was to not only coordinate the campaigns in critical areas of the House members with the presidential campaign, we were trying to blackjack members of Congress into supporting the ticket because a vast number of them knew that they were stronger than the presidential candidate in their area. We worked out a technique whereby we did more things for members of Congress than the National Committee had done before including—the critical thing really was allowing them to have a minute or two, sort of “piggy back” on a major presidential television speech. They'd cut in in their area. This was quite an expensive project. I don't

know what it finally ended up costing because this wasn't my business. We did do things for them. It was a carrot and stick technique. We were trying to get people to get out and

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pitch. because we knew it was going to be close. I was far enough on the inside so that I could see the polls that I had to see to make reasonable judgments. Everybody knew that it was going to be terribly close, and I spent two full months doing just what I've described. I traveled all over and I talked on the phone all over and tried to work these things out in such a way that we could get more and more people working for the President as well as for themselves. That would involve people who were in critical states. We made contributions, I guess—I didn't follow the contributions; I made recommendations and then forgot about them—but I would guess that we made contributions to candidates for Congress that didn't have a chance to win. We'd give them a contribution because we thought they might strengthen the Democratic vote in that state enough to carry

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that state. It was that kind of an operation.

GRELE: Did you make your recommendations to Robert Kennedy?

BOLLING: Well, there were—you know—operational.... I worked through one of the three of the executive bunch, O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien], Donahue [Richard K. Donahue] and Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan]. If they were major, I went to Bobby; sometimes to Bobby in person, and sometimes through Seigenthaler [John Seigenthaler].

GRELE: What was your impression of the staff?

BOLLING: Well, it's the best staff I ever worked with. I thought it was the best run campaign I'd ever seen or heard of. I've been involved slightly in a lot of different kinds of campaigns, and I found Bobby the kind of person to work with that I enjoyed. I found him quick to make a decision. We got along very well.

GRELE: What particular areas of the country gave

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you the most trouble?

BOLLING: Well, the one that's really the worst disappointment of them all was—I finally figured out in the last few weeks that if we were right on Ohio—and that was at a time when everyone was saying we were going to carry Ohio—and if we were right on Ohio, that the place I needed to work was California. I had a

rather interesting experience on that because the now-Senator Teddy Kennedy [Edward Moore Kennedy] was out there covering the West Coast, and it was a little touchy to say that things were messed up in California. I checked around with O'Brien and Donahue and found out that if anyone was going to say that it's California that needed some extra help, it was going to have to be me. So I went into Bob and outlined what—roughly what I've said now; that I'd done what I thought could be done in this area and this

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area and this area and this area. I stayed out of some areas, of course, like New York and the Northeast I didn't fool with at all, and I messed with the South almost not at all. I worked with the central, western part of the country—middle Atlantic, I guess it is, to the West. I just said, "I think I ought to go out there and spend the rest of the time out there. It looks to me like it's a state we can carry that's utterly fouled up. You've got the pros fighting the amateurs and the amateurs cutting up everyone, and I'm supposed to be able to get along with both so maybe I ought to go." And he looked at me pretty hard, and we didn't mention who was supervising it for the Kennedy forces. He looked at me pretty hard for a minute, maybe, and then he said, "All right, go." And he said, "When are you going?" I said, "I think I'll go as soon as I can get a ticket."

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So I went out the next morning, I believe, and as I arrived I was greeted by some people that I knew who told me that we might just as well wait because Bobby was coming in on the next plane. We then proceeded to spend a week, roughly, working with congressmen because the congressmen out there were the key. If we could have gotten anything like the congressional vote for Kennedy in southern California, we would have carried the state. I forget the figures; I'm not good at remembering those kinds of things. But obviously we could have beaten Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon] if we'd been able to produce down there, and obviously the thing that we were trying to solve there was the right problem; that you couldn't get the Unruh [Jesse M. Unruh] people together with the Club people. I could get along with both of them.

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I could go with both batches to parties, and everything would be fine. But you get them in the same room, and they'd start fighting, almost fist fighting.

GRELE: Which group would you say failed to deliver?

BOLLING: Well, it isn't a question so much of delivery. I think Unruh made a mistake on absentees. I think we got outdone on absentees. And I think the Club people were Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] people, and I think they were sitting on their hands. I don't think we ever managed to motivate them. I don't know whose fault it was; I only spent a week out there. The thing that was interesting about it is that

Bobby recognized that it was such a rough situation that not only should I be there but he should be there, which is

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a hell of a lot more significant, obviously, than a guy that's running a Congressional Liaison Committee. So really I don't know what it proves. It just proves that we had the right diagnosis in that place but we couldn't get the remedy.

GRELE: Well, it's a new interpretation. The standard interpretation is that the Central Valley didn't deliver—the migrants from Oklahoma and Arkansas—because of the religious question.

BOLLING: That may be so, but I don't believe it. I think we should have carried down there. Even in that conservative territory we should have done better. You can get a whole range of interpretations depending on who you talk to, I guess. My memory is that the North didn't do as well as they said they would and you had this

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problem with the Central Valley; you had the problem I'm talking about in the South. It would probably take a smarter man than I—a man with more information than I—to put it all together.

GRELE: In your book you say that the idea of a change in the Rules Committee [House Committee on Rules] was your suggestion?

BOLLING: Well, very—as a matter of fact, on this California trip.... You see, the liberal group, the Democratic Study Group, to which I did not initially belong because I wanted to stay loose so that I could work with Rayburn and with them without any tag on me, had pressed for rules change in 1958 and gotten turned down. They thought they had a commitment from Rayburn that he would get out what they wanted—you know, what was in the program. They

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didn't, couldn't have had a commitment like that because Rayburn just couldn't have given it. There was nothing wrong with him in 1958, he just couldn't have made that kind of commitment; it was a misunderstanding. It's one of those verbal things. They think they've got notes that prove he made a commitment; I talked to him within an hour of his having discussed it with them, and I know what he thought he said. But it doesn't make any difference. I had started working from that moment on. I had tried to persuade him, incidentally, to go for some kind of change in '58. Without telling the liberal group that I was

doing this, I was trying just as hard as I could in my personal contacts with him. I couldn't persuade him.

Then I proceeded to do two things

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in the next two years. In 1959 and 1960, as a member of the Rules Committee, instead of waiting when we didn't have the votes, I'd force a vote, so that time after time we were getting clobbered by that six-six setup. It was getting clearer and clearer to the public, to the special interest groups who support the legislation that I was interested in, to the Speaker, that something had to be done; that this was an intolerable situation. I was trying to dramatize it through action in the Rules Committee and through publicity. At the same time, every time I talked to any group that was possibly friendly to this point of view or interested in this point of view or should be interested in this point of view, I would hammer at this point that we must do something. All through this business from September

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to November in 1960, everywhere I went, this was my theme song so that we'd generated a considerable amount of labor-liberal interest. As a matter of fact, most labor organizations—most liberal organizations—would not commit themselves to a candidate until the candidate had committed himself—I mean a candidate for congress—to some kind of rules change. I had sense enough to know and so was able to persuade everybody else that the key to any rules change, regardless of the outcome of the election but assuming a Democratic victory, was going to be Rayburn. Unless we had Rayburn it didn't make a damn who else we had, including the President. We had to have Rayburn because he was the one who could give us that little tiny margin that we finally won by, although we needed

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everything else too.

So I took advantage of the last day, I guess, that Bobby and I were out in California together. We finished up and we had a long and leisurely lunch, and I went into this problem at some length with him. His brother had had some familiarity with it because of the rump session of Congress in which everything was frustrated in part by the Rules Committee. Bobby listened very, very carefully and asked a lot of questions, and we went over it at length. When the election was over I called Bobby—I made a routine report on the night of the election as a Congressman from Kansas city—I called Bobby, I can't remember if it was the next day or the day after, and said that I thought that one of the matters of the highest possible

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priority was the problem of the rules change; that his brother, I was sure, was aware of the necessity if he was going to get a program passed, and that I didn't think that the day after the

election—or whatever it was—was too soon to start thinking about it. Well, he said, “You’ve got to talk to him about it. You’ve got to talk to Jack about it.” I said, “Do I call him or does he call me?” And he said, “He’ll call you.”

And again, I don’t have the right kind of memory—I don’t remember if it was the same day or the next day—but within two or three days of the election I got the call from the President elect, and he started out by telling me, “Bobby says you did a hell of a good job and one of the jobs that made

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it possible...” and made me feel that he knew something about the operation I’d just finished, which is not an unpleasant feeling for any politician, and then proceeded to go into the rules thing. He obviously had been totally briefed on it. I might have mentioned this in the book. I don’t remember. He knew as much about it as anybody could except somebody who had been there in the brawls as I had. And he said, “Well, what should we do?” I was for purging Colmer [Congressman William Meyers Colmer, Jr.] for a variety of reasons including the fact that I thought it would probably in the end help save some of our southern liberals who were being shot down by conservatives, who were pointing out that the liberal Democratic majority was never doing anything against the conservative Democrats; they just let them have their

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boodle and get along fine and vote against them. This was murder for the southern liberal like Carl Elliott [Carl A. Elliott], or somebody like that. And he didn’t make any commitment to anything, except that he was going to have Rayburn down and talk to him, and he was going to talk to him about this. I pointed out to him that we had to keep it loose, and with all due respect to the presidency, Rayburn was the absolute key; that unless we had Rayburn and accepted his plan that we just didn’t have a prayer. And I said, “I think it’s going to be a brutally tough fight. My judgment is that we can win it by a very narrow margin if everybody puts their stack in, and if we’re all united on one plan.”

Well, that was the end of that. I heard about this and that and the other

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thing through the papers and through calls but not from him or from Bobby. But it was clear—there wasn’t any question—that this was of top priority. I read about the Rayburn visit down there, and a lot of people were calling Rayburn. I wouldn’t call Rayburn.

GRELE: Excuse me for interrupting right here, but what were the relations between John Kennedy and Speaker Rayburn? Were they warm and friendly or still cool?

BOLLING: They were really sort of interesting. Rayburn was really a remarkable old boy. He was as against Kennedy as a human being can get. I used to really

have fights with him in his hideaway when he'd tell me he's too young, and I'd come back with the standard answer that, "After all, Mr. Sam, take a look at the people who founded the country." You know, that's the

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easiest way to do it. And I'd say, "You know that he's demonstrated his ability in that fight on the labor bill." But we used to really fight. I was, you know, a pretty close friend of his, and we'd have some pretty rough ones. A couple of times he just shut me up.

But once the man was a nominee of the Democratic Party, Rayburn was for him, and he was for him—not just part for him—he was for him. The same thing was true of Harry S. Truman. It's characteristic of this type of party wheelhorse. One of the things, by the way, that I forgot to mention is that I did quite a lot of setting up on the meetings of the various Kennedys with Truman after the Convention at the Truman Library. I don't remember the details, but I know that I was constantly involved in trying

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to butter that situation up and improve it, and it worked out pretty well. But Rayburn was wholly for them. Rayburn was very interesting in his relationship to all presidents. He felt that while he might disagree with them, that the President ought to have his chance.

Well, on the rules thing, you know what happened. I've got all of that in the book that I know about. I think that's as full a statement on that thing as I can get. The only thing that isn't in there is that I think I say we ran into each other by accident at a news commentator's—it was Brinkley's [David Brinkley] house—that Bobby and Stewart L. Udall and some of the rest of us decided we had to get together and start the operation; the meetings with Bobby and the tripartite effort instead of just leaving it as a

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single effort. We had a labor effort, we had a House effort, we had a White House, to be, effort. And pretty clearly, if we hadn't had them all and if we hadn't had it coordinated, we wouldn't have won.

GRELE: Were you satisfied with the change in the Rules Committee?

BOLLING: No, I wasn't satisfied, but it was all I could get. I was no more satisfied with that than I was with the reforms that we got this year. While I'm a theoretician in some areas, I'm pretty practical when you get to the wire.

GRELE: What was your impression of President Kennedy's staff in the House rules conflict?

BOLLING: Of his staff?

GRELE: Yes. Did you work with them at all?

BOLLING: Absolutely. Oh, of course.

GRELE: Who?

BOLLING: O'Brien, Donahue, everybody. We worked

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verb closely. You see, Thompson and I were doing the liberal operation; Rayburn was doing the Rayburn operation and that tied in with the liberal House operation which was in turn tied in with the labor, civil rights operation and all the other things we could pick up. Any group that we could find a half a vote in we went after—any outside group that might produce a vote, like savings and loans, you know—all the interest groups that had ever had their legislation damaged by the Rules Committee. We went after everybody. We tried everything we could think of.

I think that the President probably would have preferred not to have to get so heavily involved, and I know they were desperately worried about it. There's no polite way to put what Bobby did to

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me one day. He called me up one day and just chewed right through me, saying, "It looks like you're going to be responsible for the President of the United States, in his first effort, suffering a defeat." And I said, "Now, calm down. I never told you this was going to be easy. It's going to be a tough fight. I think we can win it narrowly if we all do everything we can." But he was furious. He was just as mean as a snake. It didn't alter my feelings about him. I happen to like Bobby. But it was that rough a fight, and I thought they did a great job. This was the first time I really began to have confidence that they were going to be able to do an effective job with the Hill. I'd been very worried about that. I knew they were tremendous political operators nationally. That was

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obvious from the way they ran the Convention, the way they ran those state campaigns. But I didn't have any idea that they were going to turn out to be intelligent about the Hill, and part of this was because I didn't quite understand what the President was in relation to legislation except for that one bill. I knew he had ability but I didn't know how much understanding he had. But I then worked with the same people I'd worked with in the campaign, with the same people I then worked with in Congressional Liaison over a long period of time—well, the whole period of his life, and actually right up to date because some of them are still around, as you know.

GRELE: You were a member of the Rules Committee when the President's

legislation came to the House. The Rules Committee continued, I believe, to scuttle a great deal of that program.

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BOLLING: Not very much, really. I think if you'd have looked carefully—everybody seems to forget this—I think if you'd have looked carefully at the legislation in 1961—that was our good year—if you'd have looked carefully at the legislation in 1961 you'd find that we scuttled one bill, one major bill. That major bill was the school bill, of course; and of course that was important, and it went down the drain on the religious issue. But I don't know of another major bill that we blocked that year. I don't know of anything in the program that was blocked. Now, there were some things delayed. 1962 was sort of a deader year. I wouldn't be able to say how much we'd done then, but my memory is that although we had a very tight majority that we really had a majority and with Rayburn in the background and my

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knowledge of the various people that were on that committee, we usually got a majority for what the President and the Speaker wanted, and they were together most of the time. The one debacle was the school bill.

GRELE: Do you recall any of the debates within the committee over the school bill? You say it was the religious issue. Was it the religious issue?

BOLLING: It was the religious issue because it just so happened—and nobody's ever been able to quite figure this out except that it's obvious—is that Jim Delaney [James J. Delaney], who is the man who ended up voting with the conservatives on this, is a man who in his head and by conviction believes that way on the school bill. Just by a coincidence, which is not very surprising, he has a constituency that's just like that too.

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I knew it way in advance that unless we had a miracle, Delaney was going to vote his conviction. He wasn't voting his religion, he was voting his conviction, and that's fair enough.

GRELE: You don't think that there's any other way the legislation could have been handled?

BOLLING: Well, it couldn't have been handled worse. It was butchered from beginning to end.

GRELE: You mean sending it up as an omnibus package to begin with?

BOLLING: Well, the whole thing was messy. I think probably my wife [Jim Grant Bolling] would remember more detail on this because this was one of her bills. It included the incredible performance—and I guess this is another item that we'll have to watch—of Ribicoff [Abraham Alexander Ribicoff] meeting with Rayburn and not telling him the truth about what was in the compromise bill.

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Maybe he didn't know. But Mr. Rayburn was about the last man I've ever met that I wouldn't be sure that I knew what I was talking about when I went in to talk with him. I'm not accusing Abe of anything; it's just that all I know is that he didn't give him an accurate description of the content of the bill. This was one of those many compromises. The whole thing—I don't know—there's no point in second guessing it. I thought it could have been handled a good deal better. I thought with a little luck we might have made it, but, as it was it just got worse and worse and worse.

GRELE: What particular title of the bill did Ribicoff and Rayburn discuss?

BOLLING: I don't remember. I'm sorry, I don't even remember which compromise it was. There were so many of them going around. It was

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an absolutely insane performance in terms of that. I think this is one of the times when you had two axes going from downtown. I think you had the congressional liaison people and the departmental liaison people working one way and I think you probably had Ribicoff and Wilbur J. Cohen and Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] working the other way. Well, Ted Sorensen has many fine qualities, but he's never been anything at all good on legislation. He's never known anything about legislation that I know of. And the same is true of Wilbur Cohen. He writes a great bill but he doesn't know anything about the legislative process really; he probably thinks he does. And Abe is Abe. I mean he's a fine fellow and all of that, but I don't think he ever got on top of the problem.

GRELE: Do you recall any of the other legislation that came before the Committee?

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BOLLING: Well, we passed all of the stuff that we hadn't passed in '60, and you know, I've been at it too long to remember what.

GRELE: Did Medicare ever come before the Rules Committee?

BOLLING: No, it never came out of the Committee on Ways and Means. This year is the only year it's ever come out of the Committee.

GRELE: And the Civil Rights Bill of 1963—did it get that far before...

BOLLING: No. Well, that bill—you see, probably the most interesting thing about the bill that passed in 1964 is that Johnson got a tremendous amount of credit for what Kennedy did. That was an example of just outrageous butchering in a committee. For some reason or another they never could put together a bill in committee...

GRELE: Judiciary?

BOLLING: Judiciary—that could pass the House. The

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liberals kept jockeying with the conservatives, and you got into this totally chaotic situation which the President then bailed out over a weekend by getting Halleck [Charles A. Halleck] and McCormack and McCulloch [William M. McCulloch] and Celler [Emanuel Celler] and I guess some others to agree on what was the final product. There was a tremendous amount of jockeying preliminary to that. On occasion, in this case, I was fighting the Administration because I never seemed to get it through the head of the Justice Department that there were two things that had to be in there. It's sort of amusing that they're the two things that may turn out to be the most effective. One is that we had to have something about the withholding of federal funds in the event of discrimination in the programs, and they didn't want that. We had to fight that one in.

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GRELE: Why?

BOLLING: They thought it was going to be too controversial, too tough, and it was going to alienate people. Maybe they were thinking about the presidential campaign of 1964, I don't know. We had a terrible time getting them to ever take the FEPC—it's called something else now, Equal Employment Opportunity—but we just had an awful time convincing them, and we convinced them. They didn't convince us. But once they were convinced, they stayed hitched, and as you know—I don't know the details of what happened over that weekend, but I know that the President pulled it off with his own little hands, and nobody else did and nobody else could. It was totally screwed up before he got into it. The events, the sequence I'm not prepared to try to remember in detail, but we'd think we had something fixed and then it would blow up, and then we'd start over and

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it would blow up and you know...

GRELE: After the death of Speaker Rayburn you made an attempt to secure the Speakership. Did the Administration help you in any way?

BOLLING: I didn't make an attempt to secure the Speakership. A lot of people think I ran against McCormack. I ran against the present Majority Leader [Carl B. Albert]. Perfectly frankly, I would've run against McCormack if Kennedy hadn't been a Catholic President. Of course I wanted to get elected to the leadership, but my main purpose was to protest what I thought was going to be weak leadership. I did what I had to do when I found out—I had one of these situations when I would get up to 110 and go back to 75 when I needed 130. I asked for no help. In fact, I called up Bobby Kennedy, told him what I was going to do in advance and said, "I do not expect to

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have any help from anybody unless I am sure I can win, and two or three votes might make the difference." And I never got that close. So I asked for no help and I got no help.

GRELE: You say you would have run against the Speaker if the President hadn't been a Catholic?

BOLLING: Well you see, I'm a Protestant and there was too much religious issue around, and I don't like it. This may be mawkish on my part, but the last thing I will ever do is exacerbate that kind of a fuss. I figured that if a Protestant ran against McCormack that it would be taken as—that would be used—that would be part of the news. I think, frankly, that McCormack would have been easier to beat than Albert because there were an awful lot of people who wanted to defeat him. But there were also an awful

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lot of people who didn't want me in leadership.

GRELE: Anyone in the Administration?

BOLLING: I don't think anyone in the Administration. I think the Administration generally would have been all for me. They would have been pleased if I'd won. But they couldn't really have anything against Albert because Albert had been very cooperative as Whip. They were in a very awkward position, and I recognized that and the last thing I wanted to do.... The first thing I didn't want to do was to disturb what I thought was a calming down of the religious issue; I didn't want to do anything to bring that back up. And the second thing is I didn't want to embarrass them. But I still wanted to make my point.

GRELE: Did you ever expect to achieve your goals of so radically altering the

seniority system?

BOLLING: Of course I did; I still do. I think this

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is one of those things that will inevitably happen. Now it may not happen in exactly the manner in which I suggest it should be, but we're going to have within the next few years as incompetent group of chairmen as you can imagine, some of them liberals. A lot of the good, able Southerners are going—a lot of the moderate Southerners. Oren Harris, for an example—I don't always agree with him, but he's a tremendously able man. We're going to end up with a bunch of people who just aren't competent to take a bill to the floor, and I think gradually, when we get over the euphoria of having 290 odd votes in the House of Representatives, which I think we'll get over in early November of 1966, then we'll see—the point that I make in my book—I think will be clear again; that the irresponsibility in the Congress is not that of both

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parties, it's that of one party—the Democratic Party—and that the only way they can be responsible is to alter this system which has no rationale.

GRELE: Did you ever have a discussion with John Kennedy about this system?

BOLLING: No, I planned to wait and then discuss it with him after the 1964 election. I had a theory—maybe I'll come up and listen to these things someday—I had a theory about what Mr. Kennedy was trying to do—what the President was trying to do. And I think he was very shrewd in it, and I think Mr. Johnson was the beneficiary of it. I think Mr. Kennedy was planning to make his great record as a President in his second term, and I think he played almost all his cards except perhaps the tax card and the civil rights card—the tax card, perhaps even that—but I think everything he did was pointed

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toward the 1964 election. I think he probably prayed that Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater] would be his opponent. I know he wanted Goldwater as an opponent. And I think he figured that he would then have the majorities with which to pass a great program. Well, you know, it's quite clear that if we'd gotten those majorities and if he were president, I would've been down to see him in a hurry to suggest that now is the time to make the party responsible—not to him, but to itself on the Hill; that the majority of the Majority ought to run itself. And I planned to see him just as quickly as I could after his reelection. I didn't bother later on.

GRELE: My next question we've probably covered. It reads, "You had become one of the leading spokesmen in Washington for congressional

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reform. In light of the impasse of 1962 to '63, do you have any comments on the problems that President Kennedy's program ran into of its structure, of its form?"

BOLLING: Well, I think everything was made more difficult by the way in which we ran ourselves. I believe—I don't know whether the votes would prove it—I think they would. I believe that if we could've gotten Medicare to the floor in '63 or '64 that we would've passed it. I've said flatly that I think it's ridiculous that we were stymied. Obviously—I don't know about Judiciary or Civil Rights, but I do know that we might have been able to move more rapidly and perhaps more effectively on the tax bill. I was willing to go along on that tax bill that we finally voted on because it represented

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a very important modernization of the congressional view of fiscal matters. But that's about all it represented; it wasn't a very good tax bill despite all the conversation. It's doing part of its work, but it could've been a lot better. So I still think that the majority of the Majority which, in essence, has been described as presidential—it's really the platform part of the party on the hill—ought to turn its side of the committees. If we did that, then I think it would've affected his program.

GRELE: As a Congressman from a border state, did you notice any evidence of backlash in 1963 that would've hindered the campaign of '64?

BOLLING: I couldn't see any.

GRELE: Was there any talk about it at that time?

BOLLING: An awful lot of talk about it. I don't

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believe there's any—I think there is some now—but I don't think there was then. The backlash is going to come off the housing kind of thing, and it's going to come off the bussing. It'll come there, in my judgment. But I don't think it was observable in 1963. Everybody was talking about it, but I don't see any reason why we would've.... You see, what made it impossible for it to really kick at that stage was that for the first time in many a year the great American organized religious groups came in heavily on an issue. That's somewhat advantageous if you have a political issue and you have Protestant, Catholic and Jew and very few exceptions, either militant or at least with you. And we had a lot of militant—that wasn't accidental. We made some effort to see to it that they were—the ones that were

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well-motivated—were making their views known.

GRELE: When you say “we” you mean...

BOLLING: Everybody. It’s the same operation. You see, one of the things I think I ought to put in here sort of voluntarily is that one of the things that was really interesting about the Kennedy Administration and I’m not sure that Mr. Johnson really understands it—he may; O’Brien keeps saying he does—but what the Kennedy Administration did that was unique in its relations with the Hill was that it put presidential people in departments as congressional liaison officers. My wife was a Kennedy person; she wasn’t a Ribicoff person or a Cohen person. She was Kennedy. And he had people like that—O’Brien had people like that—in all of the departments. So when you worked, you always said “we”

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because you worked with everybody that was any use to you in that kind of an operation. That was particularly true, that I would be involved in all those things when Rayburn was alive because he was part of the “we.” I don’t want to give the wrong impression. I don’t have the same kind of relationship with McCormack, not because of any malice on either side but simply because we just don’t broadcast on the same wave length.

GRELE: Did your relations or your position in the Congress change on the death of the Speaker?

BOLLING: Well, I’ve been described in various ways: as a Rayburn lieutenant or a Rayburn leg man or a Rayburn flunky. It depends on who’s talking. But, you see, I enjoyed working for Mr. Rayburn and found it a creative role to play. Mr. Rayburn and I,

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although rather different in ages and different in some respects in background, saw things very much alike. I’m a good deal more liberal than he was, although he was always liberal enough. There was a congenial, effective working relationship. Mr. McCormack tried to continue this behavior without any particular arrogance—he knows I’m a good operator. And it just didn’t work. I don’t think it’s anybody’s fault.

GRELE: This probably isn’t important to the tape, but how did you first become acquainted with speaker Rayburn and come under his aegis?

BOLLING: I came here with a knife in my back. I had defeated the candidate that Truman was for in the 1948 primary, and a man who had served in

congress for some years on the Committee on Ways and Means and by 1949 was a federal judge, had written to all his friends on Ways and Means saying

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what a terrible fellow I was. The reputation I had when I got here was that I was half communist and half gangster. Well, along about 1949, late 1949, I had that corrected. Mr. Truman was my enthusiastic friend and supporter, and this gradually filtered up here. I worked hard, and Rayburn always did watch people. That's one of the things he said every time he was publicly interviewed, that he watched the younger men, and I was reasonably effective. So I was sort of invited in to the "board of education"—that's not what he liked to call it; he didn't like to call it anything—but I was invited in sort of on a one-shot basis to see how I'd behave, and I was invited again, then I was given a standing invitation and then I was fussed at for not coming more often, and then I went all the time.

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GRELE: What were the opinions of the senior people of John Kennedy?

BOLLING: Rayburn died his enthusiastic supporter. He thought he was a strong president and a good man, and that he was an effective president. He was, I would say, totally approving. This might be of interest. Mr. Johnson was always impeccable in his behavior. I saw a good deal of him as vice president in the same place as long as Mr. Rayburn was alive. I don't see how a man could behave any better than he did as vice president. I should think it'd be pretty awkward for him, but he behaved perfectly.

GRELE: Is there anything we've missed?

BOLLING: Not that I can think of.

GRELE: Do you have any final comments you'd like to offer to the record of John Kennedy, his place in history?

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BOLLING: Well, I think he's got an adequate place in history. I think it's a tragedy, an obvious tragedy. It's a cliché to say that I bitterly regret the fact that he didn't have the opportunity to reap the benefits of his planning, I think it would've been a satisfaction to him and to all the rest of us who were involved. I think, in truth, we would have enjoyed it rather more this year of we'd been doing it for Kennedy.

GRELE: Thank you very much, Congressman.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]

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