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Interview #5:
Breakdown of Bipartisanship
(Wednesday, June 13, 1984)
Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

WILCOX: Don, it occurred to me that there were several things that I might have commented on in the course of our discussions, but then again I may have overlooked them. One of them had to do with the problem of bipartisanship. As you know, there is very little of real substance or real importance that gets through the House and Senate without support from both political parties. So that in effect we do have a great deal of bipartisan cooperation as things stand, because the wingspread of the two parties is so great and there's so much overlapping that the president can't ever get anything of importance through unless he gets some conservative support from the Republicans, or some moderate--or conservative--support from the Democrats, or vice versa depending on who is in the White House. Some of President Johnson's strongest opponents were Democrats, and some of President Nixon's toughest critics were Republicans. So there is, and I think the last two administrations have shown this quite clearly, a need on Capitol Hill for greater party unity and greater party discipline. The president ought to be able to count upon his party supporters in the Senate to help him with his program.
I also wanted to say something about the transition period, because it seems to me that the presidents that come and go tend to

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make the same mistakes. If you look at President Carter's tenure, his tour of duty here in Washington, he brought in some nine Georgia supporters who were with him in the White House and they made a good many mistakes because they didn't know very much about Washington, they didn't know very much about the White House or the Congress, and how the Executive Branch functioned. During the campaign the Carter forces boasted of the fact that they were from outside of Washington, as though that were a great asset. It might have been in the course of the election--it had some appeal in the country--but it certainly wasn't after they got here in Washington to begin their job in the White House. President Reagan made the same mistake when he brought in a number of people who had no experience really in government, or at least in the Federal government. They didn't know the Washington bureaucracy, they didn't know very much about Congress or how the government machinery operates, and furthermore they didn't know very much about foreign policy. So you have the two presidents coming into office making almost the same kind of mistake, as though one

wouldn't learn from the other. It takes far too long for an administration to get underway, before the appointments can be completed, before plans can be laid, a year is lost before any real progress can be made on the substance of foreign policy. That applies to domestic policy too, to a certain extent.

To go back, for a moment, to the question of bipartisanship. There were, I think, probably three major foreign policy victories for President Carter: the Panama Canal treaties, the sale of jet planes to Arab countries, and the lifting of the Turkish arms embargo. These were three of the most important victories that he achieved during his tenure in the White House, and these were all made possible by Republican votes. Without fairly strong Republican support they would have been defeated, there's not question about it. So, as we emphasize the importance of getting support from the other side of the aisle in the House and Senate, it's apparent that that is done all the time.

Now, when you look at the role of Congress in foreign policy and you look at the instances where Congress has had a very substantial influence, you have to ask the question: who is right and who is wrong? In the case of Angola, Congress made clear that we should not be involved in Angola, and this gave to the Soviet Union a green light to proceed to do anything they wanted to do there, with the realization that the United States would not intervene. The same is true of Senator Henry Jackson's amendment on trade relations with the Soviet Union, when he specified--the amendment that he sponsored specified--that we should not take certain steps to improve trade relations unless the Soviet Union would agree to permit a certain number of Jewish emigrants to come to the United States or to Israel, or at least to leave the Soviet Union. Now, he argued that this was

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an important aspect of our negotiations with the Soviet Union in that it put pressure on the U.S.S.R. to move in the right direction. The administration argued that it prevented any reasonable negotiations with the Soviet Union. Who was right and who was wrong? Clearly in these cases, and in other similar cases, Congress was not doing anything illegal. They thought they were doing something that would help our foreign policy. That was their best judgment. But the administration, I think, felt that they were meddling needlessly in our foreign policy. This question of whether Congress is meddling or whether it isn't meddling will be discussed, I'm sure, for many years to come.

RITCHIE: Do you think the Congress should take an independent role on an issue where they differ strongly from an administration, or should they allow an administration to design foreign policy and try to check what they disagree with?

WILCOX: Well, clearly they have a constitutional right to express their opinion and to do what they think is in the interest of the Republic. I think in the case of Angola, it was wrong to signal to the world that the United States would not interfere, or not play any role in Angola, because you really need to keep your

enemy guessing a little more than that. It gave the Soviets in effect, a green light to go ahead and do what they wanted to do.

RITCHIE: Is that one of the real drawbacks of the Congress' role in foreign policy, that it's hard for the Congress to do anything covertly, that everything the Congress does is overt?

WILCOX: It has to be, and of course the changes that have taken place in the 1970s have provided for a more open Congress and a more open foreign policy. Whether you like it or not, this is what's going to happen. I've been interested though, to see--I've been reading some material about the parliamentary democracies in Western Europe. In every case, I think, including the United Kingdom, France, Western Germany, Italy, the foreign affairs committees don't have the same stature, the same power and authority that our congressional committees have. It's the executive that conducts foreign policy, traditionally, without very much interference from the legislative branch. Of course, there they don't have the separation of powers principle. They have a parliamentary system and the executive leaders are members of the parliamentary body, so the situation is quite different.

But the problem of the Turkish embargo is another case in point, where Congress specified that we couldn't sell arms to Turkey that we had promised her unless real progress was made on the Cyprus question. Well, who is best equipped to determine this problem? The administration felt that Turkey was terribly important to the southern flank of NATO, and that the Turks had made clear that they were

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not going to do anything about Cyprus until the arms embargo was repealed. Whether Congress is in a better position to judge that question is certainly open to consideration. I think what we need to do in cases like that is of course to try and reconcile the differences between the executive and legislative branches, and not let these differences impede the conduct of foreign policy. Congress ought not to obstruct any more than is absolutely essential. You don't want to destroy the efficiency of the executive branch, but on the other hand Congress has a proper role to play. The problem is how to bring these two things together.

I might have said something, too, about the importance of Congress as an educator. Senator Fulbright had an article recently in *Foreign Affairs* in which he emphasizes this point. Josh Billings once said that "it ain't ignorance that causes all the trouble, it's the fact that people know so much that just ain't so!" One of the roles of Congress in looking at our foreign policy problems is to do its share in informing the people of the country about recent developments, about problems that exist, and about options that are available because we clearly need an informed electorate. We clearly need an informed public if we're going to have a foreign policy that's worth a hoot. The task of making the people more aware of foreign policy problems, I think, falls to the Congress, maybe in two ways:

through hearings conducted by the Foreign Relations and Foreign Affairs Committees, and they can do this in a very effective way as

they did some years ago in connection with our policy towards China. I think they helped open up new avenues of thought with respect to that problem. Then the trips back home that the members of Congress make, and the meetings they have with their constituents are important. They can do a great deal to help keep the people back home informed of our foreign policy problems.

RITCHIE: Part of getting publicity requires the cooperation of the press. Did you feel when you worked for the Foreign Relations Committee that the press accurately reflected and reported what was going on? Were they giving enough attention to what the committee was doing, or were they focusing their attention on the president and the State Department?

WILCOX: Well, on the whole, I think the press does a very good job. Certainly the Washington press corps is made up of some of the best informed people in the country. It's a remarkably sharp, intelligent group of people. They do tend to emphasize conflict. They do tend to emphasize differences between the executive and legislative branches, differences of opinion and that sort of thing, rather than emphasizing the positive. But I think in general they do a very good job. They make some mistakes, of course, but on the whole I think they are pretty accurate.

RITCHIE: Did you have to deal with the press much when you were chief of staff?

WILCOX: Oh, yes. The press would come to see me and other members of the staff for background information and for any thoughts that we had about important developments that might have taken place in the committee. They, as you know, go around and pick up pieces of information here and there and the first thing you know they put together a logical, reasonable story. They do turn to the staff quite a bit for information.

With respect to this problem of public opinion, I remember the response of the public to the announcement about the appointment of an ambassador to the Vatican, when Mark Clark's name was put forth early after the war as a possible ambassador to the Vatican. I never saw such a stream of mail that came into Capitol Hill, protests from the Protestant denomination churches and other opponents to the appointment. This led me to feel strongly that the people of the country hadn't really been at all informed about the importance of having a representative at the Vatican at this high level. The Vatican has a great deal of influence in the world. The question isn't whether we approve of Catholicism or whether we are supporting the Pope, the question is whether we have a representative at the Vatican and at other important centers who can be helpful to our foreign policy and who can report back to Washington developments that occur in connection with their particular missions. In this case, the separation of

church and state concept was so strongly supported by the Protestant groups that the president simply had to

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withdraw the nomination of Mark Clark. I'm glad to see that the nomination was recently approved and we do have an ambassador now, because it's a very useful thing to do.

Another case in point, of course, was SALT II. It got all tied up in politics and was never brought to a vote in the Senate. But there was a great emotional content in the arguments against the Soviet Union. It illustrated once again how important public opinion can be in the evolution of our foreign policy. The mail was very heavy on that point. I think that SALT II could have served as a useful stepping stone to continued negotiations with the Soviet Union in the arms control field. It should have been approved.

Then one other point related to that, Don, and I'm through, has to do with what I call open diplomacy. With foreign leaders beating a path to Capitol Hill in order to be where the action is. With the Congress assuming a more and more important role, diplomats and leaders from other countries realize this and come to Capitol Hill to talk to legislative leaders and to the Foreign Relations and other committees. I was in a meeting in Toronto not long ago, where a professor announced that Canada henceforth was going to bypass the State Department in order to take many of its problems directly to Capitol Hill. They have been unhappy because we haven't done very much about acid rain, and we haven't done very much about the fisheries treaty, and whether they can get sufficient action through the executive

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branch has I think been a question in Canadian minds. They apparently have decided to bypass the State Department on several issues and see if they can't get some satisfactory action from Capitol Hill. Now, if this is done by a good many other countries it can revolutionize the conduct of our foreign policy, because if Congress gets involved in these negotiations and discussions more and more, what's going to happen to the State Department and executive branch?

RITCHIE: That could be the reason why the Canadians are going to build their Chancellory at the base of Capitol Hill.

WILCOX: Yes. Well, they'll be closely situated there next to the center of power.

RITCHIE: Well, how would you think Congress would respond to individual countries bringing their cases to them?

WILCOX: For quite some time members of Congress have invited visiting dignitaries, prime ministers and so on who come to Washington. It's appropriate to have them on Capitol Hill for a luncheon or to have them visit the Foreign Relations Committee. The Chancellor of Germany came after the war on a number of occasions as did a number of other top people. But it's a little different now. I recall when, I think it was the foreign minister of Israel came and gathered together on Capitol Hill, without any intervention from the

executive branch, fifty or sixty senators to talk with him about Israel and our relations with Israel. This is the sort of thing that can really complicate the conduct of foreign policy and make the executive branch's job much more difficult. I think though, given the increasingly important role of Congress, it's almost inevitable that we will have more and more people going to Capitol Hill seeking out members to help them with particular foreign policy questions. Of course, they've always had members of the Senate and House to embassies for dinner and things of that sort, hoping to influence them one way or another. But this move, if it's continued and developed, could revolutionize the whole problem of the conduct of foreign policy and diplomacy in the modern world. If they deliberately bypass the executive branch to get to Congress, it has some objectionable features certainly.

RITCHIE: There has also been some criticism recently of ten House members who signed a letter to the Nicaraguan government, trying to make suggestions as to how to better relations between Nicaragua and the United States. Jim Wright, the Democratic leader in the House, was one of the signers, and the Republicans in the House have been criticizing that as a violation of the Logan Act, arguing that members of the House have no right to interject themselves into American relations with another nation. But you are indicating that this goes on all the time and may increase.

WILCOX: Well, it's easy enough to violate the Logan Act, but when a number of members of the House or the Senate are involved it's difficult for the administration to say very much or to do very much. When it's just one congressman or one senator that's a little different, but when a group is involved that's a horse of a different color. You remember the group, I think it was some seven congressmen who went to Grenada after the Grenada incident took place. They came back and supported the position of President Reagan and the Congress dropped the whole matter of opposing our action in Grenada. In some cases these trips can be helpful to the administration as they were in the case of the Panama Canal . So the executive branch has to be very careful in its dealing with Congress as to whether they smile upon that kind of intervention or whether they frown upon it.

RITCHIE: I suppose the most notable example when you were with the committee was when Joe McCarthy tried to negotiate a treaty with the Greek shipping lines to get them to stop transporting goods to Communist nations, around 1953.

WILCOX: Well, you've jarred my memory a bit there, Don. I don't recall that particular incident. But the point is you simply can't have five hundred and thirty-five Secretaries of State. You can't have foreign policy by committee. One of the things that is quite clear in the business world is that you can't do business through a committee. I think the same thing is true to a certain

extent in the government. You need to have somebody in charge, and there isn't anybody in charge on Capitol Hill. When you have five hundred and thirty-five people looking at a problem from differing points of view it's very hard to get a consensus on some of these matters. So while the Congress has a great deal to offer, and there are many advantages in having Congress involved in foreign policy, nevertheless it has to recognize that the principal responsibility lies with the executive branch and with the President of the United States.

But the main thing is to make sure that the two branches work together. Otherwise we can't expect the Constitution to function effectively. The question is not whether the president is more important than the Congress or vice versa. The real question remains--how can we develop the kind of teamwork and cooperation between the two branches that is essential in our check and balance system of government.

End of Interview #4