

Maureen and Mike

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**Interviewee: George Reedy**

**Interviewer: Gregory Olson**

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**Project: Gregory Olson Interviews about Mike Mansfield Oral History Collection**

Greg Olson: George Reedy. The person asking the questions is Gregory Olson. The interview was conducted September 15, 1987 in Professor Reedy's office at Marquette University. I just noticed in a book that I was reading by Gibbons on Vietnam, that you were an aide to Senator Johnson as early as 1953.

George Reedy: Oh, sure.

GO: Would you just briefly tell me about how long your involvement with President Johnson was and when it started.

GR: Well from 1951 until 19...1966 and then 1968 one year. Well, what had happened I was a reporter covering the Senate and in the fall of '48...Do you want the whole story?

GO: Love it.

GR: In the fall of '48 the House Agriculture Committee had chartered a bus and they moved up and down the country talking to farmers and the United Press sent me along to cover it. It was a very interesting story. One of the most interesting I ever handled. And quite a few newspapers, one of them being a Texas newspaper man named Dave Botter, from the Dallas News. Well '48 of course was the year that Lyndon Johnson won the Senate race by the famous 82 votes. Actually it was more than eighty-two but that is a long involved thing that I don't really think you'd be interested in. He wanted somebody, a newspaper man on his staff, who knew something about Washington, and Dave Potter and I had gotten fairly close on that trip and I learned later that Dave had recommended me. I didn't, I wasn't aware of that fact for a long time. But when Dave threw a cocktail party for Johnson to introduce him to the press and I was invited. Then later on I dug up an exclusive on Johnson going to head a committee to look into the Korean War. I discovered a little bit later that the thing was put in front of me so I'd stumble over it. And it became my principle story. I was uh... it was a very interesting committee. It did this excellent work in terms of investigating copper shortages and aluminum shortages, that sort of thing. And in 1952 Johnson asked me to bring my family down to Texas during the Congressional recess, which I did, and I helped him out with the campaign. He didn't do much campaigning. Not that it would have made any difference. Texas was so overwhelmingly Eisenhower it was ridiculous. Of course when the Senate went Republican that meant he no longer had control of the committee. I'd written a speech for him to give at an REA co-op in San Antonio. And the speech made quite a little splash. What I wrote is that ... true that the Republicans had won Congress and won the Presidency, but that the American people weren't going to let them abolish all of the gains, the social gains, of the preceding thirty years,

however many it was. The speech attracted the attention of Dick Russell of Georgia, who was probably the most powerful single individual in the Senate at that point. Most powerful because he was smarter than anybody else. God, that guy had brains. One of the casualties of that year had been Ernest McFarland, who had been the Senate Democratic leader. He had been the leader and Johnson had been the whip. The whip in the Senate, by the way, is something of a misnomer. It is not like the British concept of a whip. The whip in the Senate is really just an assistant leader who helps out. So Johnson called... Russell called Johnson. I was out at the ranch at the time. The ranch was about fifty miles from Austin. Russell told Johnson he just had to become the leader. Nobody else was ready for it. Well that solved the problem because Johnson talking... he said he wanted to keep me on the payroll somehow. Wasn't quite sure how to do it because I wasn't a Texan. Oh, of course as the leader he had the payroll of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee. That took care of that. So I became the executive director of the committee and he became the leader. That's about it.

GO: How did you come to know Mike Mansfield?

GR: Covering of both the House and the Senate. I didn't get to know him very well in the House. Because most of my experience in covering the House was limited to two or three stories. I got so wrapped in Alger Hiss and the communist spy cases ... and also what happened to the Taft Hartly Act that there wasn't much time for me to get to know anybody that was not on those committees. I'd just known Mansfield slightly. Well, in the Senate one was bound to get to know him because he was one of the powers in the Senate. Especially as I was the executive director of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee. It was inevitable.

GO: Do you recall how Senator Johnson happened to choose Mansfield to be his whip in 1956?

GR: Oh sure. It was almost impossible to pick anybody else. The man who had been whip was Earl Clements, from Kentucky, a very able man. One of the ablest whips that the Senate has ever had. I don't think he would have made a good leader, but he was terrific as an assistant leader. He was especially good for Johnson because you know in Kentucky there are real Republicans. In Texas you just have those Republicans around the central part of the state; the German [inaudible] as they call them. And Clements had made the mistake of thinking that his election was fairly well guaranteed and so he had accepted the chairmanship of the Senate Democratic Campaign Committee and spent most of his time getting other Senators elected. And the result was that he didn't spend enough time in Kentucky and he got defeated. Well, he [Johnson] surveyed the Senate situation. There were very few people who were really eligible because the division between North and South was very strong at that point. And you could not put anybody on who was unacceptable to the South and you couldn't put anybody on who was unacceptable to the North. Well the one man who was acceptable to everybody was Mansfield. No question about it. He had not taken part in the seamier side of the debates over civil rights; he was highly respected; known as an intellectual. You added up everything and it came to Mansfield.

GO: How would you describe the relationship between Lyndon Johnson and Senator Mansfield?

GR: Terribly difficult to describe because almost any phrase that I use can give a wrong impression. I would like to say cool, but that gives an idea that they were at daggers heads or loggerheads which they were not. It's just that Mansfield was a reserved, quiet person, never exhibited emotion. Never once did I ever see him exhibit emotion. He would go to a party and just stand there puffing at his pipe, wouldn't talk to anybody. Well, they would talk to him, he was courteous. But to say a relationship... it was a good working relationship but there was certainly no warmth to it, which was unusual because Johnson could be a very warm man. And the relationship between him and Earl Clements had been a warm one.

GO: Well, in looking at the correspondence between them in the 50s. I guess I had been impressed with the warmth, but especially in Johnson's memos to Mansfield. I have one here in which the first sentence about wife and daughters. I don't understand at all and Mansfield has no recollection of what Lyndon Johnson meant by that. But you think that's just reflective of Johnson's personality that he wrote those very warm kinds of memos.

GR: Oh, hell, I wrote that one [laughing], I remember it.

GO: OK. That is very interesting.

GR: I wrote almost all of those letters for him.

GO: OK. That... that helps a great deal. A number of authors in writing about the period of the fifties, Chester Cooper, Walter [Wesley] Fishel, Townsend Hoopes, credit Mansfield with having great influence on Eisenhower administration decisions to back Diem. Do you have any knowledge or recollection of those kinds of things?

GR: No, I'm a little surprised. Do you have any uh... have you found anything in any of the libraries that would back that up?

GO: None. His second report when he went to Vietnam as a member of the Foreign Relations Committee and came back and very clearly saw Diem as the only Nationalist who had any chance at gathering support.

GR: That's possible.

GO: Cooper basically said Eisenhower wrote a letter at that point in which we really started our support of Diem and that the fear of Dulles was that Mansfield had enough power in the Senate to keep the Senate from getting aid if anybody but Diem was backed. And that's the basic argument.

GR: Well, nobody else was backed at that point. Diem was head of the Ho [Ngo] sect which was the only force in South Vietnam which had any possibility of unifying the country. In retrospect I don't think the possibilities were very good, but nevertheless to the extent that there was a possibility to vote Diem out of office [unclear meaning]. I know my own feeling, and I talked to Mansfield in Tokyo many years later, and my own feeling is that, he was very skeptical of almost anything in Vietnam. Because, the same reason why they [?] became skeptical, because there was no foundation for civilian government. That was the great weakness of the whole South Vietnamese division. The French had not educated the Vietnamese to do anything other than war. If they sent any Vietnamese to any school in France, it would be the St. Cyr, the military academy. Whereas the communists had had a lot of people educated in Marx and Engels

Institute in Moscow where they were taught not only how to fight but also the arts of government. And when it came to governing I remember one government in South Viet Nam that was worth a damn. You know it got me when I was there to discover the traffic in the streets of Saigon was being directed by soldiers. They didn't have a civilian police force at that point. I think they formed one later on.

GO: Most people in writing about Mansfield as Johnson's whip basically suggest that Senator Johnson didn't give him any duties and it certainly wasn't a position from which he had any particular power. Would you agree with that?

GR: No, no power. There is no great power in the leadership either, you know. The Senate is a very unusual body. At one point, at Johnson's request, I searched rules and precedents and everything else to try to find out just what was the power of the majority leader. The only thing I could find was when two Senators stood simultaneously and one was leader, the leader would be recognized first. If you could go through those records with a fine-tooth comb what you [would] discover is that the powerful leaders were men who had an unusual ability to manipulate the Senate. Weak leaders were the men who didn't. But for the office itself, there was no particular power. When people were elected leader, they got elected for one of two reasons, and this is very significant: one, they really were powerful men who could take over, (that would be people like Joe Robinson, Kearns, Reed.) The other way they got elected was when the Senate was so deadly divided that there was no possibility of getting even a substantial plurality let alone a majority. In which case they would look around for somebody that nobody was against. You'd find as many leaders like that, for instance McFarland, because nobody was against him. He was a good senator, but rather poor leader. Scott was this, nobody was against him, that's the only reason he got the job. The Republican Party, the Republican Senate Caucus, was actually run by Bob Taft for many years. He didn't even bother to step into the Majority Leadership until toward the end. Little Wallace White of Maine who really couldn't do much more than read stuff that Bob Taft would put in front of him...[?] So in a way he made Mansfield the Senate Leader, and he [Mansfield] wasn't very good at this — at the kind of politics that gave the leader power — whereas Johnson was superb at it — at the knowledge of how he would put together various blocs, how to bring some people into the block if he could and if they wanted something done, bring in other people into the block if they wanted to block

somebody else — Johnson was superb at that — he really didn't need much help. Mansfield was no good at it. When he took over the leadership, he did not operate it the way Johnson did it.

GO: About the whip again, do you think that Johnson used Clements more actively, I suppose, than he did Mansfield?

GR: Of course, because Clements also was good at the kind of manipulative strategy that allowed Johnson to pull the Senate together. I'm not now talking about the so-called arm twisting, that kind of junk. Can't twist a Senator's arm very often. I'm talking about setting issues up in such a way you get the majority of Democrats for it, a minority against it.

GO: And how did Johnson do that?

GR: I'll give an example. We had complete control of the Senate Banking and Currency Committee, that was one of the few, we had complete control. I mean technically the Democrats controlled them all, but the Banking and Currency Committee had a very liberal group, headed by Senator Burnett Maybank of South Carolina, who for a South Carolinian, was a radical let alone a liberal. Once they reported out a bill of 780,000 public housing units. Eisenhower had asked for 15,000 and everybody was predicting short shrift for that 780,000, you know, as it got out of the friendly atmosphere of that Senate Banking and Currency Committee and everyone said "Well, here's where Johnson is going to take a beating," because Johnson had endorsed it. Well, I'll never forget the day the act... the thinking being that the Republicans would vote against the big public housing and the Southern Democrats would vote against the public housing because they regarded it as socialism. Between the two they had a majority to kill the bill — or to get it amended back again. I'll never forget Homer Capehart of Indiana who was not the finest intellect that ever graced the Senate halls. (Oh boy, am I being kind to him.) [laughter] He offered the amendment to cut it back to Eisenhower's 15,000. Oh, the poor, stupid fellow, [and said] "well just before the vote he walked up to Lyndon Johnson, I've really gotcha now; I'm going to rub your nose in this one. I got the votes and I'm going to be cruel about it." Lyndon Johnson nodded his head. Well, the first Southern Democrat up for the vote was Harry Flood Byrd. He was the first Southern Democrat, but even in comparison to other Southern Democrats he was much more right wing because he had one wing to fly on -- that was the right one. Harry Byrd voted against Capehart's amendment. Well, I thought that Capehart's neck would break it snapped around so fast. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Every southerner voted against Capehart which meant in effect they were voting for 780,000. I don't know if Capehart ever did figure it out. What Johnson did, was to tell the southerners, "Look," I said, "50,000 — 35,000 — what the Capehart amendment would do would be to cut public housing from 780,000 to 35,000. Well, you claim 780,000 is socialism. Okay. If 780,000 in public housing amounts to socialism, what's 35,000 in public housing? Is that socialism too?" And they all agreed that it was. So then what happened is that at the end of the vote every southerner hopped real quick onto a telephone and explained that he had voted against the Capehart amendment because it was socialized housing. But of course the original was socialized housing

too, but he was the principled man, he thought it was socialized no matter whether it was 35 or 780. But then what they did — and this was a crowning achievement — then these southerners voted against the whole bill which was perfectly all right. We didn't care because the Republicans had to vote for the bill. The bill had a \$2,000,000,000 increase in Fannie Mae funds. And so what you get, first you get the southerners to vote to keep the 780,000 — it's not quite that way — what they're doing is voting for Capehart — it wasn't even Capehart because they say he's a socialist. Then you turn it over the other way and you get the southerners voting against the bill which doesn't matter because it's made up by the Republican votes. Now that is a typical Lyndon Johnson operation. That's the way things were really done.

GO: When Mansfield was selected as Majority Leader about half the authors writing about it say that Johnson hand-picked Mansfield and the other half say that Kennedy persuaded him to take the position. Obviously they both tried. What is your recollection of that?

GR: I don't recall it at all because I don't think there's any need to recall it, Johnson wanted him.

GO: And you suspect that Kennedy went along with Johnson's...?

GR: Well, he wouldn't be against him. Nobody could be against Mansfield. That was his great strength.

GO: When you talked before...I guess you already have talked about the differing styles between the two men, Mansfield certainly... well, a lot of criticism like Dodd and Wayne Morse and a number of people spoke out against Mansfield's weaker kind of leadership. (I guess that's my choice of words.) [Have you] Any other comments about the difference in how...

GR: Mansfield was quite strong. But Mansfield was what they meant was that Mansfield did not plunge in to convert votes. Mansfield's concept of the leadership was to put up a banner around which people could rally. Quite a few other people have had that concept at various times too. Well, he did not think the leadership as being one which would end up changing votes.

GO: On balance, when Mansfield retired from the Senate in 1976, do you think history will judge him as having been an effective Majority Leader?

GR: I doubt it. Not ineffective either though, I don't think history will pass much judgment.

GO: During the Kennedy administration, was Vice President Johnson consulted on decisions involving Vietnam at all as far as you know?

GR: Oh sure. Well not exactly. He attended all cabinet and all National Security Council meetings. But he never gave his opinions except in private, generally. I'm never quite sure just what he told Kennedy in private.

GO: Mansfield apparently met with Kennedy in private too, and especially in 1963 when he was...early in '63 he issued a public report, he went with Pell and several other Senators... in 62 there was a private report that he issued to Kennedy that [Kenneth] O'Donnell has written about quite a bit. Do you have any knowledge at all about Mansfield and the Kennedy administration and his views on Vietnam? I suppose working for Johnson that was kind of on the outside.

GR: Right. And I'd be very careful about any account of O'Donnell's. Very careful. After Kennedy's assassination, Ken has started to absorb booze through his pores. Usually they had to peel him off the nearest bar rail if he had anything to do and Ken is a good friend of mine, but he just went all to pot. Just broke down completely, Kennedy was his life.

GO: Well, when Johnson was running for the Presidency in 1964, and threw out trial balloons for Mansfield and other people for the vice presidency, do you think they were serious? Do you think Humphrey had really been pretty much selected prior to...?

GR: I think so. Johnson liked to play games. I don't think there was... I think those trial balloons, which were totally unnecessary, were merely... Well they did two things; they'd allowed him to get some polls and the polls showed him that no [vice-] presidential candidate made more than a two percent difference. He was perfectly free to pick anybody he wanted to. And I think generally speaking he sent up those trial balloons just to have fun.

GO: Sounds like he did.

GR: Well, certainly, he enjoyed doing it.

GO: A new book on Viet Nam by Gibbons [?] quotes you as saying that Senator Fulbright "got a terribly raw deal" because of Lyndon Johnson's interpretation of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

GR: He did?

GO: Do you think that Mansfield and other Senators were misled in the same way — that they felt that this would just be a very limited kind of thing that turned out to be more than that?

GR: Well the problem was they were misled by Fulbright's assurances, and Fulbright had every reason to believe his assurances. I was in the room the night they had that meeting at which Fulbright got that big briefing. And there is no doubt in my mind at all. I don't know that Johnson actually used the words, but there is no question that he was saying that this would be a one shot thing and it was only intended for this particular operation.

GO: John W. Finney [?], with the New York Times, at the time of Mansfield's retirement, called him Johnson's most troublesome critic on Vietnam. George Mcturnan Kahin has written that Mansfield worked hard to alert Johnson to the dangers of committing US ground forces; a lot of people kind of suggest that Mansfield may have caused Johnson to have some doubts about policy. Do you see that as being at all valid?

GR: No. Actually I think most of the critics reinforce Johnson. I would say that the most effective and persistent critic was Fulbright, myself — Fulbright [and] Gruening. But I think that all of them kind of locked Johnson into a position. If you were to come to Johnson very quietly and say, "Look Lyndon we've got to get the hell out of there and here is the way to do it: turn the switch [unitelligible], you make an announcement and do this, you make an announcement for that, then you walk out." I think he might have accepted that. The thing is though most of the critics spent their time just criticizing what he was doing, without giving him alternatives. And I think that in the last few months he did want to get out, but that's a very highly complicated subject as to why he wanted to get out.

GO: I think as early as 1963 or 1964 Mansfield at least in private, was backing DeGaulle's suggestion for some kind of neutralization and that sort of thing, Johnson didn't see that as viable, that was never considered?

GR: Well, I don't think that neutralization was viable... I don't think anything was viable, because the North Vietnamese knew they were winning, that they were going to win, that maybe if the United States stepped in, they'd have to ask China to step in. They knew they were going to win. It was unmistakable.

GO: Do you think in the long run or by the time that President Johnson left office that dissent in the Senate was making inroads in terms of... do you think that Mansfield was important in that or do you think Fulbright and others...?

GR I think the facts were important. You see so much was being expended for so little. And really the gains of Vietnam were startlingly small, and never any sort of thing that gave any hope for the future. MacNamara had that idiotic concept of when the kill ratio got nine to one that the war would be over [sound of disgust]. I told MacNamara that he had never been in combat. He ought to have known that no combat commander in the field can spend a lot of time counting bodies and bringing his men under fire. When you're in command of an outfit you feel responsible for every single one of them. To let some 4F code clerk in the rear, back in safety 400 miles distant, tell you what you're going to do with your men, hah.

GO: OK. James Schwartz, who wrote a dissertation, suggested, and I think he was talking about Lee Metcalf specifically, but he suggested that because Mansfield basically criticized in private to Johnson but was fairly supportive in his public pronouncements, that it made it difficult for

other Senators to become critics of that policy. Do you think that Mansfield might have been a more effective critic of the war if he would have been more outspoken in public in his dissent?

GR: I don't think anything would have been effective with Johnson except what I have described, which was to bring him some alternatives.

GO: And he wasn't getting that anywhere?

GR: No, because you see mostly critics were concentrating solely on what was wrong with the war. The closer he ever got to an alternative suggestion... I suggested to him once, that he called in Rusk and Ah., who the hell was Defense than?

GO: That would be after MacNamara?

GR: That is what I'm trying to remember when it was. He was after MacNamara.

GR: Well, it doesn't matter. Let's just say that MacNamara was there, he wasn't, but it covers the same thing. He'd call in Rusk and MacNamara and say, "Look I've decided to pull out of Vietnam by the end of August... this was in July. I want you to go on back and return to me with the best means for getting out militarily fairly intact." I think that might have done it. Because then I think MacNamara and Rusk might actually have started thinking how to get out. One of the troubles is that once a President makes up his mind about something the whole federal government mobilizes to prove that the judgment was correct.

GO: Pretty hard to reverse it at that point?

GR: Almost impossible. You know I'm having some trouble with blood sugar lows right now, and I think maybe we better renew this after I get some lunch.

GO: I am actually pretty much completed... what I needed to ask you anyway, I was on my last question.

GR: What's your last question?

GO: No, that was my last question.

[End of Interview]