

Richard B. Russell, Jr. Oral History Project
RBROH-048
Senator Clifford P. Hansen interviewed by Hugh Cates
April 19, 1971

CATES: --Cates, April the 19th, 1971. I'm in the office of U.S. Senator Clifford P. Hansen. He's a Republican from Wyoming. I've just finished explaining to Senator Hansen that the purpose of my visit is for him to recall anything that he would like to recall about his association with the late Richard Brevard Russell or any personal knowledge he might have had about Senator Russell and his tenure of office in the Senate. Senator Hansen, would you just comment in any way you see fit? This is not to be a eulogy as such but is to give future researchers and historians an insight into Richard Russell the man.

HANSEN: Thank you, Mr. Cates. First of all, let me say that Senator Milward Simpson, my immediate predecessor on the Republican side of the Senate, the man who I succeeded, told me before I came to the Senate, something about Dick Russell. He told me that philosophically, he found a great many common interests with Southern Democrats and he said that I could count on them. They were--I'm sure this is true of most members of the Senate--honest men, and that--whatever they told me, you could depend upon. I certainly found this to be true. So I came here to the Senate first of all with a great amount of respect for Senator Russell prior to my ever having met him. He was in fairly good health when I first came here--not; I'm certain, in as robust health as he was as a young man but he was active and despite his many duties, placed great demands upon his time. I had occasion to get to visit with him personally from time to time about different issues. I often went over to his desk to ask him what he thought about a certain issue, what he thought about national defense, what he thought about almost anything because bearing out what Milward Simpson had told me, I found that he was a completely honest man as well as a great patriot. I use that word in the finest sense of the word. I--I think that without any question he always placed the best interests of this country above any personal or parochial or regional interests he might have had. And I talked with him about a great many things.

CATES: Senator Hansen, I noticed that you came to the Senate on January the 3rd, 1967. How did Senator Russell help you out as a new Senator? Did you go to his office for advice, for any guidance?

HANSEN: No, I did not go to his office. I--as a matter of fact, I had the feeling always that as busy as he was, I should not intrude on him in his office; and the time that we visited, I visited with him on the Floor. And I've sat many, many times along side him on the Floor, sometimes for a short period of time, other times for a longer period of time. I visited with him in the dining room. He never seemed to give me the feeling that he didn't have time to exchange greetings or to respond to a question if I had one. I've gone to him different times on the Floor asking him how he thought I might best proceed to accomplish certain things, to increase an appropriations bill, to make a point of order. Another one of our colleagues, John Williams of Delaware, told me that Richard Russell--Dick Russell--was without doubt the most knowledgeable person in the

rules of the Senate, in Senate procedures, and in--in the Constitution of anyone he'd ever known. And I would have the feeling that this statement could include a far greater scope of years than those that have been lived so far by John Williams of Delaware. I think that few people were experts in knowing how to conduct business as was Richard Russell. Because of the fact that...he came to the Congress and had memorized the Constitution of the United States, the Declaration of Independence, as well as all of the rules of the Senate, placed him in a most unique position; and couple that with the actual experience he had on the Floor and you come up with the fact that no one--just no one--could ever trip Dick Russell up on any of the rules. And he was most generous in helping me out in--not that I bothered him all the time. I knew he was far too busy a person, I hoped I didn't make a pest out of myself, but I can say that we talked about many things, and about our philosophy. I know that he opposed some of the landmark pieces of legislation that had been passed in the last ten or fifteen years. I think he did what he believed was right, what he believed was constitutional, but he was not one to look back after a law had been passed. 'Though he may have fought with all his power to oppose it, once it became the law of the land that was it. And this, of course, enhanced his image and gave him nothing except the greatest respect from all of his colleagues.

CATES: I cannot help but comment along this line. You were talking about, in memorizing the various things before he came to the Senate and while he was here, someone had commented to me that he found out that the business of the Senate is conducted to a great degree upon precedent so he started memorizing the precedents too and this made him a very effective senator. Senator Hansen, could you recall any of the maybe specific conversations that you had with him on the Senate Floor? You indicated that you didn't visit too much or--or if ever with him in his office, but you did have these conversations on the Senate Floor. Do you recall anything that would give an insight into maybe his humor or any unusual thing or amusing thing that might have happened in the Senate?

HANSEN: Well, I do recall one instance following a story in one of the papers. I've forgotten which one it was. I went over and expressed my pleasure in seeing the account of his earlier life and it mentioned the fact that he had belonged to the Sigma Alpha Epsilon Fraternity and that he was a bachelor and that he had done his share of drinking as an undergraduate. And I know--with a twinkle in his eye--and I was sure he was telling it exactly as it was. And he said some of--things are built into more of a story really than they deserve being, and I thought what he was telling me was he wasn't as much of a hell-raiser as the biographer had--seemingly had implied he was in the story that had been written. I, too, belonged to a fraternity when I was in school and--I guess a few times I may have imbibed more than I should have but I don't think that anyone would refer to me as--as a hell-raiser or as a guy who oftentimes did this and I'm certain that Senator Russell was telling me this same thing. He and I had common interests, having both been in a fraternity and he a little ahead of me of course. I--was--mine was another fraternity but I thought how--how true it is that newspaper people or biographers, columnists like to search a person's history and maybe pick out some little thing and then give it a little overexposure or emphasize it a little more than it deserves to be emphasized. And I was thinking that that's what Dick Russell was telling me about that.

CATES: I know, sitting in your anteroom, I was reading your biographical sketch and pointed out that you over the years worked very well with both parties and I would say that this would be an attribute of Senator Russell. Would you comment about this? You being a Republican and him being a Democrat?

HANSEN: Yes, as a matter of fact, I haven't had an occasion to review our voting record but my guess is that I have voted far more times with Senator Russell than I have with many of my Republican colleagues. As a matter of fact, I think I--on practically every issue of the Civil Rights legislation that was passed when it was considered during the years I've been in Congress I would expect almost without exception I've voted as did Senator Russell. I think on all matters of national defense and matters wherein efforts have been made to curtail or limit or restrict the powers of the President, here again Senator Russell placed patriotism above party and invariably supported the President because he just felt that--once our flag is committed, we must stand behind the President. He may have had misgivings about some of the things that have happened in the last ten or fifteen years. I've been told that he did have misgivings about the advisability and wisdom of going into Southeast Asia but no one, as far as I know, ever heard him after the move had been made, critical of the President or failed to stand behind him. So it seemed to me the longer I was around him, the more I could depend upon him in areas that I was not--possessed of sufficient knowledge and experience in order to make a good judgment myself to depend upon his wisdom and judgment and I know others in my party have felt the same way. And they would count on him. They would count on him on appropriation bills. They would count on him in many areas because he had really--grown above party. He'd grown above the region and if anyone could speak for the nation, I think we in the Senate felt that Dick Russell would and did. And I was, not out of character at all I'm sure in asking his advice on matters that I was certain he knew far more about than I did. For a long time he was Chairman of the Armed Services Committee. I counted implicitly on his judgment there. He didn't serve as long, as you know of course, as Chairman of the Appropriations Committee but I'm certain that in the minds of many even while the great and beloved Carl Hayden was still a member of the Senate, Dick Russell's long shadow probably pretty well controlled things in the Appropriations Committee, too.

CATES: I know that when you were Governor of Wyoming, prior to your being Governor, I guess I should say, you were president of the Board of Trustees of the University of Wyoming, is that not correct?

HANSEN: That's right.

CATES: And I know when Russell was Governor of Georgia, he established the Board of Regents for the University System. Did you ever have an occasion to talk about educational matters with the Senator?

HANSEN: Not a great deal, excepting just parenthetically, I know we have a number of times. Well, I shouldn't--no--I have to qualify that. We had to, not in the context of higher education as such so much as what might be done. We did have a number of talks as some of the bills were being considered that would have to do with integration and revision and changing the school system throughout America. In this area, not at the college level so much but in this area we--we

have had a number of talks and I think he and I agreed. I know we agreed on busing. I'm sure we agreed in many other respects. That was my feeling and I think it was his that there was greater merit in trying to improve schools wherever they were than in trying to see how many youngsters could be moved around to one place or another in order to achieve a certain racial balance with little consideration being given to the cost of this movement, with little consideration being given to the disruption and the traumatic effects that I think would be visited upon very young children in having to be bused from their neighborhoods and out of their communities where they had friends and knew people into a whole new environment. I'm sure that he and I felt alike in these respects and we did visit during some of the legislation that was considered about these matters. I can say this; I suppose that he and I could be charged as exhibiting a certain amount of racism when we were talking this way because there are those who believe unless you're for a completely integrated school at all costs, that you're a racist. I don't feel that way at all. I come from a state with slightly more than one-half of one percent black population. We have two and a half times as many Indians in Wyoming as there are black people and I know from having talked a number of times with members of the Arapaho and Shoshone tribes that they feel their school system would be better if they could reinstitute, and not only their grade schools which they do have but high schools as well or at least a high school on their reservation. They have found that the dropout rate has gone up inordinately since they have closed down the reservation high schools and had to enroll their youngsters in the Lander and Riverton and Wind River High Schools. The number of Indian youngsters completing their high school education has dropped down. And just this last few weeks I've been talking with people in the Bureau of Indian Affairs here to see what that Bureau might do in order to help these Indian people reestablish their own school on the reservation. And I say this and I've gone into this detail because I'm certain that--I know what has impelled me in my position on schools, knowing what little bit about them I do. I was on the Board of Trustees for twenty-one years; I served as President of the Board for six or seven years for the University of Wyoming. But prior to that I served on a local school board and I was just interested in trying to see how we could spend our money in order to bring the most education to all of the people and wasn't concerned about trying to reform or reshape the world or society or anything but simply to try to see that we had--that every American had a chance to a decent education and availed himself of the opportunity; and I think that Dick Russell felt the same way in taking the position he did on many educational matters. Now obviously having served with him over the four years that I did, I can't say about what may have been his feelings or his expressions prior to my coming to the session, but--or to the Senate, but the time that I've been here I honestly believe that--that in these matters Dick Russell and I felt very much alike. That his concern as a practical pragmatist, was how can you spend the money to educate the most children the very best possible. I--I think that's why he opposed busing. I think that--I mean one of the reasons. There may have been others, but as far as I'm concerned, that's why I opposed it.

CATES: Much has been written about Russell being an advisor to six or seven Presidents. How would you describe Nixon's reliance on Russell, the Democrat?

HANSEN: Well, the President has a number of former colleagues serving in the Senate now. I'm sure he is able to count upon a good many of us on both sides of the aisle as personal friends, admirers, and people who respect the office and who despite little personal differences at times still recognize the great value and merit in the system and as a consequence are eager to give

our...our unadulterated allegiance to this government we have in order that it might work as well as it possibly can work. But despite the fact that there are in the Senate now and were during Dick Russell's time a number of people who had worked closely with the President when they were in the House of Representatives and later when he served in the Senate, I'm sure there were few people--I'm not certain that there was anyone--that would have commanded, or did command as much respect and attention as Dick Russell commanded. I know just little comments I've heard the President make, public comments, incline me to state this conviction of mine. I know that when he came over to pay his respects following Senator Russell's death, it was obvious then that he was deeply moved and felt that not only he but this country had lost a great friend and a great counselor and I, knowing Dick Russell as I did, I feel that it can be honestly stated that the--with no hyperbole, that the President recognized him as--as a person who always placed the country and the people ahead of any other consideration.

CATES: What would you say was Senator's Russell's most outstanding personality trait?

HANSEN: Well, the thing that struck me most I suppose was his willingness to take time to talk with a lowly freshman senator on the other side of the aisle. The first time I met him--he--I've met a number of people that are important people in my lifetime and I'm sure I haven't met many people more important, who have had greater demands placed upon their time than has Dick Russell, but I never went to him a single time to ask him for his advice or to seek help or guidance or just to visit with him that--that he wasn't willing to sit and listen. And I can't help feeling despite his many other attributes that his willingness to be helpful and to take time to advise certainly will always remain in my mind as one of his outstanding attributes. I know he has many others and this one likely will never get into the press but it struck me that here indeed was a great man who still was a humble man and who still had time for some people of far less importance than he had.

CATES: Senator Hansen, I just noticed a placard that says "American for Constitutional Action", I cannot read it, I do see your name on it. I know that Senator Russell was a great believer in the Constitution. Do you have any comments in this area?

HANSEN: Well, I--I'm proud to have been recognized by the Americans for Constitutional Action. I--I'm not one who believes that because we have some trouble these days we--we need to change our whole form of government and I certainly think that that was Dick Russell's feelings. He recognized, as all of us must, if we're honest and look about, that everything isn't perfect, no one's told us that it would be, it never will be. So long as there are people there will be problems. There will be unfairnesses and--and inequities but I'm one who believes that we have the best government of any in the world today here in the United States. Despite the disparities between complete equality of income of all our citizens, I think there's no place in the world where anyone of any color, of any background, can't get ahead if he's willing to work and try to do something for himself; and feeling as I do, I've felt that it was the duty of all the citizens to obey the laws that we have on the books, so long as they are the laws. I think that the Constitution is very worthwhile. It's not outdated and antiquated. If it needs to be changed there are ways by which it can be changed and I don't believe it should be changed excepting by those ways. I've had the feeling that some of the decisions by the Supreme Court in--in the last fifteen

or twenty years have probably moved dangerously close to resulting in the Supreme Court rewriting the Constitution instead of going through the processes that were designed and set up by the founding fathers. I have the feeling that Dick Russell may have shared some of these beliefs. I would rather let his public record speak for itself, however.

CATES: Senator Hansen, I certainly do not want to impose upon your time but neither do I want to end the interview without giving you an opportunity to say anything further that you might want to say which would cast light on the personality and human qualities of Senator Russell. Do you have a closing statement concerning him?

HANSEN: It's awfully difficult when you contemplate a great man, and he certainly was that, to try to frame in a sentence or two your thoughts. I'm overwhelmed with a great many memories that I'll always cherish. I just don't know how best to summarize in a word or two what I'd like to say. I--I shall always count it one of the great privileges of my life that I was able to know him and serve with him. I have thought some about the fact that he never married. I understand, true to the great tradition of being a gentleman that was always his, that he never chose to speak any about that part of his life. I met his--some of his family. I saw them as they visited from time to time in the--here in Washington and I as with the group that had tried unsuccessfully to fly into town, to Georgia to be on hand for his funeral. I would say rather helplessly, because I can't pull all of my thoughts together more quickly, that I certainly shall always regard him as a very warm and wonderful friend and human being and a great patriot.

CATES: Thank you very much, Senator Hansen.

