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INTERVIEW
HARRIS MCDOWELL
FORMER DELAWARE CONGRESSMAN
INTERVIEWED BY REBECCA BUTTON

Transcribed by

R. Herman

January 14, 1980

B: This is an interview with Harris McDowell, former Congressman of the state of Delaware, in his home in Middletown, just before the Bicentennial celebration on July 2, as a matter of fact, the day when Caesar Rodney's successor two hundred years later will be arriving at Independence Hall. Congressman McDowell, what are your thoughts now as we're approaching our two hundredth anniversary?

M: Well, I think like most of the people of this country if not all of them. I'm very proud that our country has made the great advancement and achievements which it has over this past two hundred years. I think we have a great deal to be thankful for and be proud of and I think the future of the country is secure.

B: Congressman McDowell, when did you begin your public service in Delaware?

M: Well, it really goes back to my first appointment in 1936 to the State Board of Agriculture. This was an appointment made by Governor McMullen and after that in 1939 I had become a little more active in politics locally and I ran for the state House of Representatives from this district where I live which was then known as Appoquinimink Hundred. Still is Appoquinimink Hundred but a different election district today. I served in the House and then after that I ran for the Senate and served in the state Senate for four years. Then in 1948 I had been Democratic State Chairman and had managed the campaign of Governor Carvel who was elected in that year and was appointed by him as Secretary of State. I served in that capacity for four years and it was very interesting. I was very close to the governor. Had a good insight into the problems all over the state; problems that a governor has to contend with and it was a very, very broadening experience. Then

after that I served on the New Castle County Zoning Commission during the period when we were first enacting a zoning law here in New Castle County. That was also a very interesting and broadening experience. We had the advice of experts who were helping to devise a comprehensive zoning for the entire county. Later I served on the department of elections in New Castle County and then in 1954 I ran for the seat in Congress from Delaware and was elected and I served five terms, skipping one term in 1956. I was defeated by Mr. Harry Haskell and in 1958 I ran against him and defeated him and served then three consecutive...four consecutive terms after that, five terms in Congress altogether. I retired in 1966, not voluntary. I was defeated in that year and I decided that I would retire from politics and did so.

B: When you first began your service, statewide service as Secretary of State, and as you said working with Governor Carvel, what were the major problems that he saw and that you found as Delawareans were post-war in that period?

M: Well, of course it was the post-war period and the government here in Delaware and as well as states all over the country had by necessity of the war, had not kept up the state services to the extent that there was a great lag particularly in construction. We found that one of the first great needs here in Delaware was for the building of schools as well as highways. The educational problem was foremost in our minds and was one of the main thrusts of Governor Carvel's administration and I think a successful one. We inaugurated a thirty million dollar school building program and that was quite a precedent in Delaware. It's interesting to recall as Secretary of State, it was my responsibility to arrange

the sale of the bonds on the New York investment market and we obtained on that first issue I think of seventeen million, the state bond and interest rate of 1.35 interest. Now, that would compare with an interest rate today of about four and a half or five percent . So you see, there is a vast difference in the financing problems of that day and the financing problems of the state governments today. Well, there were other problems of course besides education. We had a great need for renovating some of our state institutions. Delaware State Hospital was badly run down. Many of the other state welfare institutions, the old age home in Smyrna and others in Georgetown needed not only greater influx in their budgets and additional personnel but they needed actual buildings to house the people in the state who were unfortunate enough to have to rely upon those facilities. These were problems that had to be faced and were faced at that time. Our total budget I might add as I recall now and we had a biannual budget then. The legislature didn't meet every year. It met every other year and our budget was for two years. As I recall our first budget and that was in 1949, it was about thirty two million dollars. I was just reading in the paper last night that our new budget that the present General Assembly just passed which is an annual budget is for four hundred and forty-four million dollars. You can see what a tremendous increase we taught the state government has occurred in those years . It's hard to realize and it is one of the hard problems that the taxpayer and the elected representative and the officials of the state are going to have to take up. There has to be an end to unlimited continuing spending on the part of the state and local government.

B: The first part of this question is inaudible. What were some of your impressions when you first went to Congress?

M: Well, I was indeed a freshman Congressman, like all the Congressmen going down there for their first term. It was a new and somewhat appalling experience to begin with. I recall that very soon after I began my service in the House of Representatives I had the opportunity to talk to Mr. Sam Rayburn who was the Speaker of the House then and a man I greatly admired, and he said very candidly to me, "You know, a Congressman in his first term will do well if he is seen often and heard seldom." I tried to follow that advice and I found it good advice. The older members of the Congress don't like to have freshmen coming in and telling them how to run everything and how to run the country. So, you take your time and you learn as you go along as you do in any experience. We had, of course, President Eisenhower who was more or less marking time during the post war period. He was a very dynamic man and of course very popular in the country and the Congress was not inclined to oppose him to any great extent. However, they...the Democratic leadership in the Congress did have a program and they did promote that program and push it through. Most of it President Eisenhower signed into law but there were no great crises in foreign policy at that time. The country was at peace and the entire world was intent upon rebuilding itself after the war years and it was a time when there was opportunity for reflection. It wasn't like the present time when we seem to go from one crises to another both internally and externally.

B: Do you remember your first feeling of a successful project that you might have tried to help Delaware get through the federal

government?

M: Well, one of the things that was very interesting and I think that I was able to help with successfully was the investigation into veteran's housing here in the state. It developed that one or two builders had been building some very poor housing for veterans and it ended up with my bringing a committee from the Veterans Affairs Committee in the House of Representatives up here for a full investigation. It resulted in quite a few inspectors being fired and in fact the head of the Veterans Administration here in Delaware was relieved of his post. This in turn led me later to becoming a member of the Veterans Committee in the House and in this capacity I was able to increase funds for the Veterans Hospital in Delaware and in general to help more effectively in helping veterans with their problems with the federal government. Later, I was successful in getting the Cape Henlopen lands to the state of Delaware. The army had taken them over at the beginning of the war and had created the Fort Miles district down there. This had been abandoned soon after the war and this very important ocean front property was being held still by the army and there was some indication that the army wanted to hold on to it because they liked the recreational facilities there. Well, we were able through the Kennedy administration to have this land returned to the state for the same amount of money which the federal government had originally paid the state for the land which was some sixty-two thousand dollars. The land I imagine today would be valued at some place between five and six million as ocean front properties. There was other funding I was able to bring to Delaware particularly in education and the state library system, to bring federal funds

into the state that had not been available on that scale before.

B: You mentioned your work as a member of the Veterans Affairs Committee in the House. What were your committee assignments when you first came to Congress?

M: My first committee was the Committee on Education and Labor and then my second committee was the Veterans Affairs Committee. Later, in 1958, I transferred from the Education and Labor Committee to the Foreign Affairs Committee and I served on Foreign Affairs for the remainder of my time in Congress. This of course was most interesting work. We were then beginning to have problems in our foreign policy all around the world. We were having the cold war then and we were having growing problems in Southeast Asia which later led to such horrible catastrophe in our foreign policy in that whole area. I went through that preliminary period and made several trips to Southeast Asia and Pacific countries as well as central and eastern Europe. I visited Russia twice. I was in Poland three times. I was in Western Germany several times traveling with the Committee on Foreign Affairs when the Congress was not in session.

B: What were your impressions particularly in the eastern European nations that Russia appropriated?

M: Well, of course, our confrontation in West Berlin had been very frustrating. They had the blockade of the city of Berlin which lasted for very many months and then later the Berlin wall. We didn't seem to make very much progress or come to any agreements with the Russians. It looked like a long and hard confrontation then and as it turned out it has been and still exists. In Asia we had the thrust of the new Communist regime there expanding and trying to gain influence in many of the other Southeast Asian

countries and on its borders. We had the confrontation with Taiwan and Matsu and that resulted in our having to put more military and economic aid into those countries to support them, to help them to try and overcome the communist influence which was spreading rapidly then. Our foreign aid budget went up constantly. Our military budget was going up all the time. We were having to put more men on station in the Pacific areas where we held military bases and these were problems that were great concern to the country and to the Congress. I don't think there was ever a period that was more interesting and really that laid some of the basic policy which was followed by our country after that and the later years. That is, in the years after 1960 when the Vietnam War came about and its escalation and the tragic consequences to the country.

B: Were you aware at the time the Vietnam funding was being voted? Was information coming to the Foreign Affairs Committee that sort of made the never ending appropriation look like it never was ending? Could people see ahead very well?

M: Well, when you visited those countries and talked to their officials and you had an opportunity to get behind the scenes and talk to some people who would tell you what turned out to be a little more truthful than the interviews with their foreign officials, officials of the country. Of course they were optimistic because they wanted to impress the Congress to appropriate more money and to get more aid both military and economic. I don't believe that we ever had a chance with the weapons that we had available to us and I don't necessarily mean military weapons but the economic weapons that were used then did not do more than give an influx into the top levels in those countries.

It did not get down to the people where the great need was if they were to combat communism. So, that I don't think we ever had a chance to succeed in our foreign policy in those years prior to the Vietnam War.

B: Having known President Kennedy, would you have expected him to continue the war? Of course this is not a question that can be really answered but would you have expected him as you saw him to continue the war as Lyndon Johnson felt compelled to continue the war?

M: No indeed definitely not. I know I had the opportunity to talk quietly with President Kennedy several times and he was most emphatic that he was not going to be drawn into a war in that part of the world. He thought that it was necessary and that was his policy at that time to give as much aid as seemed expedient for the best interest and the security of the United States but I do not believe that he ever would have escalated the war in the sending of large numbers of American troops into South Vietnam as was later done by President Johnson.

B: Since you had the opportunity to talk with President Kennedy, it probably was true that there were people that were looking at this problem, yourself included, on the Foreign Affairs Committee. Had you chosen this as your special interest, the Foreign Affairs Committee? Did you ask for it?

M: Yes, I asked for it and was fortunate enough to be able to secure a seat on the Foreign Affairs Committee. We were at that time, yes, developing a great deal of expertise in this field, not only through our State Department and foreign diplomats but a great many of our large universities in this country were developing schools on the political and economic problems facing the United

States in these countries, that is in Southeast Asia as well as in Russia and Poland and the satellite countries but it was a time when there was a great deal of expertise being developed because the problem was obviously deteriorating very rapidly.

B: You mentioned meeting Sam Rayburn. Could you share some of your other relationships, some of the people that you admired very much, maybe some of the people you didn't admire very much? What about the tensions at the time of the Army-McCarthy hearings? You must have just come after that.

M: Well, of course that was during the time of President Truman, again, one of my favorite persons and I was very much on his side in that controversy with McArthur...or with...I mean with General MacArthur, not McCarthy. But this did follow the McCarthy period so I was a little bit confused. I think that General MacArthur had conducted himself splendidly during the war years but I think he was very amiss in assuming that he could establish policy on the part of the American people in Asia and I'm afraid he did have that concept and he came of course in direct conflict with the President of the United States and Harry Truman didn't hesitate to let him know who was boss.

B: Truman and Rayburn were great friends weren't they when they had been Congressmen together?

M: Yes.

B: Who were some of the tyrants in Congress when you came? Were there any?

M: I don't...no, I don't know.

B: Who was the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the House when you served?

M: The chairman then and had been for several years and still is

today was Doctor Morgan, a very fine man, an eminent physician and has conducted that committee I think over these many years in a very, very democratic way. There's never been any problems with his committee not having his full co-operation and support and having an opportunity to function.

B: You certainly were at Congress at a volatile time, the Vietnam War, the cold war period. Did you find the leadership, for example, under the Johnson presidency vastly different from the Kennedy type of leadership as a Democrat?

M: Oh yes, there was a vast difference. In the first place President Kennedy had gained the imagination of people all over the world, I think particularly young people but not only young people and I think that they expected great things from him. He didn't last long enough in the White House to carry out his programs. As a matter of fact in the first two years of his term as president his programs did not find great acceptance in the Congress. It wasn't until after his assassination and until after Vice-President Johnson became President that those programs were adopted almost in their entirety in the succeeding years which I think was a great credit to President Kennedy because they had been initiated by him. Of course later President Johnson had his own programs when he became a full term president by election.

B: Do you think that there was the beginning of a resistance to spending that was overcome by the feeling of Kennedy having been assassinated and sort of the rush of good feeling made those programs go forward under Johnson?

M: No, I don't think it was that entirely. I think that the programs had so much merit that the Congress after deliberation decided that they were good for the country. I don't believe that there

was any hardening in the Congress then against reasonable spending but I might point out that during this period the Congress passed one of the largest tax reductions that had occurred since the war years and there hadn't been any increase in federal taxes basically since that time. Most of the tax increases had been local, state, not federal. This I think is quite a coincidence and of course leads to some of the problems today in state and local governments and city governments as to how much the federal government should and can contribute in reallocating funds.

B: As a Democrat when you look at your own career, you've complimented and found merit in the Kennedy programs that went through finally under Johnson and at the same time you're talking about the problem now of reaching a point where we must be as you say refining programs. When you characterize yourself would you characterize yourself as a liberal, moderate, conservative Democrat?

M: Well you know, in trying to answer that question I think we have to realize that someone who was considered liberal twenty years ago might be an ultra conservative today and vice versa. So, it's pretty hard to reach a definitive answer to that kind of a question. I voted for those programs which I thought had been well devised by our leadership in the Congress and in the White House and which would be for the benefit of most of the people of the country. Now, some of those programs then necessary I think are questionable as to whether they're still necessary but that again is a question for the government, leadership in the government and leadership in the Congress and members of the Congress and the American people, taxpayers, to decide now and

in the future. I think we can eliminate some programs. I don't think we can eliminate the essential programs that are for the best interest of most of the people of the country but it's a matter of refining.

B: We're approaching a time when as someone said, a campaign based on love looks as if it's about to win. Jimmy Carter, a new phenomenon in democratic politics, is talking about even reorganizing before election. Isn't that about the first time that's been suggested?

M: Well, I think in answer to that it's the first time we've had a Jimmy Carter. He is quite a phenomenon in the political field. I think he is going to become a great president. I hope he will have the opportunity to carry out some of the reorganization in our federal government that I believe that he believes in. It's going to be difficult however to route out the bureaucrats. They're pretty firmly entrenched in Washington and when we talk about government and people are talking about government today and I think people are pretty well fed up with too much government but it's a broad term. You don't think of it in terms of just the president, the vice-president, just the Congress. You have to think of it in terms of hundreds of thousands of bureaucrats, administrators in the many departments and agencies of the federal government when you think of government in Washington. But, that doesn't mean that the people of this country are not looking to someone who is going to offer them a new approach and as a Democrat, I think that opportunity is going to be presented by Jimmy Carter.

B: It's refreshing to see a southerner approaching the presidency. Would you say that?

M: Well, I think too long in this country after the Civil War and up to recent times we have thought too much of the South... taken the South too much for granted. As I heard Carter... Jimmy Carter, speaking on this subject just recently he said, that it was Franklin Roosevelt who realized that the South and the poverty in the South was then the number one economic problem of this country. He did something about it. As Jimmy Carter said, "I wouldn't have had the opportunities that I had, had it not been for the programs of Franklin Roosevelt and his government in the South in my time." So, I think it's time we realized that the South is a part of this country and I think it's a healthy condition that we have a man from Georgia of the character and of the ability of Jimmy Carter to be president.

B: When you were serving in Congress you were serving as the representative of the people of Delaware. Did you find this a special kind of Congressman?

M: Well, there are four hundred and thirty-five members of the House of Representatives and each one is equally important at least by his own evaluation. However, there is a difference when...in some of the larger states for instance where there might be forty Congressmen from the state of New York or California even more and being one Congressman from one state. Of course each state has two Senators but one Congressman running at large in the state has the same responsibilities especially the responsibility to be elected as a Senator running in the same area statewide. The difference is the Congressman runs every two years and the Senator every six years. That is quite an advantage for the

Senator. Many times I have been asked this question whether I felt that it would be advisable to lengthen the term of a Congressman. I have always said no and I still would say no. In our balance of government I think it is important that the American people have an opportunity to go to the polls every two years and speak their peace in regard to their views toward their government. I think in many foreign countries where they don't have this opportunity the tensions build up and then when they do finally go to an election they sometimes go to an extreme, jumping far from the right to the left and vice versa. In this country I think that we have kept an even keel basically and I think one of the contributing factors has been the every two year election of the Congress and one third of the Senate and I would not favor changing that. I might be more inclined to favor a long and single term for the president but not for members of Congress and I certainly wouldn't extend the term of a Senator. Six years is long enough for him too.

B: You're not thinking of particular Senators. When you said that the public needs a chance to make itself felt, on the other hand the Congressman always needs to be running is that not true? Doesn't he always have to run?

M: Yes.

B: And what about his time? Do you feel that it's too much taken up by constituents coming to Washington for instance or expecting him to do things for them?

M: No indeed I don't. I think that is one of the basic principles of our government, the Congress especially. The representatives of the people must be accessible to the people. After all we live in a more constantly complicated world and a constantly more

complicated economy here at home. The average citizen naturally has more problems that deal with the federal government and it's important for him to feel that he can take his problems to his elected representative. It's important for that representative to be active in his district or his state and to have access to the views of the people. He can't very well vote on legislation if you don't know how the people feel about it and I don't believe that...well, there's always a personal viewpoint in the decisions of elected representatives in government. I don't believe that should predominate in his final decisions on how to vote for important legislation.

B: What is your thinking on federal financing of campaigns, and the cost of campaigning for an individual campaigning in the state of Delaware? For example, did your campaign costs rise steadily?

M: Well, of course as everything else in the economy went up naturally the cost of elections and of campaigning went up. However during the period when I was in Congress this was not nearly the problem that it has become today. There weren't the huge amounts of money either available nor spent. Delaware being a small state, it wasn't difficult to travel from one part of the state to another. We didn't have major television coverage other than the Philadelphia stations and they were simply too expensive, too...they were prohibitive to use in the average campaign at least by Democrats. Some of our opponents sometimes were a little more affluent and did make use of television facilities but they weren't always successful in being elected no matter how much money they spent.

B: You're sounding like a partisan. Do you feel that the congressional salary is sufficient for someone who may live very far from his

district?

M: Well, I don't think the salary necessarily has so much to do with how far he may live from his district. I think the present salaries are adequate. I was able to get along pretty well when I first went down there when the salary was a great deal less than it is now. In fact the salary when I first went there was fifteen thousand. It later went up to twenty two thousand. It's now forty five thousand. I think that's enough. I hope that inflation in this country doesn't go so far in the years ahead that it becomes necessary for all salaries to be increased. I think that's one of the present great problems facing this country is the controlling of inflation and the controlling of any increase in taxes.

B: In your work on the Foreign Affairs Committee did you find that there was an aura of good feeling after the war and a belief in foreign aid and the United Nations or was each of those programs difficult to get through each time?

M: Well in the succeeding years they became more and more difficult to have the Congress accept them. There wasn't the opportunity to reduce the programs very much both the military aid and the economic aid programs continued to run from three and a half to five billion dollars annually. This seemed like a lot of money then and it was but after the Marshall Plan in Europe it became obvious that there were many emerging countries who had a basic opportunity to achieve success as democracies but the poverty in many of those countries was so great and their industrial base was so backward that it was obviously necessary for the more affluent countries and the United States at that time was the most affluent country other than the Communist Russians who was able to

do something about this and so I felt that we had to continue these programs and to try and make them work even though I was many times discouraged with what I saw when I went over there to see how they were working and as it turned out some of them had to be discontinued. Some places we were forced out and in other instances they were so successful they could be terminated. Several countries became self sufficient as a result of our foreign aid program. One of the very difficult and intricate problems that I was very much interested in was the whole question of military aid as a part of our foreign aid programs. I did not feel that the furnishing of military hardware to foreign countries in many instances where they didn't need it and it was only a matter of prestige should have been included in the foreign aid program. It was included in it and many times you had...the members had no choice but to either vote for a foreign aid bill with military support or to vote against the entire package. Consequently it was always a successful military lobby that was able to get a very large part of the foreign aid budget allocated for military hardware in dozens and dozens of foreign countries. I was successful many times in the mark up of the bill in committee in cutting that appropriation and always made such a motion. Usually I was able to succeed in getting it cut some. Not as much as I would like to have but after all cutting fifty or ninety million out of a budget is no small slice. Sometimes the Senate would restore it but not always. The Senate was more inclined toward military aid than was the House of Representatives. Well, now here we are again at this very important two hundredth celebration of the founding of this great democracy. What is the future of it? What is America going to be in the years ahead? I

think a great many people are concerned about this. I think a great many people are thinking about it. It's true that right now there is an antipathy toward government but this is a problem that has been brought on by political events and it does not and it should not effect the basic feeling or understanding of the American people for their democratic principles and the great democracy and freedom and liberty that we enjoy in this country compared to any other country. We have so much that can lead to a better future for this country and its people. I'm optimistic. I've always been an optimist and I remain an optimist as far as the opportunity for American people to expand their way of living, to have a better life, to bring more tranquility into their lives and to work toward a basic understanding that will bring about peaceful solutions. There are many today who understandably have become disillusioned about the United Nations and I must admit I'm one of them. But this is again a great principle that was initiated primarily in this country by a people who were tired of war and who felt that it was necessary for us to have this basic foundation. People coming from all over the world coming to deliberate and to try and find peaceful solutions to their problems . The American people have not throughout their history in spite of the tragic events of war that have occurred, have not been an aggressive people. We have not sought to rule over other countries. We have not sought additional territory, to expand our country and I believe that we have within our borders sufficient opportunity for the future to enable our democracy to make that progress in the next two hundred years that it has made in the last two hundred years.

The Harris McDowell tape ends here.