

SENATOR EVERETT MCKINLEY DIRKSEN

Interview with Dr. Burns 1963

April 1, 1963

DR. BURNS: Senator Dirksen, I contend in my book "The Deadlock of Democracy" that we really have four parties in this country, not just two parties, that the Republicans and the Democrats are both divided into a Congressional party and a Presidential party. How do you feel about that formulation or would you put the party difference in a somewhat different way?

SEN. DIRKSEN: I suppose it would depend entirely on what you think of as a political party. Now speaking for my own side of the aisle, there are some divergences of opinion, but I don't whether you would put the tag of a party on those who on occasion may depart from the rest of the group on a liberal measure. On the majority side of the aisle, I presume you have in mind a cleavage as between the Democrats from the South and those from the rest of the country. I wonder, however, whether that justifies putting a party tag upon those groups, because there are so many times when we vote almost as a unit and then we may divide on given measures depending on what the predominant interest in a given state might be. And that of course is no strange phenomenon in politics because in an agricultural state you have one interest; in an industrial state you may have another, and it may bring about some cleavage. But I doubt whether it would warrant or justify putting a tag on it and calling it two parties within a party.

DR. BURNS: How serious do you feel that the cleavage within the

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Republican party goes? What is how deep is this, or how easily can it be overcome?

SEN. DIRKSEN: Well, it gets hard to say by degree how serious it really is. But if you look at the vote in 1960, or the vote in 1952, I thought the Republicans as such gave a very good account of themselves. 1960, particularly, when they came within a few thousand or something less than 200,000 of having a vote equivalent to the Democratic vote. I doubt very much whether you can say there is a cleavage there when you can roll up that size of a popular vote.

DR. BURNS: I am thinking of the kind of cleavage we saw in very dramatic form back in 1948. I think of those of us who were watching television who will never forget your eloquent presentation of Senator Taft's case before the Convention, and your concern that the liberal Republicans, such as Mr. Dewey, might be leading the Republican party down the wrong path. Doesn't that cleavage still exist to some extent in the party?

SEN. DIRKSEN: Perhaps to some extent, but I think it is minor. Who shall say where you draw the line and say this group is liberal, that group is conservative? I have never been able to draw that line as I see the performance of the party, and as I see it, and think in terms of individual members of the House and Senate, there are certain factors that probably impell them to follow a certain course. But I can't say that that constitutes a cleavage.

Maybe I can make my own philosophy clear. People say to me how can the Republican party embrace within its folds people far to the right and people far to the left, and as examples they

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cite Senator Goldwater as one who's thinking is on the conservative side, and Senator Javits of New York who follows a more liberal line. I take the position that if you can get your party reasonably unified and harmonious on the fundamental things that's as much as you can expect to do, and there is in our party tradition something to be said for it. You must remember, and I'm sure you are a pretty good historian, that the Republican party when Lincoln came along was an amalgamate for five parties. They didn't forsake a single thing - except one thing: that was the great challenging issue of the time. And Lincoln used to admonish them and say do not let the minor points obscure the larger issue and the larger challenge. And so I never let those obscure what I think is the fundamental purpose and tradition and feeling and gospel of the Republican party. That is a free America, and dedicated to free enterprise as we think of it in the free market system and dedicated to sound, sane constitutional government.

DR. DEANS: Let's put this in a speculative way about 1964, if you don't mind looking ahead that way for a minute. Let's say in 1964 the Republicans face that traditional problem in their party, the way the Democrats do in their party, between a more congressionally oriented leader, such as the Senator from Ohio, Bob Taft, on the one hand, and a Governor-type on the other, the Rockefeller-Dewey type of somewhat more liberal Republican, somewhat more responsive to urban voters. Do you think that if that kind of alternative faces the Republican party in 1964, that you could win with a candidate of this point of view and, I might say, of the capacity of Senator Taft, or do you think in order to win, the Republican party has to

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choose a somewhat more liberal, gubernatorial type of candidate?

SEN. DIAMOND: I would think, as I see it, and as sentiment reflects itself today, on the economic issues that confront the country, that one of the more conservative type probably has an excellent chance to succeed to the presidency. I think there has been a gradual trend and a tendency in that direction, and that becomes more obvious as the problems before business, industry, labor, agriculture, and those who are jobless come up on the horizon. Goodness knows we have those problems today, and they seem to increase in intensity. That would argue for a more conservative type candidate. Now if one should be picking names out of a hat, that's quite another thing. But somehow, I think the candidates who are candidates on a given party ticket will finally sense this for themselves, and come around to that way of thinking with some differences, and I think that will be true in 1964. Without mentioning any names, one shouldn't mention names, I think, under that circumstance, you discover that there is a change in the thinking of some who are ambitious to be a candidate for the presidency on the Republican ticket. Our more conservative type sometimes liberalize a little; the more liberal type come over to a more conservative way, so that actually you don't have a marked cleavage or a demarcation as to their views.

DR. LEWIS: We have been talking about the Republican side, I wonder if you would be willing to comment on President Kennedy's leadership of Congress. You've seen presidents come and go, how do you feel about the leadership capacity of the present one?

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SEN. BIRKSEN: Well, the President is having his difficulties with Congress. He did reasonably well, I think, in the 87th Congress, the predecessor to this one. He's having trouble with his program now and of course there are reasons for it. I think essentially when you get into the fiscal field dealing with a budget that is out of balance, dealing with a jobless problem where you have 6.1 % of your working force jobless, dealing with a program to spend more and to get into the field of new obligations and new authority, and at the same time, suggest that a very substantial tax cut, that runs athwart, I think, the traditional thinking of a legislator and obviously, you are bound to have some difficulties. So Mr. Kennedy is having some difficulty with the Congress, I think on both sides, because you will find Democrats who have been here a long time who take exception to a number of provisions in the New Frontier program. It's not unexpected that we should do so because of our tradition, but you find a good substantial number of Democratic leaders who do the same thing, and that adds up to controversy and it adds up to difficulty.

SEN. BURKS: So you don't see any gimmick or technique of leadership that can be used here? Basically there is a difference between President Kennedy and the congressional leadership in both parties, and there is no simple way to bridge that?

SEN. BIRKSEN: I think it is a question of issues. It's a question of fundamentals. Could any leader be better than Mr. Kennedy when it comes to fiscal affairs as it relates to the viewpoint of Senator

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Byrd of Virginia, or Senator Robertson of Virginia? I doubt it very much. Because that is a position they take, they have taken that position for a long time, and you see no evidences that they are going to depart from it whether Mr. Kennedy is in the White House or if you had Mr. Truman or Mr. Roosevelt. The differences of viewpoint are still there.

SEN. BURNS: I wonder if we could turn back to Congress for a moment - the insides of Congress as it were. There are those who feel that unless Congress reforms some of its machinery, like the Seniority System, the Rules Committee, the filibuster, and so on, that unless certain reforms are made, Congress not only will be guilty of a slow-down and perhaps stalemate, but maybe something very perilous for the future of Congress and that is abdicate to the President, so that this will mean actually more presidential power. How do you feel about that argument?

SEN. BIRKEN: Oh, I doubt very much whether that would happen or could happen. I went back to research some of the comment on Congress, going back as far as 1887, and the things that are said about Congress today almost pale into insignificance with the rough language that was used in other hectic days in the country when people commented and editors commented on what Congress was doing. Now I have seen this slow-down term used, it slows, its slowness. Well, you know Gibbons during the work on the Roman Empire - its "rise and Decline", I think makes mention of the fact that progress is made not by what goes on the law books, but what comes off, or what doesn't go on. And I sometimes think that it is all to the

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good for the country when a good many of these things that are proposed do not go on the statute book. Now that can be characterized as inaction, or a Do-nothing Congress, as Truman called the 80th Congress. And yet it renowns to the economic benefit of the country and it doesn't bother me one bit. Now I see nothing in the mails as such to indicate that the people are unhappy when some of these legislative proposals fall by the wayside. And they may fall either by being defeated, or they may fall through inaction, with the results the same.

SEN. JONES: Let me ask you one final question on this same score. Doesn't it make it difficult for you, personally, in dealing with the Republican party as the elected leader of the Republican Senators, to deal with Republican Committee chairmen or high-ranking committee members who have perhaps almost as much influence as you, and who represent a rather generally conservative wing of the party, that is, I should think that you as a majority leader or minority leader, depending upon the make-up of Congress, would need the kind of support that the party would have to arouse in order to present a vigorous face to the public. How do you feel about that?

SEN. DIRKSEN: You can present your views vigorously. There is a real sense of reasonability and decency about the chairmen and the ranking members, and I have never found any difficulty. You may get licked and you may get licked in a very substantial fashion, by opposing something or presenting something, but the fact of the matter is you get a full opportunity to do so.

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MR. BURNS: Thank you very much, Senator Dirksen, for being with us.