

James Johnson

May 16, 1974

The first thing he said was "You didn't pick my district because it was so pretty, did you. A Wall Street Journal guy <sup>asked</sup> ~~wanted~~ to go out with me last year because he wanted to go skiing."

He commented that it's a lovely time of year and started in talking about the fall campaign. He designated three sections of the district. The first thing he said was "Do you know about the district?" Then he talked about it as "going from the Nebraska to the Utah border". And he said the campaign would mostly consist of walking up and down the street in the towns of the district handshaking.

He began by talking about "the plains" area. in the east and the towns of 10,000 (he named them), then the towns of 3,000 to 4,000 (he named some of them) and then "some of them smaller than that". Later on in the discussion he ticked off these eastern counties by their population. Clearly he thinks in terms of towns and counties.

After the eastern area, he talked about the towns of Fort Collins, Greeley and Loveland. "They form a triangle with Windsor (?) in the center." Then he mentioned Adams County (which he came back to later). When he talked about this segment of the district in terms of population, he also spoke in terms of counties--Laramer, Weld and their populations.

Then he spoke about "the mountain area" in which he included Vail, and Steamboat Springs (I think).

Then he went to "the Western slope, which has ranching, all the water problems, oil shale". He said he would probably start his campaign here and spend a week visiting all the little towns--he ticked them off as if he visualized what he called "the circuit". "I'll go to Rangeley--I've never been there before. Maybe to ~~Aspen~~ <sup>Aspen</sup> ~~then~~--sometimes I go there, sometimes not. Up through Vail and Steamboat Springs."

He said his wife went with him to the east and to the western sections of the district but not in the center because when he campaigns there he goes home at night. He said probably an aide--somebody from the Washington staff or the district staff I guess--would be with him on the campaign trail too. He worried about that, saying that he didn't want people to think he was using his staff to help him with the campaign. But he said people did have problems and as he went around handshaking they would talk to him about their problems and that he ought to have an aide there with him.

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Sebelius*  
He said he'd spend a week in the western area walking around and handshaking, then a week in the eastern area and then a week in the central area--all mostly handshaking. "Then I'll do it again and that will be the campaign." Clearly he sees three (possibly four) segments of the district, the western slope (mountain area), the central triangle and eastern Colorado. He sees three campaigns, and he said that I couldn't see all the parts of the district because "it is just too big". "A lot of us in the area have the same problem. Keith Sebelius has 50 counties."

That's what makes it so hard to unseat an incumbent. There's no way to cover the whole district with one kind of campaign."

Then he launched into the reasons why an incumbent is so strong, thinking I guess of his own case. He said the Denver papers covered the whole area--"better than anything else"--but "since I'm not a Denver Congressman, I don't get prominent coverage."

"If you visit Fort Collins, the Fort Collins' paper reports what you said there, but in Greeley they don't care what you did in Fort Collins. And the little newspapers in the towns don't give you any coverage. They just say "The Congressman was here." There is no way you can get total coverage across the district, not unless it's something very very big. It can't be a PR campaign. I don't like that kind of campaign anyway, I'm no good at it and I don't do it."

Then he talked about the TV stations--the Denver stations cover the area "But three-quarters of the people you reach, aren't your constituents." Denver TV is carried by cable to the western slope area. Grand Junction also has a small station. But the whole point of his discussion of the media was that a segmented district has segmented media markets and the newcomer to politics has a very hard time. "Last time, no one even knew my name." The incumbent, therefore, can build pockets of strength bit by bit and is very difficult to sweep out of office via a district wide PR campaign. (He did not, however, comment on whether or not a central issue (like Watergate) might sweep an incumbent out.)

He said that he spent about \$50,000 on his last campaign and that his opponent spent \$150,000. He said he'd spend another \$50,000 again this time. And he said again that he wouldn't conduct a PR operation. He spoke about putting ads in local newspapers in such a way as to indicate that he felt that's the way you fritter your money away.

I asked him if he went home much. "I went home 13 times last year and spent 90 days in the district. I don't bang it the way some of the guys do. That 90 days includes the entire August recess, and 10 days of the Lincoln recess. Some of the city guys, like Jack Kemp of Buffalo, go home every weekend. And the people know he's there. But what's the point of my going home weekends? Nothing much happens Saturday and Sunday anyway. And nobody knows you are home. If you go to Fort Collins, they know you were there, But no one else knows or cares. You can't reach the district all at once."

Near the end of the interview he discussed some of his strongest and weakest support. With respect to his weak support, "Adams County is Democratic. I have the northern half. And it's a mystery to me. I go there and all I see are row after row of mobile homes and apartment houses. It's just a collection of shopping centers. The people who shop there don't live in the district. The people who live in the district don't work in the district. I have absolutely no contact with Adams County. I don't know how you would campaign there."

With respect to his strong support he talked about the eastern area. "That's a strong area. I won by a big margin and offset my losses.

If I win next time, that's where I'll win it--in the east."

I asked him how life was going on the Agriculture Committee. "It wasn't my first preference but I thought Colorado ought to have a Congressman on the Agriculture Committee. I would have preferred Foreign Affairs or Judiciary. But I didn't even apply for them. I applied for Agriculture."

James Johnson - May 21, 1974

The interview did not take place under very auspicious circumstances. He and I had made a date for 9:30 in the morning, but when I got there ready for the interview, it turned out he had made the appointment on his own schedule and not on his secretary's. So, he was not in the office, had forgotten all about it, and was not due in the office until around 10:30 and had appointments scheduled until 11 at least. Though they rescheduled me for 11. I got there about 11:10, waited until about 11:30, started the interview, got about ten minutes of it, had to leave the room for a phone call during which the bells rang for a quorum call in the House and I finished up the questions first by talking as we walked over to the House and then in the Speaker's Lobby. The whole thing was extremely rushed and I didn't get any sense of relaxation at all on his part. But I have a little better feel than I had before and he may open up when I travel with him in the fall.

Question 2. I asked him for a thumbnail description of his district. "It covers the northern one-third of Colorado, roughly.

It goes from the Kansas-Nebraska border to the Utah border. The far east is mostly concerned with agriculture, the foothills of the mountains on the east is suburban; the mountain area on the Continental Divide is mostly tourist, a resort area and small mountain towns which are ranching oriented, and the far west is agriculture and mineral development."

It seemed to me as though he had covered pretty well the answer to 4A. and 4B. in his answer when I asked him specifically whether he had covered the major economic activities of the district in his description, he said yes.

4D. "Middle class, small business, little organized labor."  
"The coming of Eastman Kodak changed this. It will bring a different kind of people." When I said that Eastman Kodak was not unionized, he said it would bring a different kind of people anyway--by which he meant industrial employees.

4E. "White, some Chicano."

4F. "No ethnic population."

4G. "Protestant--I don't know what the Catholic population is but most of the people are Protestant."

4H. I didn't ask him about that since we covered it the other day.

4I. "I hate those terms but I would say moderately conservative."

4J. "We did a study on that. The small eastern counties are losing population steadily. The foothills are growing rapidly. West of the Continental Divide is growing at a steady pace and oil shale will

make it grow even faster. At least they're counting on that."

4K. "About equally divided, one-third Republican, one-third Democrat, one-third Independent. I'd say it's slightly Republican in its voting pattern. But there are lots of Democrats in the court houses and the district votes for Democrats for Governor and Senator. You can't say anyone has the advantage until you have an incumbent. Once you have an incumbent who is popular, after two or three terms they'll stick with him."

4L. He said that in the northeast it had been primarily Republican in the past but that the Democrats were getting stronger. He said the Denver suburbs were "solidly Democratic" and he said the western slope was about even.

4M. I ticked off the various types of groups and he said no on labor. On business, he shook his head and said "just Rotary, Kiwanis, that kind of thing." On farm groups, he said yes, the NFU and FBF. He said the Farm Bureau had supported the Democrat in the last election. He said the NFU had given him "tacit support, maybe active." He said he spoke to their Rocky Mountain meeting in December, and that they like his voting record. He said the man who introduced him said he was a surprising friend of the farmer, a vociferous friend of the farmer." Then he said, "We'll see what they do in the next election."

5. I used my new format in which I asked them whether all in all would you say your district is pretty homogeneous. He reacted quite strongly. "It's not! It has very diverse interests. The west has a

great deal of animosity for the people on the east. The east doesn't pay much attention to the west however. If you live in a mountain town you have no interest in common with the people interested in oil shale. Ranchers have no interest in common with the people in the foothills."

5B. I then asked him whether or not, given the fact that the district was so diverse, any one part of it thought more like he did on the issues and he said, "No one particularly." Then he immediately got into his farming interests. "We have an important farming community, and I went on the Agriculture Committee. The farmers are not numerous but they are the most important part of the State's economy. There is more farm income than anything else--even in Fort Collins the majority of bank loans go to farming interests." It was at this point that the telephone rang and everything from here on was very much on the run.

8F. I did ask him to weight the following factors and he said "Of course I ran in 1966 as an anti-war candidate, so I had something of a head start. It's mostly a personal matter--there were no burning issue differences between us. He was more environmentally oriented than I was but the environmentalists were not worried about me once they defeated Aspinall they were not very excited after that."

8H. I asked him in addition to the NFU whether he might get any groups in the district, and he said, "No, identifiable group--they don't



form themselves into any groups. It's an individual thing. I have four people in the district providing ombudsman services for the constituents. We handle our correspondence in the office; we get constant thanks for doing incumbent types of things."

8I. He mentioned the Zionists, the Right to Life people. He said that he was in favor of the Supreme Court ruling on Right to Life and he didn't know how his opponent felt about that. He had talked, walking over to the House about his activity on the Foreign Aid bill in which he spoke against Aid to Israel. He said he had gotten a lot of flak from that speech. He noted that the flak had come from Leon Uris who had written him saying he was a "Jew killer" and a terrible person generally, but he said "These are issues of great importance to the country and I wasn't going to keep still." He later explained at some greater length that he simply does not believe in fighting abroad. (I'll get back to that a little later.)

9. The only thing he could say was "Just personal friends, that's all. The reason is I've never been an ideologue. My voting record is not 100% for anything. I think labor has some points, I think the ACU and ACA have some points, my ADA rating was the highest for any Republican in the state and my support of Nixon was the lowest of any in the state-- it was the 27th lowest in the whole House." I asked him if people had some idea of that. He said, "People get an impression roughly. Some tag me as a Liberal, some Conservative. My primary opponent last time said that I was a raving Liberal. My Democratic opponent said I was a great Conservative."

11 & 12 & 13. These three questions all seem to jumble into together when I asked him, walking over to the House whether he had an issue-oriented district. He said "Not particularly, although particular people are interested in particular issues. The farmers are very interested in farm problems, the western slope people are particularly interested in oil, the foothills people are not particularly interested in anything." Then I asked him whether his interests were the same as those in his district and he said, "Not necessarily--and I don't think that's unusual. If I had a free choice, I would have chosen Judiciary or Foreign Affairs. Those are the subjects I'm most interested in."

I then asked him whether or not he was tied down very much by his Agriculture assignment or whether he could get into these other issues in one way or another? He said yes he had. "I have done more speaking on the Floor and gotten into more debate than almost any other Freshman." I can't remember how he put it but he said something to the effect that "I just sat there and finally I said to myself why don't I get up and say something. I feel strongly about it." What I do remember him saying is "These are issues of life and death and importance to the country, and I'm not going to sit there and keep still." It was here that he said he had spoken out on such things as foreign aid and the Peace Corps and it was on foreign aid where he got into trouble with his Jewish constituents.

9. I asked him about his strongest supporters, what kind of people they were and he said, "Just personal friends. The reason is

that I've never been an ideologue. My voting record is not 100% per cent for anything. I think labor has some points. And I think the ACU and the ACA have some points. (And he ticked off his ACA rating) The ADA gave me the highest rating of any Republican in the state. And I had the lowest Nixon support record of any Republican in the state--I was the 27th lowest supporter of Nixon among the Republicans in the House." I asked him whether people understood that and he said, "People get an impression roughly. Some tag me as a Liberal, some as a Conservative. My primary opponent said that I was a raving Liberal. My Democratic opponent in the general elections said I was a staunch Conservative." Then I asked him what he was and he said "Economically I'd fall into the Conservative group right now; in a depression I believe in deficit spending. I'm a keynsian. But the corollary of keynsian doctrine is that in good times you balance the budget or keep a surplus. I don't think we are ever going to get a surplus the way things are going, but we should try to balance the budget. We can't spend ourselves into trouble the way we are now. We are greedy, profligate people and we will pay for that someday, though I don't know when. So I'm a Conservative on spending right now."

I commented that I noted that he had voted differently from the other Colorado Republicans on such things as minimum wage, foreign aid, and military aid to Indo China, and I asked him whether this was a philosophical difference or a constituency difference. He shook his head

as if to say it was something he just believed in. He said he would give me a long argument about minimum wage if I wanted one, that he believed there was a case for it. He then said that he would be in favor of foreign aid if it wasn't so military. He then said with respect to aid to Indo China "I'm a military isolationist."

I then asked him whether the fact that he was a marginal Congressman had any noticeable effect on his voting behavior. "Oh, sure--on some economic issues, you should go with what the people in the district want. But on great issues like civil rights and war and peace, you don't go with the district. I don't have any great desire to impose my moral beliefs on other people, but I am not going to vote with a majority just because they believe something if I don't believe it too. I have no great love for this job. If I lose next time, that's fine. If I win, that's fine too. I don't think a majority of people in my district feel the way I do about military matters. I think we're a violent people, a violent and vicious people. No nation in history can touch us in our love for violence in this century unless it was the Germans. And the Germans were fighting for some reason. We have just been fighting for the hell of it." "Maybe you don't believe that but I do." He said this last with great feeling and I think it's what he means by military isolationist.

His office was decorated in a quite spare way. There was a Seal of the United States, and a Seal of Colorado. The one major picture was of a young Abe Lincoln picture. There was one scenic picture of Colorado. The book cases were mostly empty.

I can't figure him out at first blush but I sense a kind of religious streak in him. He talks in somewhat apocalyptic language about the country--that we are a profligate greedy people--that we are a violent vicious people--and he seems to have some sense that we will come to no good end. He said he was not an ideologue but when he spoke about such matters as war and peace, he seemed to get rather firm. Well, we'll see what he's like out on the campaign trail.