

Benjamin Rosenthal, D., N.Y.
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10:10 - 10:45 35 minutes

*(Interview by
John Manley
for Committee
20002)*

Rosenthal is most cooperative, wants me to come back. I walked him over to a subcommittee meeting (state) and we wandered around the Rayburn Building trying to find the right room. He's pretty bright and receptive to political science.

(attracted to FA) "To put it on its simplest level it was the subject matter. I wanted something interesting to make a career of it in the House. I have no special competence but its effects on the nation and on world affairs attracted me. When I first came here I was put on one minor committee, Veterans Affairs. I came in a special election and that was the only vacancy. Then I got on Agriculture which had some political value in my district. I get a lot of favorable publicity as a champion of consumer interests. But I had to work too hard at it to make it pay."

(recruitment) R said he did have competition. "It was between me and Fitz Ryan. I like Fitz Ryan but others don't. He's something of a maverick. Gene Keogh contends that if he put Fitz Ryan's name up and the rest of the committee on committees disapproved of him, which they would do, New York would lose the seat. So he put my name in. Whether or not that's true I don't know, I don't know that much about the inner workings of the committee on committees. I had another thing going for me. When I went on Agriculture I did so with something of a commitment that I'd get something better. I went around to talk with Wilbur Mills and some others on Ways and Means. I even talked to the Speaker. Yes." I asked if anyone asked him about his views and he said "No. If they had I probably wouldn't have gotten on." He explained that he led the fight against the Administration on the Nasser amendment and raised some hell. I asked about foreign aid and he said he's all for it. "McCormack the other day asked me if I was all right on foreign aid. There's a saying around here that no one pays any attention to you until you raise some hell, and I guess it's true. After the Nasser thing McCormack asks me about how I stood on foreign aid. Imagine. It seems strange even to ask me about that."

R said part of the problem about getting on FA was the "unwritten rule that New York have only two members on a committee. But this year, with the great increase in Democrats in the House, they decided to let us have three."

"This goes to the heart of your interview. What is the role of the House in foreign affairs? What do the American people want us to do in foreign affairs? I'm thinking of writing an article on it. The executive says don't rock the boat, we're working behind the scenes. And you don't want to upset the apple cart. But if you're just going to rubber stamp foreign aid what's the sense of being here. Why bother? The executive says we have all the knowledge, all the information, don't interfere. I think we should stir things up once in awhile." I asked if FA seems to go along with the Administration too much and he took the bait. "Of course they do."

Doc Morgan is as sweet a guy as you'll ever meet. Helluva nice person. But he's an Administration man. He goes down the line. He's a good soldier, a good trooper. He doesn't raise questions. But Fulbright is asking questions, not to mention Frank Church and his crew! How long has Doc been chairman? Ten, twenty years? Well he's not going to change his ways, he's not going to rock the boat. He wants to run for Governor of Pennsylvania, he's not going to raise hell."

R feels that FA is not active enough and is too much under the thumb of the executive. "They take good care of us, they come up here all the time to brief us, they are nice to us, but what can you learn in a two-hour briefing from Williams (Soapy). You can learn more by reading the first ten pages of the New York Times."

I asked why FA seems inactive and he said "I don't know but I think the subject matter has something to do with it. If you're a member of the Education and Labor committee and on a subcommittee reporting out aid for impacted areas, you sit there, attend the meetings, listen to testimony, propose amendments, and at the end you know something about the legislation, it's difficult for someone to con you. But foreign affairs? It's all undefined and amorphous, it's all up in the air." Another factor he cited was the undefined nature of the subcommittees' jurisdiction. R said no one suggested FA to him, he sought it on his own.

(subcommittee) R said he did not get the ones he wanted. "I talked to Morgan and said I would like this or that, but I didn't get this or that. But I told him I didn't much care one way or the other. None of the subcommittees are too important." Later he said he would have liked to have gotten on Inter-American Affairs but he didn't get it. He knows a little Spanish. R said the subcommittees don't handle legislation, State does but that's about all, and he would prefer that they use subcommittees more. "We had the Sabotino amendment which involved a highly technical legal point. I consider myself a pretty fair lawyer and I had trouble understanding it. What about the non-specialists on the committee? I don't see any reason why the full committee should spend five days on it."

R said in the full committee they just go through the bill. He said anyone can participate, Doc is very fair, and that the notion that new members can't participate is a myth. "I could have offered as many amendments as I wanted. None of them might have been passed but I could have offered them. There's no restriction on what you do." He added that of course the older members who have been around 20 years know more and new members must have experience before participating very much, "but what you do is focus on a very small point and zero in on it."

(partisanship) R said they had a dozen or two dozen votes and that all of them aren't party line. "I've noted two or three Republicans who vote with the majority of Democrats and two or three Democrats who vote with the Republicans. So it's mixed voting."

I asked if the Republicans have an important say in making committee decisions and he said "What decisions? What do we do? There weren't any cuts this year. How can they be effective, they don't have any votes, and things around here are run by who has the votes."

I asked him what happened in the Democratic pre-markup caucus but he said he didn't attend so he doesn't know--he claimed he was attending a Govt. Ops. meeting.

R compared Morgan with William Dawson. He said both go down the line with what the Administration wants without questioning it. He said "The President sends down a reorganization plan which could have a major effect for years, Dawson goes along. I think he'd consent to a reorganization of the Negroes if the President wanted it. I'm not criticizing it, that's just the way it is." He added that Doc isn't running a dynamic committee, he isn't making statements on Viet Nam etc.

(specialization) "Members seem to specialize in their subcommittee interests."

"I haven't read White's book yet but I hear he says Foreign Affairs is useless. Well, it's not really that bad. Some of the subcommittees serve a purpose. The hearings on the Sino-Soviet split, there should be a report today or tomorrow, were helpful and a real service. I am trying to get the Africa subcommittee to look into South Africa and our economic relations with South Africa. The Committee could be more active and important and I had my way it would be."

I asked if anyone gave him any advice. "No. You make of it what you want. There's no central location for advice, you have to seek it out. Some of the members wouldn't tell you where the men's room is. You're on your own here." Earlier R said being on FA was "like being a member of the PTA, or Kiwanis, if you put a lot into it, if you work hard, you get a lot of satisfaction."

R does not yet have a feel for relations with the Leadership, or Rules, or the Senate.

(staff) R said he hasn't gotten a feel for the staff yet but "I get the impression there are a number of them around. They seem to be somewhat older. This doesn't mean they aren't good in their fields but if I were chairman I'd have some young fellows like yourself who would be likely to stir it up a little. It's like any organization: you have to bring young people in at the bottom to make it healthy."

You never know. I thought Broyhill this morning would be good, and Rosenthal a bust. Just the opposite.

I asked, point blank, if he had a lot of Jews in his district: "Yes. The anti-Nasser amendment was a good political move." R likes the House

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and plans to make it a career if he can. I asked if the Administration or Leadership took any reprisals against him on the Nasser amendment and he said: "A couple of snide remarks. What could the Administration do, actually. They don't vote in my district."

I am going back to see him again sometime. I sat in on the subcommittee meeting and when he left he came over and asked me to drop by the office for a chat.

"Paul Rogers is the 'ambassador from Florida to the rest of the world!'"