

Bill Cohen

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I asked him if people talked about their campaigns and if it seemed a long way away for him. He laughed and said "Yes, it seems like a year ago. Nobody talks about their campaigns. It's over. You start fresh. It's just the same as your being in the House. That doesn't matter, ^{but} ^{either.} It's a clean slate. There isn't any reminiscing in the Tuesday meetings or the Wednesday meetings. Mostly it's a sense of foreboding, of the lack of leadership of the state of the country. It's not quite 'there is no joy in Mudville' but there's a concern about the way things are going and a worry that we can't pull ourselves out. It's very serious talk, much more serious than in the House. There isn't the light, "let's go to the gym" type of banter there is in the House. I get my 45 minutes in the gym every day. With ^Biden and Hart, young guys like that, you can still be a wise acre. But the Senate is a more serious place. I'm not criticizing it. In fact I like it."

I asked if there was any concern about the capacity of the institution to cope with the problems. "No. It's in the nature of the Senate to blame the executive. So the criticism is directed at Carter and his lack of leadership--can't get a rationing plan through, and can't inspire anybody. There isn't any talk about our lack of discipline or the lack of leaders--or followers--here in the Senate."

He talked about the diminishment of the President. "I'm just as much a part of it as everyone else. The other night I got an invitation to the White House for a briefing on SALT. I turned it down. I had better things to do. I had been before, I knew what they were going to say. I knew what the format would be. Maybe a few years ago I would have considered it an obligation to go. I would have felt I owed it to my country to go down with 15 other Senators

and listen to the President. I remember in 1972 when Jerry Ford was minority leader he got all the Republicans together and told us we had to support the President. George O'Brien asked 'what's in it for us? Why should us freshmen with insecure seats walk the plank?' And Jerry had said 'you'll get invitations to the White House. I thought of the Peggy Lee song 'Is that all there is?' But those things were important then--invitations to the White House, favors from the President. It was like John Dean in Blind Ambition getting bigger offices and rides on Air Force One. Things have changed. Now, people like me say, sorry I have to work on my speech for committee tomorrow."

He talked about how we react vs imperial presidency, get Carter, and want Connally or Kennedy to take charge. And when we got that we'll react vs. power.

I asked him if Howard Baker is a good Senate leader. (I should have asked how Baker leads). "Yes. He's smart and he's very quick. He can make a statement that will pacify everybody in the party. Danforth supports him. Lugar supports him--he's more conservative than Danforth. Baker doesn't have an enemy in the party. But he may be too short to be President. It's amazing how people think that's important. People come up to me and say, you're much shorter than I thought you were. I say I'm six feet." They get a full shot of you on television and they think you are going to be a giant. Chuck Percy is that way. On TV he has a face like granite and a voice like Goliath. Yet he's 5'7", and when people say where's Chuck Percy? and have him pointed out to them they are invariably disappointed. People don't realize how short Carter is. He's got great PR."

Do you feel like you are in the minority? "You know you are in the minority but you don't feel it like you do in the House. You are treated as an equal. I got to introducing the Home Health Care amendment the other day. Lawton Chiles let me. He was the Chairman. That would never have happened in the House.

Yesterday I got MX amendment through in Armed Services. Jackson Cannon and I were a tirumvirate. That would never have happened in the House. They treat you as equal even if you are a first term Senator. They show you a lot of deference. That has amazed me. But, of course, you have to pick you spots. On the other side Levin, a freshman senator, a very smart guy has deliberately set out to make himself the great dissenter. He proposes amendments, all of which lose 13-1. He wants to be known that way--the Oliver Wendell Holmes of the Committee. He isn't going to make it. Already, no one listens to him. It will be 18 months before anyone listens to him again. I don't know whether anyone has spoken to him. That's not the way to be effective. He's trying to be a John Culver. But it's a little early to try that. Culver is physically intimidating as well as intellectually intimidating. He shouts and stares at you and intimidates you. Culver is a great Senator."

I asked him about his relations with the press, and he talked a long time about it. I can capture some of it.

"I have stayed away from the press--deliberately. I've done very few interviews--almost all of them off the record. I'm asked to do them all the time, but I've been refusing. I'm keeping a low profile, avoiding publicity. I've turned down Issues and Answers and a lot of the magazines. We've talked about this before. The media likes to build you up and tear you down. They already think I'm ambitious and that I'm campaigning for 1984 and interpret everything I do in that light anyway. Everything I do they want to know why I did it. So I avoid them. I made some speeches in California and the papers asked "Why is he campaigning in California?" I was doing it purely to make some money, but I didn't tell them that. Lester Hyman, a friend asked me to come have a drink with him. I did. There were some Hollywood producers there. I didn't even talk to them; but one of them was quoted the next day asking 'Why is it that certain senators are drawn like

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magnets to Hollywood producers.* Christ. The other day I went to the reception for Elizabeth Drew's book, Simon and Schuster is my publisher and they asked me to come. When I saw the cameras coming, I ducked out of the way. I didn't want my picture taken. I've carried this image for 6 years that I'm a social climber. If they took my picture, people would say 'There's Cohen eating hors d'oeuvres again.' Some people are asking 'Where are you.' I tell them I'm doing my work on the Armed Services Committee. If you drop out of sight, they say you aren't doing anything. If you are in the news they call you an opportunist. I'm very sensitive about my relations with the press. I suppose if no one was interested I'd wonder why they weren't breaking down the door, whether I had bad breath. But I know the press is going to cut me up soon enough, and I'd rather have it later. I'm very sensitive about it."

I asked about the Washington Post article. "No one was around here when it came out. There was one negative thing in it, but it was 99% plus. I did it because I refused a friend once, but promised that if I won, I would do it."

On relations with Muskie. "We have a very good relationship. There will be some blood spilled in a couple of weeks over Dickey Lincoln. The newspapers in their infinite wisdom--are playing it up as a test of our relative influence in the Senate. How ridiculous can you get. There's no way that the influence of a first year Senator is comparable to that of a 4 term Senator, Chairman of the Budget Committee and ranking on Environment and Public Works. But I'm going to have to round up some votes so that I won't look utterly ridiculous. The worst thing that could happen would be to have him lose. He would take that very badly. So they will be tense for a while. But we have a good relationship."

Said he gave Al Hunt an interview. "He was one who didn't think I would win. I don't think he approves of me but I don't know why". (Something like that last sentence)

Re the Department of Education, he said an interesting thing. "I made my speech and that was it. You can see how persuasive I was--20 votes I got plus mine. Actually I made the speech to be helpful to the opponents in the House. I thought it would have more influence in the House than in the Senate." The idea was that his speech would provide both ammunition and some hope to people in the House.

Fact that action in one chamber influences action in the other chamber is evidence in bicameralism and this is one aspect of that relationship. Of course, both chambers can be influenced by outside forces exclusively. But we can be so preoccupied with H-S differences that we don't realize those differences may have strategic component--as well, let's say, as constituency or member component.