Interview with Barber Conable, February 5, 1967

The first thing he said was "there's a lot of politics involved in getting on Ways and Means. I haven't sold my soul but there's a lot of politics involved. It got pretty embarrassing because Frank Horton was involved in it. I think the key to it all probably was my membership on SOS."

"Right after election, I went down to Washington to see what the committee situation was. I knew we would have a lot of openings with the 59 freshmen and all. I didn't know exactly what I wanted but I knew I wanted to go off the Science Astronautics Committee. I had had a good experience on that committee but I thought of it as a declining committee."

The day he got back, he and Bob McEwan went by to talk with Charley Goodell. "After our conversation, when we were getting ready to leave I said to Charley, "what committee assignment do you think I ought to try for?" He said, "what do you want?" I said that I would like foreign affairs or appropriations. Appropriations was the one I had thought about mostly. I had begun to think about foreign affairs because Peter Frelinghuysen had had his assistant call Harry and ask him if I wouldn't go on the Foreign Affairs Committee. And he had later come around himself to ask me to come on the committee. He said they needed some good people, that the leadership would just be putting on a bunch of midwesterners and wouldn't I try for it. And that's what got me thinking about that. Well anyway Charley asked me if I had thought about the Ways and Means Committee. I said no. He said why not it's a good committee? I said well that was not the one that I wanted and that anyway it seemed to me that several men senior to me probably wanted it. Charley said that he didn't want it that he was involved in the leadership, that he had tried last time and he wasn't going to go through that again, getting cut off at the knees by these people like Utt and the others. He said why don't you think about it? I said I'll see and we left."

A little later on I bumped into Mel Laird and I asked him what the chances were of my getting on the Appropriations Committee. He said you don't have a chance there, but you ought to go for Ways and Means. New York will get a seat and he said to me, "you'll never have any trouble raising money again."

Then I went to see Howie Robison and I asked him what he knew about the situation and what different people in New York wanted. Howie said, "sit down here and tell me what you are interested in." I told him foreign affairs, appropriations and Ways and Means (this was the first time
he mentioned that he was interested in Ways and Means). Howie said he  
didn't think there was any chance for New York to get a man on appropria-
tions. They had had a person on appropriations last year. And he said  
"why do you want to go on the Foreign Affairs Committee. They don't do  
anything, it's a very weak committee etc." He said foreign affairs is  
a bunch of weak clunks, and that was about the size of it. Then he said,  
"I want you to try for Ways and Means." He said he's had some contact  
from New York, asking him to get someone on the Ways and Means Committee.  
I didn't ask him any more about that so I don't know whether that contact  
came from the Republican State Committee or what. Howie said he wanted  
a good candidate and he thought I was the best. I asked him who else  
was interested and he said that Frank Horton had called him from Miami  
and that was all. He said he was going to tell Frank when he came back  
that he didn't have a chance to get Ways and Means that he was just too  
controversial. I said, "I don't want to go on Ways and Means; it's not  
my cup of tea. Do you mind if I see Gerry?" He said no.

I left Howie's office and called Gerry. Gerry could see me and so  
I went over to his office. I said to him, "Gerry, I'm grateful to you for  
getting me on Science and Astronautics Committee and I know I owe you  
something there. I'm being urged to go on the Ways and Means Committee.  
I want Appropriations or Foreign Affairs. He said, "why not Ways and  
Means?" I said, "it's too much of a pressure cooker. I understand there  
are just too many interest groups around. Mel Laird told me that I'd  
ever have to raise money again and that sounds kind of rotten to me. I  
said it's just too much of a pressure cooker." Gerry said that there was  
no New York seat on the Appropriations Committee this year but that I  
would have a crack at Foreign Affairs. New York does have a chance on  
Ways and Means, he said, if they come up with a good candidate. Then he  
said, "If I were you, I'd go for Ways and Means. You have to make a  
decision at this point in your career. Are you going to find yourself a  
quiet corner and be a genial nothing or are you going to look for  
responsibility? If I know you I think you want to be involved and seek  
a central place here. The Ways and Means Committee is involved with  
people and I would think that you would want to be doing something that  
people are interested in. That's the way I felt when I came down here."  
That's the gist of what he said and he told me I ought to get off the  
three horse kick, pick a committee and try for it. And he made it clear  
in no uncertain terms that there was no chance for me on appropriations.

I went back and I talked with Harry. I told him I still didn't like  
Ways and Means and Harry said he didn't either! But we decided that I  
should try for it. I called Howie Robison and said that I would go for it.  
Howie told me to go around and see the members of the executive committee  
and that he, Howie, would find out who else is interested in it from the  
New York delegation. I didn't want to get into any fights inside the  
delegation.
I went around to see Les Arends and I said to him, "Les, I'm asking you for some advice. New York has a chance to get a man on Ways and Means. I told him that Burleson was going to get it on the Democratic side and that nobody would be on the committee from New York and that I was interested in getting on the committee. At that time everybody thought Burleson would win the seat and Gilbert would lose. That's about the line I took with everybody, asking for advice. Les talked around and around and was very noncommittal. Then he asked me who else is interested from New York? I said, Frank Horton. "He sat bolt upright, and he said well, he ain't going to get it. He ain't going to get it. He's not the type for that kind of a committee. Barber, if I can help you in any way I will."

Then I went to see Johnny Byrnes. He told me, "I won't oppose you the way I would oppose some. I want someone who will work. Then he asked me if I still practiced law and I told him no. He said we get as many requests from New York as we do from the whole country. If the New York man won't be on the job and won't see these people and answer their questions then they fall in my lap. I've been doing it for two years now and I'm tired of it. If there's anybody who wonders about the work here just ask him to come and see me and I'll tell him how much work there is."

All of the narrative to this point occurred in one day and that was the end of the first day—a day in which he had touched base with Goodell, Robison, Laird, Ford, Arends and Byrnes. All of this was before Christmas he said.

"The next day I went to see Glen Lipscomb and asked him 'Will you put in a good word for me with Jimmy Utt?' Laird said he'd like to see me on the Appropriations Committee, but if there was no chance that he would talk to Utt for me. At that point I was acting somewhat undecided. So he said, "Let me know when you've decided and I'll talk to Utt."

By that time I decided that the Republican leadership wanted me but I also decided to wait until Howie had heard from the other members of the New York delegation.

I heard that Carleton King might want it so I went to see him. He and I sparred around for about a half an hour without him telling me what he was going to do. Finally he looked at me and said, I'll level with you. I'm going to go after it if Frank wants it. I know I can beat him by seniority and I don't want him to have it. But I'm not going to stand in your way if you want it. I'm going to run but I don't want you to quit running. It won't offend me if you win. Frankly, I don't want to do that much work."

I went to see Charley Goodell and told him that I was worried about Carleton King stopping Horton and I didn't want to get involved in a deal of any kind. Charley said not to worry about King, that King wouldn't get
it, that nobody would take him seriously as a candidate and not to worry about it. He said King's Health was not too good and he told me not to worry about that.

A week before Congress convened Howie had not heard from Wydler. I had heard something about the fact that he might want to run for Ways and Means. He is just above me on the committee and has one year's more seniority than I do. Howie and Charley told me that I should call Wydler and ask him for his support. I didn't want to do this because I was afraid I might put the idea in his head. He is a moderate but he's a good person and he is considerate of the leadership and I thought he might be a strong candidate. Bob McDewen told Howie that he was doing the thing all wrong and that Howie ought to call Wydler and ask him if he's satisfied with his present committee assignment. Bob said that Howie was the New York representative on the executive committee and that he ought to do the calling. So Howie called Jack and Jack said, "what's available?" Howie told him come down to see him when he got to Washington and they would talk about it. I decided that I would go to see Wydler and talk to him too when he got down here.

Then I decided I would go see Jimmy Utt. On the way up to his office I stopped in to see Jim Fulton. Jim's a funny guy but I know him pretty well because I'm on his committee. He said I'm for you but you'd better check with the Pennsylvania delegation. Last session we got into a hassle and we cleaned your clock. I'd go see Bob Corbett if I were you.

Jimmy Utt told me, "Barber, I'll be for you. I understand that other New Yorkers want it and I'd rather see you get the New York seat. I asked Utt whether I should go to see Corbett. He said no you've got enough votes. Don't get over committed to those bunch of pirates in Pennsylvania." I went to see Al Cederberg. He said, "we want it. We'll trade with you. If you will vote for our man we will vote for you." I told him that I was in no position to make such an agreement. He said that they had thought Jim Harvey was their candidate but within the last couple of days Chuck Chamberlain had decided to go for it. He wanted to get on the Appropriations Committee and he also wanted to get on the defense subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee. When nobody would promise him that, he decided to try for Ways and Means. So Cederberg said that both Harvey and Chamberlain wanted it. I don't think Michigan ever got that problem settled and I think it cost them the second seat. Jim Harvey was offered the Appropriations Committee and he didn't take it so they gave it to Don Riegle, a freshman, a very bright young guy. Their effort to get on the Ways and Means Committee dissipated itself in trying to ride two horses."

I went to see Frank Bow. He was very cute and wouldn't say anything. He said he had to look out for his own boys but that he was not personally unfriendly to me.
Lipscomb told me that Utt can be counted on and that Utt says everything is O K. Lipscomb was very friendly to me. I guess it's because of SOS. We run SOS between the two of us.

I saw Mel Laird and he asked me how is it going? I said that it all depends on the New York delegation. Then he told me, "I'm telling everyone in the New York delegation that I talk to that if you aren't the candidate New York will lose it."

Up to this time I hadn't heard a word from Frank Horton nor from Paul Fino. I asked Howie to see Fino and Howie agreed to see him. We both thought that I should stay away from Fino because he is very erratic and you don't know what he will do.

The Monday before Congress convened we had a Republican conference. We had a recess in the middle of the meeting so that each state could choose its delegate to the Committee on Committees. The New York delegates had a meeting in one corner of the room. When we got over there Paul Fino said to Charley Goodell, "I want to be a member of the congressional campaign committee, I'm the dean of the delegation and I think I should have it,' Charley was our member of the committee. Well, Charley just sort of walked away and this ended the caucus of the New York delegation and there we were the only state not to have chosen its member of the Committee on Committees. Before we broke up, Fino said that there would be a meeting on Wednesday to choose our member. Howie Robison was having fits. He didn't know whether he was going to be the member of the Committee on Committees or not and here he had been putting in a lot of work on it already. Well before the Wednesday meeting, Charley decided that he didn't really want the congressional campaign committee that much so he told Paul he could have it.

In the meantime I had gone to see Jack Wydler. Wydler said that he had been thinking of running for Ways and Means. I told him that John Byrnes said they worked all week and that he ought to think about whether he wanted to do that much work. He has usually been a Tuesday to Thursday fellow—though he works very hard. I said that they wanted someone on the committee who would be there Monday through Friday. Wydler said "I'm not going to take any pledge like that." He said they couldn't push him around like that and went on with a lot of brave talk. I told him that I had a good bit of support lined up outside the delegation and that I didn't want a fight. I asked him to let me know when he decided what he was going to do and then I would decide what I was going to do. I didn't hear from Wydler until the meeting of the delegation at lunch on Wednesday.

After we had had our lunch and along about two o'clock Paul Fino said, "before we quit, we had better decide on our candidate for the Ways and Means Committee. New York has a chance if we get a candidate. He asked Howie who..."
was interested and Howie said, King and Conable. Then Wydler spoke up and said he might be interested. Charley started talking to him about the amount of work that he would have to do and he suggested that Wydler might try for appropriations. Then Howie said there was no chance for New York to get anyone on appropriations. Howie asked Jack what kind of outside support he had and he said he didn't have any. Carl King got up then and made a wonderful speech. He said, "Barber has outside support and we should vote for Barber. We don't want to lose this and we've got to go with our strongest candidate." That was the gist of what he said so all of a sudden Sy Halpern said,"let's nominate Barber"! Frank Horton who hadn't said anything said, "isn't there anyone else?" Fino said, "let's not monkey around with this and lose it." Brownie Ried seconded the motion, they voted and I was the selection. Then Frank made a bitter outburst. He said,—and I guess Charley Goodell had used the phrase "we want an acceptable candidate" --I don't want to be part of a Republican Party that considers some of its members acceptable and some others not acceptable." It developed that he had been talking to Howie and Howie had told him that he just couldn't get him another committee assignment. I got out as quickly as I could and I thanked Carl-King out in the corridor for his help.

Howie and Charley Goodell talked for an hour in the room to Frank Horton. Frank asked them what's the matter with me? I've been here longer than Conable and I can't get on a major legislative committee. Howie and Charley told him, "you have the biggest public relation operation on the Hill and yet you don't care what your colleagues think. You never go and tell Les Arands how you stand. We know you have to go against the party many times. But nobody knows where you stand. You make no effort even to be courteous to your colleagues. You spend all your time back home with public relations and no time on your public relations in the House." That was the gist of what they told him.

I saw Frank later and he wished me good luck. But I found out later that he had contacted the county committee to telegraph Gerry Ford saying that the county committee supported Frank. And he did this after I had been endorsed by the New York delegation. He also had Ken Keating call Murphy to get in touch with Ford and tell him that he Frank was the local choice. When Keating found out I had been endorsed by the New York delegation, he didn't want to have anything to do with it. I wouldn't have known this except that Mike Telesca told me about it. Apparently, Cassella, Tofany's assistant called Telesca and asked him to come over and compose a telegram to Gerry Ford saying that the local committee would support either myself or Horton. Nobody else knows that I know about this except Telesca. But Frank was still working.

"The more active Frank got, the more anxious Jim Utt and Les Arands became to support me."
I also ran into John Rhodes who is a member of SOS before the executive committee met and he told me he would like to support me for Ways and Means. He was a small state representative but he is the head of the policy committee and that was a help.

Then there was a debacle in the Democratic caucus. Burleson lost when everybody thought he had it all lined up. I don't know what happened but everybody thought Burleson was in. Sammy Fridel was working for Burleson because he wanted to be chairman of House Administration. So Burleson had some northern support among Sammy's friends and he had southern support. Gene Keogh had supported Jack Murphy. The New York delegation didn't think Murphy was strong enough and they Gilbert. The day the caucus voted was the day that Wallace was inaugurated in Alabama and some of the Alabama people went down there. They had a plane ready to bring them back but they didn't take it for some reason. So there was lots of recrimination there. The Texas people were very upset. The leadership decided to go fishing in troubled waters with George Bush. He's just a freshman. But he's a very handsome very appealing person. He ran against Yarbrough for the Senate last time in Texas and he's going to run statewide again I think. Anyway I'm very impressed with him now. He's moderate and he's a very smart man. But at the time I wondered whether it was smart to make such a blatant move for the Texas money. He was the first freshman put on Ways and Means since 1902. There were a lot of reasons I guess for giving the second slot to Bush. They could say something to the Texas Republicans. They could build George up in Texas. And they could satisfy the freshman class. Those 59 freshmen were doing a lot of talking and the leadership felt they had to give them one or two assignments. There was no question about my getting one slot and I was never in trouble from the start in the executive committee.

I don't know who voted for me but I'm sure California did. I'm sure California did. At one point during the meeting of the executive committee when I was up here in Rochester, I got a call from Harry and he said Jimmy Utt wanted me to call him. I asked Harry what he thought the problem was and was I in any trouble and Harry said he thought it had something to do with the oil depletion allowance. So I called Utt and he was in a meeting and said he couldn't talk and would I come to see him when I came back on Monday. So I went to see him and Utt asked me, "are you sponsoring any legislation to do away with oil depletion?" I said no. He said do you intend to sponsor any legislation? I said no that I didn't have any intention at that time of introducing any legislation into the Ways and Means Committee, that I was going to look around and use my own judgment. He said, "I won't ask you to pledge anything, but I want to make sure that you have an open mind. I want to make sure that you aren't pre-committed. If you are, it's going to be awful embarrassing to me with my oil boys in California. A lot of people are going to come in
and tell you that the oil depletion allowance is a terrible thing and if they make the case to you, then that's all right but I just want to make sure that you don't have your mind made up in advance. I told him that I wanted to exercise my independent judgment on matters as they came along and that I didn't have my mind made up on that question at all. We talked a long time and I talked along with philosophical tripe like that. He didn't make me promise anything. That's the closest I came to having to promise anything. It was a great relief. I didn't have to pre-commit myself on a thing."

He also mentioned that he talked to Burney and Arch Moore at the opening of the executive committee meeting and that each of them said he had nothing to worry about. He called this double talk and certainly no commitment from either of them.

I think the leadership decided that I should go for the Ways and Means Committee. It was no coincidence that all four of them urged me to go for it. And a lot of it had to do with my being on SOS. Mel Laird wouldn't have known me from Adam if it hadn't been for the SOS. Rhodes and Cederberg are members. And Charley and Gerry come to SOS meetings. For a year and a half I've been doing the programs for the group. I've been keeping them going almost single-handed. Laird has said to me several times, "the Republican Party owes a lot to you for organizing these breakfasts. I don't know what we would have done without you." That's one place where I was recognized as a worker. Also on the Science and Astronautics Committee, I got a reputation as a worker because I attended everything. Another thing that helped was that we didn't have a man in SOS from the Ways and Means Committee. Glen Lipscomb mentioned that. After all we spend our time talking what we are doing in our committees. At one meeting Clark McGregor said, "I want to know what's going to happen on Ways and Means. Whose going to get those positions?" Mel Laird spoke up and said, "Barber Conable is a candidate." McGregor said, 'good.'

He went back to the meeting of the New York delegation and said, "Charley Goodell had built up an atmosphere that "let's not boot it. Let's go with our strongest candidate" and when we had our meeting there was that assumption that I was the strongest. And I still hadn't been to see them all.

Maybe if Gilbert had been elected early the results might have been different. I talked with Johnny Byrnes once and asked him whether it would make any difference to the Republicans who was elected to the committee on the Democratic side. He told me that it wouldn't make any difference, that the Democrats could do any foolish thing they wanted to do but that the Republicans would make their own decision.

With respect to the Democratic decision he said at one point that Wilbur Mills had deliberately kept the size of the committee down because he thought there would be one extra slot and Burleson could get that slot. His point was
that if Mills hadn't been quite sure that Burleson would win he would have consented to enlarging the Democratic side and adding one Republican so that Burleson could have gotten on the committee.

I thought I had it sewed up when the New York delegation went for me. But I never said so. I underplayed it all the way through. Actually there was a great row in the executive committee with several of the senior people having to step down from one committee to make room for the new freshmen. I was afraid of the domino effect in executive committee meetings—that someone would have to be put on a given committee and then everything would back up down to where I was. I used to call Howie after every session of the executive committee and ask, "how am I doing?" He'd say, "you're all right."

I asked what made him change his mind and decide to go for Ways and Means. He said it was because he had no chance to get on appropriations and because he saw he had a chance to get it and that it became a matter of pride with him once people thought he had a chance. He realized also that it was the best committee in the Congress and he wanted something to sink his teeth into. During this interview he did not do any talking except to point out at one place that it was the best committee—that is, he didn't do a lot of braging about what a great committee it was etc. He clearly was an inner-circle choice and it does not seem as though there was any great amount of head-knocking. There is a question of course as to how the notion got afoot that New York was entitled to a place. It seems as though the establishment of this notion was the important step for Barber.

Bob McEwan was a tower of strength for me all the way through. He was a great help to me. Now I see where he would like to have me help him with the problem of the importation of strawberries from Canada.

I honestly think that the biggest thing I had going for me was Frank Horton. Everyone knew he was interested in it and no one wanted him. Honestly, he is one of the most unpopular people in the House. The sad part of it is that he is so ambitious. But he's the kind of guy who elbows his way right in front of everybody to get his face in the middle of the camera so that he'll be in the center of the picture. It looks great back home in the newspaper, but in the meantime he has made a lot of enemies and offended people down here. He's almost laughable. The thing between us is that he's never been nice to me. But in my very first meeting with him the only thing he said to me was, "you'll have to get out of the bigger office in the federal building, because I'm senior to you." He didn't even ask me what my plans were. He's just the way Charley and Howie told him he was. He pays no attention to anyone or anything except for his public relations back home. He has very few people he's in solid with—Brownie Reid and Cy Halpern and a few others. But nobody else in the party likes him or trusts him. Everyone in the party knows that
we share Rochester and they think we are in competition. We're not. But with guys like Jimmy Utt, Les Arends and Frank Bow, Frank was the biggest asset I had. Once they knew he wanted it they couldn't do enough to help me get on the committee.

Only two people in the New York delegation were able to change their committee this year. Carl King got on Armed Services and I got on Ways and Means. I'm worried that Howie may have used up all his bargaining strength getting me the position on Ways and Means. You only have so much bargaining strength and I'm afraid he used most of his helping me. I think there's an agreement that New York can have a position on appropriations next time. I asked Howie what I could do to repay him for all that he had done for me. He said that I could buy him a drink sometime and then he stopped and he said, "no you can do something else. I wish you'd write to Harold Ostertag and tell him I helped you. He was always so nice to me and I would like him to know that I was able to help you." So I wrote to Harold and told him about our conversation and told him what a reservoir of good will he had left behind him in Congress.