

Barber Conable

First Week of the First Session of the 89th

Congress, January 1965

These comments came from a running interview with Barber Conable during the first week of the 89th Congress while he was getting organized.

We went to the APSA sponsored orientation sessions for congressmen. The first session was held on the House Floor and I went with Barber and listened to the standard kinds of commentaries by older members. Some of them were as follows, in terms of little rules for proper behavior. "Be prepared before you speak on the Floor." "These older members are like big bass lying back and waiting to chop you up when you don't know what you're talking about." "Be in attendance on the Floor as often as you can."

Speaker John McCormack talked to the group and gave them such hints as "learn the rules of the House", "work hard in committees," and in these ways "you will secure and enlist the confidence of your colleagues."

The same theme was echoed by others--"we measure each other." "The House is the best judge of its members." One speaker, Dante Fascell said that the members here knew their stuff and therefore they were better judges of one another and could measure one another whereas a congressman cannot make himself understood to the people back home. The major point of this lesson was that the individual's goal inside the House ought to be to win the confidence and respect of his colleagues and that there are

certain rules for gaining confidence and respect. These are the rules that were given to the freshmen. Getting elected is important but it may not be affected by how one plays the rules. An individual's performance as a legislator will be affected how he abides by the rules.

At the orientation session on the House floor, Barber turned to another congressman and said "Isn't it awful to find that you're in such a tradition-bound body?" The other congressman said, "I certainly don't see why you can't sit in the gallery and put your hands on the railing." Conable replied "Probably it's so you won't have anything to help you steady your pistol."

"When I was having my picture taken with the Speaker, I said "I know I've got a lot to learn." He said, "Well, I'm still learning."

One amusing experience the first day of Congress occurred when Barber and I were starting out of his office door toward the House Chamber. He was clutching his very first bill in his hand--a bill which continued the status of some immigrants or aliens in the district. We started out the office door and got about ten steps down the corridor when Barber stopped suddenly, turned around, went back and leaned in the office door and shouted to Harry, with respect to the bill, "Harry, where do I put this damn thing?" Harry said "In the hopper." And Barber said, "Well, are you going to show me where the hopper is?"

Another amusing occurrence came when a bell rang at 9:30 in the morning. They were just testing the bell system. Barber hadn't heard

it before and he hopped up out of his chair and stood in the middle of the room looking around puzzled. All a matter of learning the small details.

With respect to the Senate he said, "In the New York State, the Senate and the Assembly are small enough so that you can know each other and there is a close unity. No one wants to change chambers. But in the House, the Senate seems very remote and therefore seems desirable." He knows he won't get a Senate seat, but he talks about the contrast nonetheless."

When he was inviting me to his home for dinner he said "You will learn more about me from my wife." And he spoke of his wife as "my most penetrating critic." Charlotte has, he said, "strong backbone and good political sense." "She ran my first campaign. All I did was to keep on the dead run. She stayed home and thought. Most all the good ideas we tried in that campaign were hers."

"It's a fascinating experience. I can't imagine any man not feeling a quickening of the pulse when he gets down here and feels as though he's in the center of things. It makes you want to do a good job."

With respect to the vote on the leadership between Charlie Halleck and Jerry Ford, he voted for Ford. He said he committed himself early to Charlie Goodell in favor of Ford and that he later got Bob McEuan's vote for Ford. He told me not to tell how he had voted. "Bob McEuan and I showed our ballots to each other so we would be sure how we voted."

He spoke of Bob McEuan--"a little stuffy. He's been in the State legislature too long I guess not to feel impressed with his own importance... (He said they were not close in the New York Legislature.) where we're

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He talked about the 89th Club--the Freshmen members on the Republican side. "I'm having a lot of fun sizing up my colleagues in the 89th." He talked about organizing the 89th Club and organizing the leadership of it. He said that the southerners who made up a lock decided they were going to select the leadership by telephone and that they would do their telephoning to the Alabama man who was the secretary of the 89th Club. Barber wanted a secret ballot. He also went to see the Alabama man, Jim Martin, he along with Henry Smith, to see about balancing up the ticket with respect to the officers of the 89th Club. For one thing the Club had to pick a man for the Committee on Committees. Conable said with respect to the southerners--"I'm going to find it hard to make common cause with them. I think I'll have to make my contacts outside of the 89th Club." He sees them not as a cohesive group nor as a heavy weight group and he suspects they will not stay around long. The southerners are not true State's righters he says. They are looking for federal boodle all the time. He commented amusingly on the first meeting of the 89th Club when the members were going around the circle introducing themselves. He remembered how Prentice Walker from Mississippi, when it came his turn said "My name is Prentice Walker. I'm from Mississippi and Aahm mighty happy to be here." Barber said that when he heard Walker say this he said to himself, "My God, are they on our side?"

With respect to the New York delegation, "They are a group of individualists. There isn't any cohesion in the delegation. The one who comes closest to speaking for the delegation is Howie Robison. The old in-group were all defeated--Kassy St. George, Kilburn, Wharton, Riehlman, Ostertag. They were wiped out and the rest of them haven't had time to agree on anything except that they all like Howie Robison. Robison was named as the New York member on the Committee on Committees. Paul Fino is the head of the delegation. "He's a wild man. He's interested in all kinds of things that nobody gives any consideration to. You can't build a ^{national} legislative program around a state lottery." He spoke of Charlie Goodell as an "off-ox" in the New York delegation. He thought Charlie was the only one to vote for Mel Laird against Peter Frelinghuysen. He said Charlie was not popular but he was respected.

With respect to the leadership contest, he said that Ostertag took him to see Charlie Halleck and Ostertag told Halleck that Conable was a regular fellow, etc., etc. You can count on him, etc. etc. Yet Barber said that Halleck never contacted him during the fight over the leadership. "I wondered if he hadn't lost touch with his troops. If that was so, it would be the best reason in the world for voting against him."

He talked about getting his committee assignment. He said he talked with Jerry Ford and Howie Robison about his committee. "I told Howie

Robison I would trust his judgment. The only thing I said to him and to Ford was that I wanted to go on a working committee--a committee where I can learn the business of legislation." He mentioned the interstate and foreign commerce committee, the government operations committee and the armed services committee as committees where he thought that he had a chance, and also the banking and currency committee--whereupon we talked some about Patman. But it was clear to me that he had no idea of a favored committee and that his comment to Ford and Robison was genuine.

He spoke about his experience in the State Legislature when he was getting his committee assignment and used it as an example of how not to behave with respect to committee assignments. He said that he had gone to ask the Republican leader in the State Senate, Walter Mahony, for one of the three top committees and said he had been advised to do that. "I was the victim of bad advice. I went in to see Mahony and he asked me what committees I wanted. I told him that I wanted Finance, Judiciary, or Codes. His eyes popped out, rolled around in his head for a minute, and then he said, 'Well!!--and he changed the subject. Then I got the New York equivalent of the District of Columbia."

Harold Ostertag had apparently gone to Ford to tell Ford that Barber ought to get on an important committee. "Harold said I should go on Appropriations and why not and so forth. I said to Jerry that I knew about seniority. Harold was just whistling up a rain spout." Another example of how Ostertag and Conable were not really in tune with another on this matter.

He talked about getting his committee assignment to the Science and Astronautics Committee. He said that because the New York Republican delegation had declined in numbers they had lost weight and prestige on the Committee on Committees. As a result, New York's assignments were not as desirable as they should have been. He also said Paul Fino messed things up by trying to go for everything. With regard to his own situation, "Howie Robison went to Jerry Ford and said he had no committee assignment for me. Jerry asked him what my first choice was. (It was Science and Astronautics.) Apparently the minority leader was willing to lend his weight toward getting me my first choice. I was told that he had really helped me. I'm not sure why and I haven't gone around to ask why. I'm grateful for my assignment and I'll just shut up."

He did indicate, however, what he thought it was that had helped him with Jerry Ford. Ford came to talk to the 89th Club about his choice for Whip. Ford had chosen Peter Frelinghuysen and the contest was between Frelinghuysen and Les Arends (eventually won by Arends). "The southerners started giving Jerry hell on Frelinghuysen. They were embarrassing Jerry. So I got up and said, 'Something's wrong when we even vote on the Whip. The leader should choose the Whip. If we don't trust the leader we should kick him out. Otherwise we should let him choose his own executive officer.'" He, looking back, thought that this certainly did not hurt him with Jerry Ford.

"The House seems very unstructured to me. The lines of communication are not well established. But I think that will change when the committees meet. It's the committee structure that makes the House hierarchical. That's where you feel junior."

A little later in the week, Barber was invited to join one of the informal Republican groups--the SOS Club. He was very pleased about that. He was asked by Laird and Bob Wilson. "I think they wanted to see who I was that Jerry Ford had gone to bats for." In the first meeting of the Club, after Barber said he was going to try hard, someone spoke up and said "You'd better after the way Jerry Ford turned himself inside out for you." He described the group as "an in-group". And as a group of "lively conservatives and some liberals". The only names he mentioned were Laird, Frelinghuysen and Wilson. He was the only Freshman congressman invited to join the SOS Club. "I'm very pleased about it naturally. You want to know people who are serious, who are strong sources of information and potential support. Devices like the SOS Club will increase your effectiveness without any doubt."

Again, talking about the SOS Club. "Communication is obviously a problem here. SOS is primarily a vehicle for exchanging information. One of the ideas is that when some member gets in trouble on the floor, the others will help him. It's a mutual support group as well as a study group. All major committees are represented. We meet every Tuesday in a member's office. Each fellow says what his committee is doing, predicts legislation and discusses passible party positions.

We discuss the major legislative issues. We also meet Wednesday morning for breakfast with distinguished guests. It's an in-group. Members have pictures of each other on their walls. I'm fortunate to be able to exchange information with such experienced and well-informed people."

He spoke about a meeting called by party members--not an official meeting I think--to consider reapportionment problems and Barber commented about party meetings, "People are a lot more apt to listen to me there than on the House Floor. I know a man's effectiveness is not measured according to the amount of his palaver on the floor. The most effective speeches a man makes are not on the floor."

"I'm still studying my pocket Congressional Directory trying to match up names and faces. That's important. You can't do anything by yourself around here. It's a collective operation."

He became the program chairman of the 89th Club, and he asked Carl Albert to address his class in one of their early sessions. "I walked over to him on the Floor and asked him if he would come talk to the Freshmen Republicans. He nearly fell off his chair and said, 'Well ... well ... well, I suppose I could.' He said he'd have to leave after fifteen minutes, but he stayed for an hour. I said I thought we didn't have enough communication with Freshmen on the Democratic side--that we were too segregated in our own groups. He agreed but he said that these lines would break down once we got into our committees. He said the

committees were the best mixers and that we would make friends on the other side of the aisle in our committee. He said a lot about the House being a community, that we all had to work together."

He talked about getting started on the Science and Astronautics Committee. He said that the outside advisory science panel had been their for two days talking about aeronautics. He said the chairman got the Freshmen together and said he would be glad to help them get the subcommittee assignments they wanted. He said also that Chairman Miller wanted to get them started. "You fellows will be helping pass on a \$5 billion budget for NASA and the hearings begin in two weeks. I want you at least to have seen the installations in the South where the bulk of the money is being spent. You can't visualize what's going on unless you've had personal experience in this field. I'm going to ask you to make yourself available and go South this week." He put it in quite strong terms that we should go." Barber said that he was going to Huntsville, to Cape Kennedy and to the Mississippi Test Facility for what he called "an orientation visit." But here within one week he had gotten some marching orders on his committee. He commented that "if we're going to pass on a budget twice the size of New York's, I'd better know what we're dealing with." He said he had not yet been assigned to a subcommittee. He said Joe Martin was "floating around in the Caribbean and Jim Fulton hasn't been given a complete go ahead from him to organize the subcommittees."

A little sidelight when I left Barber's office one day I walked out with a liaison man from the Agency for International Development. I asked him if he had had a good meeting with Barber. He said "The new men are very pleasant. They don't know who you are and they are pleased to see everybody. After a term or two they can be real rough."