

30 - Alexander phone
343-4036
Washington (home)
301-657-4090

Barber Conable

November, 1964

This interview took place two week s after he had been elected to the House for the first time. The interview took place in the Faculty Club. The key ideas that came through were that he had no preconceptions about the job and he had always followed a policy of no precommitments in legislative activity. So he kept saying that he had no preconceptions and had made no precommitments.

"I have no preconceptions about the job. Maybe I should have, but I don't. It's just like it was when I was elected to the State Senate. I had never even seen the New York Senate Chamber. I went there and I asked an attendant 'Is this the Senate?' He said it was and I asked him if I could go in and look around. 'I'm a Senator' I said. That's just the way it is with Congress. I have no preconceptions."

He thought it was a good idea not to have any preconceptions.

He said he had talked with his wife and that he might spend some time trying to get some idea of what the job was rather than letting the job sit around him. He said his wife thinks he should be prepared. So, when the family went to Williamsburg after the election for a few days rest he took along Charlie Clapp's book and read it. He thought that Clapp's book stressed consensus a lot. He also said the book seems to picture a confusing life. He asked me what he should read. I suggested Clem Miller and he said he would get that book.

A key idea--"I have an abhorrence of getting myself precommitted. Fortunately my opponent in the campaign didn't force me to get pre-committed. I don't go around looking for chances to commit myself

if I can avoid it. He conducted a quiet handshaking campaign and that's the kind I conduct. People always want to know how you stand and not what you think. If you use a yardstick instead of your brain, you're finished." In this connection he says that he voted in the State Senate for the Burke-Metcalf bill but that his opponent, Neil Bubel didn't press him on that subject. Whatever that bill was he seemed to think he might have been vulnerable on that issue.

"I think you have an obligation to your constituents to make your vote as effective as you can. You want to keep as much bargaining power as you can. If you commit yourself to a group before you know what they stand for you lose that bargaining power." He said that a vote on an amendment to modify something may be the key vote in the legislature and that you should leave yourself free to bargain on amendments.

Again and again he stressed the idea of not getting precommitted. *Democratic*

VIA *10/10/64*
He said that in the State Senate people want you to say whether you are with them or not and that he didn't like this. They didn't care what he thought, he said, they just wanted "a pledge or a declaration of war". "Sometimes when I told them what they wanted to hear I regretted it afterward. When the vote came, the situation had changed, and I had to vote against my better judgment ~~for~~ my word. So, many times what you think you will be voting on when you look at it abstractly is not what you are voting on ^{will be} (when the time comes). You have to keep yourself free to use your judgment when the time comes."

He said at several points that his own experience had only been in the State Senate. "All my ideas come from my experience in the State

Senate. Maybe that's wrong. The House may not be like that at all."

"It must be awfully hard to get to know all those people (in the House). I thought the Assembly was unmanageable with 150 people. In the Senate, it wasn't hard. You could know everyone. When you spoke up they listened because you were of a few. Specialization was at a pretty low level. We could meet around the card table, all 33 of us, and reach a consensus before we went to the floor. I don't imagine the House will be like that."

"I use to speak up a lot in Republican conference but I didn't speak much on the floor. It wasn't expected of me and that's not my forte.

style | In campaigning, I'm much better shaking hands with a few people than at making ringing declarations from the court house steps. I don't expect to go down there and grab the thunder bolts as they go by."

"There are a thousand people in this district who could do just as good a job as I can in representing their constituents. I just was in the right place at the right time. Harold resigned at just the right time. I had had a little taste of it. I knew I liked it. I didn't have much seniority in the Senate."

"I had no ambition to be a congressman. I didn't even want to be a state senator when I got involved in that. (He explained how he got in a fight politically in the local area and just got carried along.

"I got so interested in the chase I forgot about the goal.") ... One night my wife asked me if I thought I'd be a state senator for the rest of my life. "Wouldn't you like to be in Congress?" I said, "That's not

possible and there's point in thinking about it. If Harold retires it will be in six or eight years. By that time I will have seniority in the Senate and will have settled into a niche there and will be more valuable to Western New York there than in Congress. Besides, what's wrong with the State Senate?" I had no ambition to be a Congressman. Why try to attain the unattainable? That was my attitude."

He said several times, 'I'm a country boy.' And he talked about the Monroe County people who might run against him. 'If those people think that with their slick city ways they could go out into Mrs. O'Leary's cow pasture and get a farmer to change his vote and throw over the local boy, they're crazy.'

At another points he talked about Western New York and he seemed to have a good sense for Western New York as his constituency. He spoke of getting more Democrats on his mailing list and said that the Democrats in Western New York were "pretty conservative". "We're all decentralists up here. We don't trust the big cities and the impersonal government way off there somewhere. We like our own local institutions."

"I'm interested in establishing good relationships with my constituents. For a couple of years anyway, I'll just postpone my statesmanship. With the tiny minority we have, I don't think there would be much opportunity for that anyway."

He talked about Harold Ostertag's staff. He said the staff was good. "They've got what I don't have. Harold had the knack of being able to grab

hold of just the right handle in helping people. He was a man of limited training and limited intelligence. But he made the most of his experience in knowing how to help people. That comes with experience. I don't have it, but the staff does. I don't want too much of a wrench with the past. I want people to feel they can come to me and get the kind of help they've always gotten."

He talked about Austin Erwin who was the man he got kicked out of the State Senate. He said that Erwin had grown away from his constituents and at several points he expressed disdain for people who don't go out and meet the voters. He does see himself as a good campaigner. Erwin was the man about whom Conable said earlier that he got so interested in the chase he forgot about the goal. He got into politics to get rid of Erwin and ended up running for Erwin's seat, but he had not started out with that intention.

He said he had no great program to put through. He said he was not concerned with his image. He said Frank Horton had told him "You've got to get a liberal image if you want to run statewide." He told a story about Frank Horton and how he hadn't gotten any endorsements. He wrote and got an endorsement from the ACA. Conable said that Taft's moderate group endorsed Conable and Keating and that Horton was miffed and that he went down and joined the Wednesday Club. Conable said he was very wary of the Wednesday Club, that he felt it was dominated by John Lindsey whose ambitions and whose audience were elsewhere. He said he wanted to go down and look around. He said that Horton had not been of any help to

him and that he hadn't offered to help him.

When I described the Republican factions in the House he said "Well that sounds just like the Republicans in Genesee County to me. I didn't realize Genesee County would be a microcosm of the Congress."

Ostertag had called him in June and he went down to scout the staff. He talked with members of the staff. He had gone down to Washington in July to Marine Corps Training at the War College but the Republican Convention was on that time and there were not any representatives around. He then went down to the Republican candidate's school in August. He said that Bob and Jane Borth (Jane is one of Harold's assistants) came to the banquet but that Harold had not. He then went down again to Washington three days after the election to Williamsburg. During that trip they bought a house, in Maryland.

After the election he sent Jerry Ford a letter and told him that he should hold a conference of the Republicans. He also said that he would stop around and see him when he came down to Washington in a couple of weeks. That same day Charlie Goodell and company sent Barber a letter asking him to write Jerry Ford to ask for a conference. He was glad he had written first so it didn't appear that he was part of Goodell's group. "I don't know anyone I'd rather join up with than Charlie. But I don't want to join any group until I know who they are and what they want to do. The time will come when you have to make common cause with the fellows you agree with, but I don't want to pre commit myself."

Harold Ostertag is going to take him around to see Charlie Halleck and he sees Harold as being useful in that way. "I want to talk to him about my committee assignments. I had Harrie and Jane draw up a list of committees I might have a chance to get on and where the Republican losses have been great. Not Appropriations, but some of the moderately important ones. I don't have any preferences. I'll accept other people's judgment as to where I can make the best contribution."

Harold had planned to take him around and meet certain people, he said. "All of the people he was going to have me meet so they could take me under their wing and make sure I didn't make some of the mistakes that other young men did--they were all defeated and he mentioned Ernie Wharton, John Pillion, Walter Riehlman and Catherine St. George. All the people he mentioned were in the New York delegation.

He said he had called Charlie Goodell a couple of times to find out what was going on in Washington. He said he had a long chat with Charlie during the campaign which was very good. But he said that Charlie had cost his brother a job once by pulling a "smart-alecky trick", and he was not terribly well disposed toward Charlie at one time. He sees Charlie as a man who commands respect.

"I had no preconceptions about Halleck. I hear he's a petty tyrant and not at all the persuasive leader that Senator Dirksen is." He seemed to have gotten this view from a friend of his who worked in the Treasury Department under Kennedy--a man who had run down some members for him. This man had said John Byrns was good.

He talked about how Sheriff Al Skinner and Vincent Toffany (the Republican Chairman in Monroe County) went around in the campaign saying how important it was for the voters to vote for the other one. Toffany was running for the State Assembly. But he said neither had made any mention of Conable. He said he had the feeling that he was "a submerged personality" and that he had had to recruit some women who worked for him in Greece. These women, he said, were "also submerged personalities" since Skinner did not believe in women in politics. He said that voluntary organizations are a technique that he had used in Batavia and he used this group in Greece. He said he stopped going around with Skinner and Toffany and went by himself. He campaigned in small meetings in Monroe County. He said he went to factories. He thinks that after he votes Labor won't be so friendly, that they will think him a "big fat capitalist bastard".

With respect to his nomination,--he talked about the Republican organization in Genesee County. He and the chairman there are not friendly. "He's a product of the old days when you could run any old yellow dog on the Republican ticket and he'd win. You can't do that any more. He thought the job of the party organization was to maintain harmony and not to fight Democrats. I thought the job of the organization was to win votes and not just keep harmony." Jim Beech comes and asks Barber if he's interested in Congress (Beech was Chairman in Genesee County). Harold Ostertag had asked for a meeting of all the County

chairmen. Conable said no he was not interested, that Ostertag was doing all right. "Monroe County will grab it anyway." A meeting was held in the Treadway Inn at Batavia at which Ostertag says that he is resigning. The four counties back Conable for the job and Ostertag agrees. Ostertag did not initiate the move to back Conable. They report back to Conable and tell him that the Monroe County chairman, Don Foote agrees. Conable cannot believe that and so he goes to see Foote the next week. In the meantime Conable gets a list of Republicans who want it and he takes that list to Foote when he goes to see him. Foote says that he will back Conable. He says he had looked up Conable's primary record in 1962 and thought that Conable was a good campaigner. He thought he was young, able, had the title of State Senator. But his main reasons for backing Conable was that he did not want a fight in Monroe County for the job. He did not think his organization could stand such a fight and he thought Conable was acceptable. He would not have done this if some old assemblyman had been running. With respect to Toffany Foote was sore at Toffany for not running against Charlie Stockmeister in 1962. He had told Toffany that if Toffany didn't run this time, he would get no more favors from the party. (Toffany was running for Assemblyman this time in 1964.) Besides, Foote didn't think Toffany would go over well in the Western counties and that he was not ready yet for Congress. With respect to Paul Hanks who was in the State Assembly from the western part of Monroe County, Toffany said Hanks was valuable on the Ways and Means Committee in Albany. He said Hanks had more power

than his ability entitled him to, that he was not a good campaigner and that he had lost touch with his constituency.

"I had no ambition to be a congressman. But when it was offered to me in the circumstances it was, and when Don Foote said, 'I want you to run as a personal favor to me,' I accepted." Foote helped insure Conable's nomination by calling in the Executive Committeemen from the west side of the city and telling them that he supported Conable. The west side Republicans in the district had no organization of their own. They could not react as an organization to Conable's nomination. Don Foote stole the march on them and they couldn't help but back him. What's interesting here is the idea that there is no Republican organization on the west side of the city and that therefore the west side Republicans are not in a position to support or get interested in a congressional race--not at least organizationally.

"He said he had talked with his wife nearly all night about it. They decided that they'd worry about it for the rest of their lives if they didn't take it then. They said they felt it was better to make a sin of commission rather than one of omission. They talked about their children and so forth.

He talked about his law office. "It's a shambles. I'm trying to get it in shape but it's very hard to concentrate on wills right now." He has a young partner who has left with the office and he wants to do right by him. But there is an idea of personal service. He said lots

of old ladies want him and only him to do their work.

"Out in the rural areas being a congressman is considered quite a job. He spoke of how the jury in a case last week came up to him after the trial and wanted to meet him and he said it made him feel funny. It was simply because he was now a celebrity."

He talked about his family. They are natives of Wyoming County. His father was a judge and he has a brother who is also a judge now in Wyoming County. Barber moved to Genesee County to get out from under the shadow of his father." "Fine old family" was a comment often made during the campaign, and that irritated him because he wanted to be an independent personality in his own right. He said he was still a "johnny-come-lately" in Genesee County--he had only lived there twelve years. "They don't consider you a native until you've lived there thirty years. So they call me "a Wyoming County boy"". He says he got a bigger percentage in Wyoming County than in Genesee County (a friends and neighbors vote). His strength in the two counties had helped him to get the Senate nomination first time around. He said he thought his family background was important. He has bought a fine old 1830 home in Alexander (a suburb of Batavia) which he'll keep. He says if he sells that home he will be beaten in 1966--that he is superstitious about that.

He talks about being beaten--that the parties don't count for much anymore and that you can never tell. He thinks about people running in the primary against him in 1966 and he says that he's glad he did so well in the outlying counties in the election. He thinks that will protect him

against primary opposition from local people there. And that it will discourage the Monroe County people too since they will not feel they can bite into his lead in the outlying counties. Here, two weeks after his election, he was already worrying about a primary in 1966. He showed a lot of concern about the district.

He was quite good on the staff. He saw Jane as aggressive and a take-charge person. He saw Harry as a "soft personality". He sees a conflict between Jane and Harry coming to the surface in the presence of the uncertainty caused by his coming. He sees himself as constituting "quite a splash in their quiet mill pond". He got in there one day when he was visiting at 8 o'clock and he surprised Jane who, "likes to come in and file her nails, etc.". He saw Jane and Bob as social members of the congressional country club with Harold, and therefore social friends of his. He sees Harry as being prodded by his wife to get his two cents in. Harry had come up to the district to see Barber about job possibilities and Barber thinks Harry did it so he could see Barber alone. Every other time he and Harry had talked they talked in Jane's presence and Harry wanted to get a free and independent line of communication with Barber. When Harry wrote to Barber afterward, "I thought it was a letter with a sense of relief".

letting

He says he wouldn't think of/Harry write the newsletter.

(Harry had always written Harold Ostertag's newsletter--indeed, it seems to me, that's the main thing he did for Harold.) Barber

says that his newsletter is his chance to reach his constituents and to bring the government home to people instead of having government be a distant thing. He wants a research person. He sees himself as disorganized, not very efficient, going in all directions and needing solid dependable people that are in the office. "I'm the kind who doesn't know what he's going to say when he makes a speech. I open my mouth and the words come out-- blaaah."

He had 70 applications for jobs from Republicans--all of them were Republicans but a few and they are out of a job. They are all experienced. Harry called the night before the election and said that he had decided to work for him. He saw the wind blowing and wanted to make sure he wasn't out in the cold. "The magnitude of this year's disaster hadn't come home to me until I began to get these applications--70 of them--all from experienced people, all Republicans." He said some came from Senator Keating's staff, some came from Robert Taft's staff. He said all the letters begin "congratulations on your victory. Due to the defeat of Republican Representative so and so..." there are only twenty new Republicans in the House and eight or nine of them are from the South. "I imagine they are ships that will pass in the night."

About Rockefeller, "I hate his guts." He thinks Rockefeller had a point of view and didn't sell it. "He's for State's rights.

He takes the view that you can't have State rights without State's responsibilities. That ^{new} you will sell. It is a marketable commodity. But he's more interested in his own personal image. I'm not overjoyed at the prospect of running with him in 1966. Don't let anyone try to tell me that the man at the head of the ticket doesn't count."

About his relations with Harold Ostertag. He said he had a good deal of respect for him and that the only link Barber had with the voters or with the organization in Monroe County was their affection for Harold Ostertag. "It seems to me he's been running away from anything to do with the transition period." They were not close and he saw him very little. On election eve he saw Harold in the Powers Hotel with a half empty bottle of whiskey, stunned and saying "They got John Pillion, they got John Pillion." Harold said that Barber would get a 40,000 vote margin. Barber knew better than that. He had checked Batavia's ward figures before coming to Rochester (these were figures he was familiar with) and he thought he would win all right. He was not worried but he knew that his margin would be small. Ostertag was stunned and he didn't know at that point even that Walter Riehlman had been beaten. Harold did not campaign here and people thought there might have been a rift between the two of them. There was none he said. Still it seems obvious that Conable is not Harold Ostertag's boy and that Barber does not feel he owes Ostertag anything. He talked about the fact that he didn't owe anyone anything and he said this is very important.

He talks about his garrulity. "I wear my heart on my sleeve. I'm just a country boy and I assume everybody is friendly."

He said there is going to be a Republican Conference held on December 16. "That's the same time as the special session in Albany. I know where it's most important for me to be--in Albany. It's more important for me to look after the Western counties and reapportionment than it is to attend the Republican Conference. The important thing is that a conference be held not anything I would say. It's just as well that I won't be there. I don't want to have to stand up and be counted before I know who wants what." Here again is a strong sense for his region and for himself as a regional representative.

"I don't want to get identified with any of the groups in this badly divided party of ours."

He speaks of himself as a conservative but he also talks against labels and against a doctrine^{aire} approach. He had read Clinton Rossiter's book about conservatism and he likes the idea of arranging the "isms" around a circle so that those next to each other are close--fascism and communism. He had recently given a speech on the tyranny of labels in politics and he feels strongly about that subject. Indeed the whole idea of "no labels, no groups, no preconceptions, no precommitments" seems to fit pretty well. He spoke of Robert Taft as a conservative because "he didn't worry about being consistent". He looked at the programs and their merits

and he could support public housing and he could support management against labor. Barber thinks that change in the country will come from the private sector.

"This should be a safe district, but you never can tell."

"I won't get any political advice from Harry. I was appalled when I saw the mailing list. It looked like it was made up from Grace's (Grace Ostertag) Eastern Star buddies. Now's the time to get that in shape if we ever are going to while I'm on top of the situation. Harry asked me if he ought to go around and talk to the County chairmen. Apparently, Harold let him do that. I said, "Hell, no, that's my job." Harold had been getting out of touch. He said again that he wanted to get Democrats and the Jaycees on his list.

"I don't want to precommit myself. But I hate to seem evasive. Cause then you seem to fit the public image of the politician as the weasily, mealy-mouthed individual who can't make up his mind on anything."

He spoke of the idea that there's a lot for congressmen to do in personalizing government for the citizens to let them know/not ^{it's} an impersonal thing far off but is concerned about them. This ties in with his early constituency interest. Not only is it smart in survival terms to cultivate the constituency but he thinks this is an important part of a congressmen's job.

He said he thought what, with his statewide ambitions, was "chasing a will-o'-the-wisp." He saw this unrealistic. "As Western New York congressman has to accept the facts that the way our state is set up you can't run statewide. He should content himself with serving his district and not chase some will-o'-the-wisp. That's plenty to take care of too. Being a congressman is more than I ever thought I would achieve in life."