

(1980)

Interview of Jack Flynt by John Hibbing

JF Well, I honestly don't know why the number was as great as it was in my retirement class 1978 effective January 1979. Mine was really a case of a delayed reaction. I had made up my mind to retire in 1972, four or five months before the opening up of the qualification period for state offices. I wrote my retirement statement out in long hand--I'm going to show it to you when we get out to the house. I don't know whether I want you to quote it or not.

JH Fine.

JF But you can use it.

JH OK. Like I say, anything you say, I'm not going to quote you in any way.

JF That's good. I can talk more freely. I made up my mind to leave in 1972. I read a news story in one or more papers--I don't know whether any other picked it up or not, but I remember reading it specifically in one--that speculated that there were going to be a host of candidates. They speculated as many as four or five candidates against me in the primary and on the general election. And prior to that time I had occasional opposition in one of the other or both in the same year. I suppose between 1954, after I'd won my first election, and 1972 I had had only one serious campaign--one hard-fought campaign, which I won easily. And that was in 1966. In 1972, for a variety of reasons, all of which will not appear in the long hand statement--which I'll show you and which has never been typed out, but eventually will be--I had fully determined to leave. When I read this news story, that there were four or five candidates priming themselves, or grooming themselves, to oppose me in 1972 elections, I just decided that I'd let them do it. And that I would let those who had encouraged them to do it just see what they could do. They even went so far as to speculate that at least four of the five candidates could probably defeat me. And I just made up my mind, without saying anything to anybody, that if I retired in 1972, it would be involuntary instead of voluntary. I ran hard. I had one--not five, but one--Democratic opponent in the Democratic primary whom I defeated by about 10 to one. In 1974, I had no primary opponent, but I had a general election opponent.

JH Mr. Gingrich?

JF Yes. And I defeated him by a narrow margin, because I didn't even campaign. I didn't realize that he had any support, any following or that anybody knew him. I didn't even put out any

INTERVIEW OF JACK FLYNT BY JOHN HIBBING-1

literature, (or) letters, (or) go to visit anybody on a strictly campaign basis until about three weeks before the election. And I suddenly realized that he was making some headway. So I got out and worked and won. In 1976 I had both primary and general election opposition. I had made up my mind that unless I got a clear majority on the first go-around in the primary, I was just going to say, 'Hell, they can have it.' I think I've always served at a personal sacrifice... Don't misunderstand me, I enjoyed it; and I was both willing and able to make the political sacrifice to serve. I went there knowing and I accepted it. In the primary (I'll have to check these figures--if they're off, I'll correct them.) I expect I got about 62% of the vote with four candidates. So I didn't have to make a runoff. And I went in the general election and I increased my majority, both percentage wise and numerically over Gingrich the second time around. If I had run in 1978, I think I would have overwhelmed him. I think I'd just have beaten the living daylights out of him.

But I had been in a very serious automobile accident, when a bus in which my wife and I were passengers, along with the Secretary of Army and his wife, the chief of Engineers and his wife, four or five other congressmen and three or four of their wives. And while we recovered from the accident, we still remember it. I've got a partially crippled hand, and my chest has suffered a little bit from being crushed. I had a heart attack in 1976 in the middle of the campaign--in the middle of the general election campaign after the primary--which may or may not have been a result of the accident, as opposed to being a heart attack brought on by organic heart disease. My cardiologist has written a paper for the American or International Congress of Cardiologists using my case history as a basis for his paper.

JH You're just a subject of all kinds things, aren't you?

JF He believes that it was a traumatically induced heart attack as opposed to heart disease induced heart attack. And, of course, if that's true, I'm a very lucky person, you know, having survived that. There would probably be no recovery with anything related to that.

On the day after the election in 1976, I made up my mind. Whether I told anybody including my wife with whom I used to confide everything, but I made up my mind that that was it. I did not announce it. I thought about announcing it early and retiring from the chairmanship of the House Committee on Standards and Official Conduct, while retaining my position on the House Appropriations Committee. I did not do that immediately after the election, or immediately prior to the convening of the 95th Congress because when you announce your retirement you, in a sense, emasculate yourself. You lose a

INTERVIEW OF JACK FLYNT BY JOHN HIBBING-2

great deal of your power and your influence. You lose it in your district; you lose it your state; you lose it among your colleagues; you lose it among government agencies with whom you intervene in behalf of constituents. I kept my decision a secret from everybody, but perhaps two persons--my wife and one other person. As far as I know, neither one of them ever gave a hint to anybody of my decision to retire before the end of the 95th Congress. On February 21, I think I'm correct on that date, I assembled four of my staff members in my office. I had one from the airport area office come down, I had one from the other office, which is about 38 miles west of here come over and with the young man and the lady in my Griffin office. I told them all to sit down... so that you'll be the first to hear what I'm about to read to you. And I read it to them. So two of the three women just absolutely broke down emotionally. The young man was rather stocial about it and one of the woman strongly suspected that I had made up my mind, took it without any display of emotion.

I gave it to the Griffin newspaper first. I gave it to the Griffin radio station so that they could have it for their noon news report; and the Griffin news put it out over AP immediately. I began to get calls from the Atlanta newspapers--other sources and other places, too--which I did not accept. In fact, I thought that my statement spoke for itself and I didn't want to elaborate on it at all. When I went to the airport that afternoon to return to Washington, there were television cameras, radio reporters, newspaper reporters there to ask for further comments. And I said, 'here's a copy of my statement which I assume you already have and I have nothing to add to it and nothing to subtract from it.' And they kept pressing me and asking questions. I said 'I'm not going to answer any questions. I said I've answered every question that needs to be answered.' I said I'm on my way back to Washington to ... continue what I've been doing up to this time and I have said that I will not be a candidate for reelection in 1978 and that's it.

I did not run; I stayed out of the primary. I did participate somewhat in the general election. And the Republican who had run against me twice unsuccessfully ran successfully against the Democratic nominee. ... That's the chronological history of it. I have had no regret at any time--not for even a fleeting second--about my decision. If I had any regrets, which I do not, the only regret would be that I didn't do it in 1972 instead of in 1978. I enjoyed my 24 years and two months as a member of the House of Representatives. I think I'd do it all over again, knowing exactly what I know now...
(long discussion of family)

When I made my announcement of my retirement, I had no idea what I would do, except I knew that I was coming back home

INTERVIEW OF JACK FLYNT BY JOHN HIBBING-3

cause I feel that I've never left home. I turned down some very rewarding--as far as financial compensation is concerned-- offers to remain in Washington. I turned down some nice offers to come to Atlanta. When I retired, I had no idea what I was going to do between February 21st and December. I was invited to join this firm here. And I thought it over and decided that while I'd probably make more money in Washington or Atlanta, that I could be at home, that I could be very selective in the work I did, and that I could--without any difficulty at all--be able to supplement my retirement and other fixed income that I have so that I could live comfortably. And I've been able to do that so far.

My practice has really been more than I expected it to be. I do not put in an eight-hour day, five days a week. But when necessary, I put in whatever time is necessary. I expect I average between 24 and 32 hours a week, in being gainfully occupied in helping carry my share of the firm load. During my first year of practice, during 1979, as near as I can read the figures-- although the firm had been established for 10 years and the senior member of the firm before I came in had been practicing in Griffin for 28 years--I've generated more than half as much revenue as they did together. In other words, I generated more than a third of the revenue for 1979. I have no reason to suspect that the generation of income of 1980 will be any less than their share. The firm became effective in January 1979. My youngest son, John, joined us in June of 1979. In addition to my work, I am very active in the work of my church. I am reasonably active in civic and other community activities. I have resumed a very active role in the state bar association of which I was president before I went to Congress--as the youngest president in the history of the Georgia Bar Association. So I've had no regrets about my decision to come back to Griffin. A lot of people were surprised that we came back to Griffin. (Here, he asks John to turn off the tape. I guess Crisp was led in.)

My son Crisp just walked in. John, I wish you'd tell Crisp the exact title of your dissertation for your doctorate degree. It's going to be the "Causes and Consequences of Retirements from the House of Representatives." And Crisp I wish you'd repeat for the recording, you will not be quoted--you might be interviewed, but no quoting. (Crisp) "Say it's from an anonymous source." See, Crisp knows a lot of my colleagues, both past and present. (Crisp) "Of course nobody would go up there to have fun. Any body who went up there with the idea of having fun would be a damn fool. But it's a lot easier to say and a lot easier to go back if it's enjoyable. So when you've got people hassling you, nipping at your heels in the press and everybody's trying to unearth bodies in your backyard, skeletons in your closet. We don't need people poking around in your private life and all. You

INTERVIEW OF JACK FLYNT BY JOHN HIBBING-4

have to pass such a muster to even get in."

I had completely forgotten this, but what Chris just said reminded me of it. We've literally had platoons of investigative reporters--which is a fairly new term in journalism. We have literally had teams of investigative reporters from the Washington Post, possibly the Washington Star, possibly the Los Angeles Times, certainly the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Baltimore Sun papers, as well as of course the state newspapers here in Georgia. We've had platoons of 'em down here searching through court records, searching through newspaper files, interviewing sometimes as many as 100 people in a day, trying to find somebody that would say something unkind or even malicious about me. Several of them have told me that they've been down on just such an assignment; and they said that they could not find anything in the records which would be adverse... One of them said during the entire time, one of them said that during the entire time that he was here, which covered three days, that he did not find anybody who was critical of either me personally or of my services.

JH Why you? Was it after you were chairman of the Ethics Committee?

JF It was during the time that I was chairman of the Ethics Committee.

JH Was that the connection or did they do everyone or....?

JF Well, I can't answer that. I don't know, but I do know that some of the media people thought that I myself might have had some direct/indirect connection with what has become known as Koreagate. In fact, I have probably been asked over 200 times if I've ever been to Korea; the answer's no. I've never been to Korea, I've never put foot in it; I've never even flown over the air space of it. But during the investigation, somebody found some shredded files. One of the reconstructed documents contained a copy of a cable which had been sent to some one in the government of Korea saying that on August 12, 19__--I even forgot the year because I didn't go--that Congressman John J. Flynt, Jr., an influential member of the Appropriations Committee, a Democrat from Georgia, a senior member of the House, would arrive in Seoul, Korea for a five day visit. Please extend to him all amenities and courtesies possible. Well after they found that they thought, damn it, that I went. I had my usual Wednesday afternoon press conference while the investigation was going on. And they asked me the question again. And one of them was doing all the questioning, everybody else was mysteriously silent. And he monopolized the questioning. And he asked me four or five different times if I'd ever been to Korea, South Korea. And,

INTERVIEW OF JACK FLYNT BY JOHN HIBBING-5

of course, finally I got exasperated and I said I've answered that question to you four times--how many more times are you going to ask it. And he said until I get the answer that I'm looking for." I said, well damn it, if you're looking for an answer that I've been to Korea, you can ask me 20,000 times and a fact is a fact. And all the questions you could ask wouldn't change it. I've never been there in my life. What he was doing, he was laying that was carried in its entirety. It wasn't news-worthy at all, but it was carried in its entirety on the NBC Nightly News. It was carried again in its entirety four times the following morning during the news segment of the Today Show. Their plan was to run that Wednesday night, Thursday morning

..... has been called a lie about his association with the government of Korea.

JH The thing that amazes me most about congressmen is the ability to shift gears like you have

JF As to the causes of my retirement, I would not want a ~~penny~~ ^{to point to} for it, anyone, and say that that's why I did it. I can give you several contributing factors. 1.) I was working my heart out. I was working almost to the point of physical and mental exhaustion and I had reached the point where I felt that, particularly in the conduct of the Korean investigation, that I was not getting the support that I deserved and needed from the Georgia media. You ought to do an idea on that. Without going into the merits of it, it was a case that was blown all out of proportion from the very beginning. The actual involvement of members of the House of Representatives I would say was less than 1% of what had been one time alleged by irresponsible people in the media. I was carrying on a reasonable, conservatively-approached investigation. I was trying to find out the truth. I was prepared to censure, expell or recommend prosecution of anybody that we found to have been guilty of gross impropriety or criminal activity. At the same time, we had the duty to protect innocent people wanted Mennon to be charged publicly with bribery or the equivalent of bribery is like driving a damn coffin, I mean driving a nail in his political coffin. So at the risk of being criticized by the media, I was determined that this investigation was going to stay on track and going to be thorough, at the same time it was going to be fair. Though it was that we brought disciplinary actions against three members, two of the recommendations were followed by the House, the third one was reduced by a vote of the House on the House floor from what we recommended to a lesser sanction. I did not feel that I could successfully complete that investigation and at the same time come home three or four times a week to campaign. And I think I was really looking for a reason to retire anyway. Another contributing factor

INTERVIEW OF JACK FLYNT BY JOHN HIBBING-6

was that although I was financially able to do it, I always have been, the cost of maintaining a home in both places because of multiple trips back home, the additional costs associated with the responsibilities which a senior member of Congress that junior members don't have, it was literally costing me a substantial amount every year to stay in Congress. Fortunately my children had all been educated--we had had 23 or 24 years of education, expensive education for those three children. I managed to survive financially and I have no regrets about any of the personal sacrifices--I know I've said that several times before, and I repeat it--but it was making a financial drain that I thought it was time to call a halt to. Also, it was making a drain on my physical well-being that I could not continue to accept. I managed to keep my equilibrium. I managed to keep my sense of humor. But looking back on the patience during that last two to three year period that I served in the House to compare it with the way you see me looking today, I probably looked 10 years older two years ago than I do today.

JH

JF Yes, yes.

INTERVIEW OF JACK FLYNT BY JOHN HIBBING-7