

This oral history interview is part of the Richard J. Daley Oral History Collection at the Special Collections and University Archives Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago. It has been used to create content for the online exhibit, Remembering Richard J. Daley, <http://rjd.library.uic.edu> , published on July 20, 2015.

Special Collections & University Archives  
Richard J. Daley Library  
University of Illinois at Chicago  
801 S. Morgan St.  
Chicago, IL 60607  
3rd Floor  
(312) 996-2742

*<http://library.uic.edu/special-collections>*

## **Interview with Congressman Dan Rostenkowski**

Date: 3 June 2005

Location: Gene and Georgetti's Restaurant, Chicago, IL.

Present: Congressman Dan Rostenkowski and Dr. Robert V. Remini

Dr. Robert V. Remini: It is June 3, 2005, and I'm at Gene and Georgetti's Restaurant, waiting for a group of about ten that Jay Doherty, who is the president of the Chicago City Club, has arranged. And present, I trust, will be Dan Rostenkowski, maybe Rahm Emmanuel, and other political figures. I'm hoping to interview Dan Rostenkowski, particularly about his role in the election of Jim Wright as majority leader in the House of Representatives.

(the recorder is turned off momentarily)

(the interview has already begun)

Congressman Dan Rostenkowski: There was a comb and a spittoon can.

RVR: A can, oh.

DR: It was a spittoon can. It was loaded with pellets on the bottom so that it rocked. For the two years I was there, I got one in 1958 and I got one in 1960.

RVR: What did you do with it?

DR: Jesus Christ, I wish I'd saved it.

(the recorder is turned off momentarily)

DR: You're a menace, Bob (everyone laughs). For heaven's sake, what the hell is going on here, Jay?

RVR: You were instrumental, and I think the mayor was too, in the selection of Jim Wright to be majority leader when he beat Phil Burton by one vote, to be the majority leader of the House of Representatives. How did that come about? The fight was supposed to be between Burton and Bolling.

DR: It was strategy. Dick Daley originally—and we had lunch at the Bismarck Hotel—it was Jim Wright, Dick Daley, and myself—But before I brought Jim Wright in, Dick Daley had met with Dick Bolling. And Dick Daley was inclined to be for Dick Bolling.

RVR: Not Burton?

DR: No, it was never Burton. I said to Dick Daley, "Wait a while, Dick. Give me a chance. Let me bring the guy in," and then I went through what Jim Wright did on the Public Works Committee for the State of Illinois and the City of Chicago. And of course, Daley being realistic about this, said, "Really? Bring him in." I asked Jim to come in. We went over to talk with the mayor at this luncheon, and the mayor concluded, "Now Jim, you can press Dan. And I'm inclined to support you. Now, Daley can be of help, or he can be a hindrance. Now, I'll call Abe Beame." And Wright said, "Mr. Mayor, I don't want you to call. I'll call Meyer in Milwaukee." He said, "That'd be fine." And the mayor caught this right away. He said, "Now, wait a while, Jim. One thing I don't want to do is hurt you if I'm for you. Now, you tell me who you want me to talk to, because I'll call anybody you want me to." It was at that point in time that the mayor agreed to be for Jim Wright. And it was at that time that I had to go back to Washington to Mel Price, who had already kind of committed to delegation to be for either John McFall, Phil Burton, or Dick Bolling. I went to Carl Albert; I said to Carl, "Jesus, this is a big problem for us." It was really mishmash. Well, Daley never really came out for Jim Wright, but you could see all of us going for Jim Wright. But Morgan Murphy, Mel Price, Frank Annunzio—they were with Dick Bolling.

RVR: And they stayed?

DR: Well, they stayed until we beat them. And our strategy was to go to the McFall candidates—go to the McFall supporters and ask them, saying, "Listen, we have no argument with you being for McFall, but on the second go around, can you give us Jim Wright?" "Oh sure." We were picking up the second votes, and in the first runoff, it was Burton, Bolling, Wright, and McFall. McFall faded out. Now we've got to beat Burton—at least we think we've got to be beat Burton. But I said to Burton, "Phil, you aren't going to beat Bolling. We aren't going to beat Bolling. Bolling is going to get elected. Let's compare notes." And Burton said, "Oh no, I've got some studying." I said, "Oh, I'm telling you. I've got duplicates on Mike Pounce. The guy telling you said he'd be there for me." At any rate, in the second go around, we knocked out Bolling. Now it was a fight, Wright against Burton. And that was where we were in the well. Rudd Ashley walks in from Toledo, Ohio. Rudd Ashley, he was a congressman from Toledo, Ohio. Rudd Ashley's suite is right across the hall from mine. I walked up to him and said, "Look, you're okay with Wright, aren't you?" He said, "Oh Jesus, no. I'm voting for Burton. Danny, is this important to you?" I said, "Holy Christ! It's my balls! Don't do this to me!" He crossed out Burton and wrote in Wright with one vote. He won it by one vote. Now, that's honest to god. Jim Wright knows it. Rudd Ashley knows it. But Rudd Ashley said, "Jesus, don't tell that to anybody." I'm a goddamned liberal. Rudd Ashley was really a liberal not to be for Phil Burton.

Unknown Man: You gave him your balls.

DR: Oh yes (everyone laughs). The fact of the matter was that, Professor, that's how it all came about.

RVR: Why didn't you like Burton? Burton was the big liberal wing of the Democrats?

DR: He was too liberal for me. I really am not a liberal. I am a Daley Democrat—liberal only when cities are getting screwed and they're entitled to more money. But the idea that we throw money around to solve all of the problems, that's what Johnny [inaudible] on the Education Committee was doing. I was not that liberal.

RVR: Did Tip O'Neill ask you to find a candidate other than Bolling and Burton?

DR: No. Tip O'Neill was hiding in the closet. Tip O'Neill didn't want anybody to know. It was Leo Deal, his aid, who was doing all of the work.

RVR: My evidence is that Tip O'Neill went to you and asked you to find another candidate, and that you talked with other people and came up with Wright.

DR: We talked Jim Wright into running. Jim Wright did not want to run. There was Jim Wright, who had a comfortable position on the Public Works Committee. But it was a member from New Jersey—I can't think of what his name is—There were three of us that talked Jim Wright into running. Jim Wright didn't want to run. But when we got it all worked out together...

RVR: ...McFall could never make it.

DR: No.

RVR: And you knew that.

DR: That's why we dealt in the initial election for the McFall votes because we knew that if we picked up the McFall votes, we'd jump in front of Burton or we'd jump in front of Foley.

RVR: But he won by only one vote, which was pretty close.

DR: It was Jim Wright against Burton. But we beat McFall and we beat Bolling by ten or twelve votes.

RVR: Were you sorry later, that by one vote, you could have had Burton and not have had all of McFall?

DR: I was never for Burton. I despised Burton.

RVR: Why?

DR: That's because he was too liberal for me.

RVR: He was a womanizer.

DR: Oh, I don't care about that (everyone laughs).

Unknown Man: He liked Clinton. He loved Clinton.

(the tape is shut off momentarily)

DR: Burton was totally tied up to labor, out of San Francisco. I just never felt comfortable in the company of those people. Tommy can correct me on this—Nobody like Dick Daley had better allies than Texans. Tom O'Brien, who was my predecessor on ways and means, was the greatest pal of Sam Rayburn. John Connally was the only son of a gun that had the guts to come over and put his arms around Daley at the convention when everybody in the room was anti-Daley, with Abe Ribicoff being the cheerleader. John Connally came over and put his arms around Dick Daley. Is that a fact?

Unknown Man: Yes. We also tried to throw John Connally out of the convention.

DR: Oh sure.

RVR: They punished you, too (everyone laughs)?

DR: Yes.

Unknown Man: That was in 1968. The mayor did make the calls to the mayors of those other cities. And after that, though, Wright knew who put it together, delivered by one vote. That's because they created a position in the leadership with Dan Rostenkowski.

DR: Oh yes.

Unknown Man: That wasn't there before that.

DR: What was strange is that Tip O'Neill and I are like hand and glove, and O'Neill was opposed to me. I went to see Jim Wright. I said, "Jim, I want this deputy whip job." "Sure." I said, "Tip O'Neill is not for me." He said, "Well, it's my appointment." I said, "Jim, that's not the right way to start it. Go in there and tell Tip O'Neill that you're going to insist on it." He said, "Danny, I can't believe it. For Christ's sake, you practically elected him mayor. Do you think I'll make that mistake?" I said, "Hey, you know, strange things happen." Jim Wright went in and stood like a major leaguer. "I want Rostenkowski. And I'll tell you, Tip, I don't want to get into embarrassing situation with you, but I'm naming Rostenkowski." "Oh Jesus Jim, you don't think that I'd be against Dan, do you (laughs)?"

Unknown Man: Bullshit Irish (everyone laughs)!

Unknown Man: They're a sick crowd. Aren't they?

DR: Oh, terrible! I'll get this god darn thing out of here (everyone laughs).

RVR: Why was Wright such a terrible Speaker?

DR: He wasn't a terrible Speaker. He was a very principled guy. He didn't really want to live in the shadow of Sam Rayburn. You know, being a Speaker in the days of Sam Rayburn was nothing.

RVR: But he was living in the shadow of Tip O'Neill.

DR: Who was? Jim Wright?

RVR: Jim Wright.

DR: I don't know. Jim Wright was very big in South America. He thought that the Speaker's job was far more than just being an American legislator. I mean, I had no problems with Jim Wright. Jim Wright was always irritated with how much authority I had in the tax area. I mean, Jim Wright thought that he could oppose his will on me. I said, "Baloney. I have the brightest kids in the country working for me."

RVR: Switching the subject to Clinton...

DR: What is this interview? I get ten thousand dollars for it (everyone laughs), and a free lunch (everyone laughs).

Unknown Man: They might even put your name in the Sun Times Sunday.

RVR: Is Clinton a perjurer?

DR: Tell me about Jack Kennedy. Was he a perjurer? You know what I'm saying? Perjury is in the eye of the beholder.

RVR: What I need Mr. Chairman, I have Newt Gingrich's testimony.

DR: He's a liar (laughs). He's a liar—a downright, out bold-faced, liar.

RVR: Okay. But I don't want to end the discussion of Clinton's impeachment with Newt giving the final evaluation. I'm not trying to go one way or another. I'm trying to be neutral, as a historian. What is the Democratic view then, of Clinton as president, as a man who has...



Unknown Man: It's a question of the deposition of what isn't he.

DR: Yes. I'm not good at this. But I really feel that, and I think it's been liberal interpretations that have taken us down this line. It's where we're mixing apples and oranges all of the time with respect to personal interests of an individual. I don't think we should have arguments on the floor of the House of Representatives about abortion. I mean, I think that's a personal religious operation. And I said this to Cardinal Bernardin, who was a saint. You know, they think that Pope John Paul should be that. Here's a guy that should have been a saint. And I sat there with him, and I had a lot of fun over on State Street with those guys, but I said, "Hey, you tell me that it's sacrilegious to be for abortion. I live with five women. Every one of them think that it's their business, not mine, and I tend to agree with them." Now, the Catholic Church can say one thing. So, when you get these apples and oranges mixed up, in my opinion, that's why we've got the big problems that we have. We're arguing—wasting time. I'm not talking about the social welfare in the country with respect to Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. We're talking about abortion. You know, women...

Unknown Man: And there's stem cells.

DR: There's no question about it. And I don't think the government should fund it. But we shouldn't be on stump being against it, either.

RVR: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

(the tape is shut off momentarily)

RVR: Why did you like Bolling?

DR: Why did I like who?

RVR: Bolling.

DR: Oh. I disliked Bolling more than I disliked Burton.

RVR: Why did you support him then?

DR: I didn't support Bolling. I supported Wright.

RVR: Okay. Why did you dislike Bolling?

DR: It was because he was a pompous, professorial mother fletcher. Dick Bolling gave the impression that he used to sit in the room that Sam Rayburn had and that he was very big with Sam Rayburn.

RVR: Was that the Board of Education room?

DR: It was the Board of Education room. Yes. It right down there on the bottom of the steps as you came down. Have you ever been there?

RVR: I want that to be my office, but the Speaker won't give it to me. I think historically that's where the historian should be. He has private dinner parties.

Unknown Man: He's the Speaker.

RVR: Yes, he owns everything.

Unknown Man: Sam Rayburn.

DR: That's where he would be. As a matter of fact, that's where Truman found out that he was the President of the United States.

Unknown Man: Bob, was Sam Rayburn gay (everyone laughs)?

DR: He never got married. I thought you were a historian of the House of Representatives. What the hell are you looking at (everyone laughs)? If you want to sell your book, you'd better put some sex in there.

RVR: We have some sex in it.

Unknown Man: It should be two editions, like a DVD—a regular cut and a director's cut.

RVR: We have Wilbur Mills and Firecracker Something. [Fanne Foxe, “The Argentine Firecracker”]

DR: I'll never forget that as long as I live. Bill Green said, "Danny, did you see that television show?" I said, "No." He said, "I think that's Wilbur Mills." I said, "Really, for Christ's sake, Wilbur Mills. He's taking Holy Communion." Sure enough, Wilbur was in the place with Danny [inaudible]. Then—Wilbur had a very low, gravely voice—“Dan, do you really think that I'm in trouble (everyone laughs)?" We were in H208, which was my office for fourteen years, after Wilbur. I said, "Wilbur, are you dead?" I was only thirty-five, forty years old. Wilbur Mills, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, Time Magazine...

RVR: He was a powerful man.

DR: I said, "Do you want some advice? Get in your car with Walter," who was his black driver, and a good kid. "Have him take you out to Walter Reed and say that you're sick." He said, "Dan, Dan (everyone laughs)." I said, "Wilbur, I can't vote for you. And I'm a loyalist." "Dan, Joe Carth was just in." Joe Carth was from Minnesota. I said, "And what did Joe Carth say?" He said, "Joe Carth said, 'Sit in there, Wilbur.'" I said, "Wilbur, he's out there campaigning like a son of a bitch against you. Now, you can believe me, you can believe Joe Carth, but I suggest you put your hat on, go out to Walter Reed, and say that you're sick." And that's what he did. You know, he resigned his chairmanship. But

you know, it's so strange how things happen. I chose to go on Ways and Means and to be chairman. I looked at Jim Wright, a young man, who was going to be Speaker forever. All of a sudden, John Foley took my whip's job. John Foley was in line. But I've got to admit, when I made the decision to be the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, I was on the front of every goddamned newspaper, more outside the city than any time in the city—more! People, mostly on Lake Shore Drive, who I've known, would call me and say, "Danny, I read the New York Times. Jesus Christ, you're doing good. I don't see anything in the Chicago papers." There was not a goddamned word about me in the Chicago papers (everyone laughs).

RVR: You were not appreciated.

DR: With Wilbur and Al Allman, it's just amazing. What I enjoyed more about being chairman was that I had the kind of staff that was just, boy, out of the park. I had a rapport that I wish other executives had. I said to them, to the lowest guy on my staff, "If you don't feel comfortable coming in and telling the boss that he's full of shit, then you don't work for me. I want you to be able to come in and say, 'Hey boss, on this one, you are absolutely wrong.' Tell me why." And there wasn't anybody on my staff that couldn't walk in and say, "Boss, on this one, you're way out in left field." And we'd make the adjustments. The trouble with me coming a power as a chief executive is that you dismiss everybody's ideas and the newest members come in and say, "He wants this done tomorrow. Let's get it done." It's not analyzed. It's not saying, "Wait. Do you know the repercussions of this?" And that's where I think our mayor has a problem.

RVR: Mr. Chairman, why did you go along with Reagan's cuts?

DR: In what?

RVR: I mean, in all of the domestic programs. He was...

DR: He was the most populous son of a buck you ever met in your life. I got beat by him twice. Twice!

RVR: He was wrecking the Johnson social programs.

DR: Well, about twenty minutes ago, I told you that I wasn't a liberal (laughs).

RVR: I take that with a grain of salt. You're a Democrat!

DR: Oh, Christ almighty.

RVR: Okay.

DR: So was Ronald Reagan. I'll never forget John Connally walking in to the mayor's office and having the mayor say, "John, you can't leave the party. Jesus, stay in the party and we'll change it." And John came and he said, "Dick, the party left me. And the party left you. And we ain't going to change it. And you aren't going to change it. These people are going to run over us because they've got the press on their side. You guys killed the Democratic party."

Unknown Man: Get that guilty look on your face (everyone laughs).

Unknown Man: That'll be after we get rid of the wings in a hundred years.

Unknown Man: Mr. Chairman, what happened to a lot of people who worked for you? Where did they end up?

DR: Well, I got a notice that one of my guys is retiring from Pfizer. He probably had two hundred thousand shares of Viagra. The other one is Ken Bowler.

Unknown Man: Pfizer is a hundred dollars a share, or ninety dollars a share.

DR: Yes, and he's a Mormon. And he'll probably give it all to the church. They're all doing fabulously. But then again, they had it there.

Unknown Man: Did any of them run for office?

DR: No.

Unknown Man: What about Jimmy?

DR: He's bought and sold, in and out.

Unknown Man: How about Ken?

DR: He runs the Railroad Retirement Board. They're all bright kids.

(the tape is shut off momentarily)

RVR: Say that again about [inaudible] (everyone laughs).

DR: I stuck it to George Mitchell.

(the tape is shut off momentarily)

DR: I'm getting crazy here. And I'm through.

RVR: No. No.

DR: But I loved being in it and sticking it to the bastards who were on television shows, like Meet The Press (everyone laughs).

RVR: Tell me how you loved the job.

DR: I don't think I want to go back to it. I mean, I loved it to a point where we were in the majority. When I lost, we lost the majority. I wouldn't want to sit in the Congress of the United States in the minority.

RVR: What was it like to be in the majority? Did you screw the minority?

DR: No, no! Professor, the only way I passed legislation was that I got a share to the Republicans. And I knew that. They knew that. And we took care of the Republicans, where they needed taking care of. But when Gingrich came to town, Michael compromised. The idea of an understanding was gone.

RVR: The Democrats were in the majority for forty years. It was forty years!

DR: Professor, you know, they didn't beat us on our policy. They beat us on getting the rascals out.

RVR: But is forty years too long?

DR: Not if you're doing the right things.

\*\*\*\*\*END OF INTERVIEW\*\*\*\*\*