

Mr. Joseph P. McCaffrey interviewing Senator Everett M. Dirksen

Good evening, I'm Joseph McCaffrey. Welcome again to Close-up, the Capitol. My guest this evening need no introduction to anyone who has ever watched television, certainly no introduction at all to anyone who is interested in public affairs. This gentleman first came to Congress as a member of the House in 1933 and served there until he retired voluntarily in January 1949. He was elected then to the Senate in 1950 and has served there ever since. I think if there was a Congressional Hall of Fame, and I really think there should be one, that this gentleman would be the first man who would be selected for it. Because he is, and I am sure that almost any other reporter who covers the hill will agree, the complete senator. He is the perfect senator, if in the world of human beings there is such a thing as anyone who is perfect or anything that is perfect. And in just one moment I will yield the balance of the time on this program to the distinguished Minority Leader of the United States Senate, Everett McKinley Dirksen.

Senator Dirksen, in many ways it is a miracle that you were in the Senate, in that no one ever thought you would return to public life when you left the House. The verdict was that you were going to be blind. Will you tell us the fears and feelings that went through your mind at that time?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Yes, I remember the incident rather vividly. I had six or seven physicians including one here in Washington, a very noted physician who was an eye specialist who had been in the Wilmer Clinic at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. I recall so well the day when he called in the morning and said there was a division of opinion as between him and others as to whether this retinitis condition was malignant or not, but they thought at

least I ought to go to John Hopkins and think about having an enucleation - which is a nice fancy word for the removal of one of your eyes. I remember how Mrs. Dirksen and I wept when the news came. I very dutifully went to Baltimore that morning on the train. I remember telling the surgeon over there afterwards when I got there that I had consulted with another doctor and came to the conclusion that I would not permit the removal of my eye. He said, what doctor? Oh, I said, a very great big doctor, He lives way upstairs. Oh, he said, you are one of those guys, are you. I said, yes, I am. I am a rather rough, uncouth sort of a person, but I am one of those guys. He said: all right, if that is the way you want it; I'm going to California tomorrow so make up your mind. I said, I have made up my mind and that was it. That is my good eye. The other one has some scar tissue on it but it does very well for peripheral vision. Incidentally I became an expert on eyes myself at that time but there is something that hits you, you can just envision a black world for a while.

**MR. MCCAFFREY:** Did you have any fear, any panic when they first talked to you about this?

**SENATOR DIRKSEN:** I would not call it panic but I was fully sensible of what confronted me and how serious this really was because just think of those limitations on what you can do and how long you have to be out of circulation before you can undertake to get anything done and learn an entirely new technique where you feel your way in the world.

**MR. MCCAFFREY:** Senator, those who observed you during your years from 1933 until 1949 in the House and who have observed you since your return here to the Senate say that you have changed a great deal, that you may have mellowed perhaps. How would you compare yourself in the Senate today with yourself when you were in the House? Do you see or think there is any difference in

you as an individual as an operating member of Congress.

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, I think you will have to remember first of all, that I am somewhat older than I was in those days. I came here at age 36 or 37, full of energy and ready to just fairly push the dome off the Capitol, until older and well demeaned members advised me that that dome has been there since they came and would be there when they were gone and would be there when I was gone. So perhaps it might be well to slow down a little. Then I think you learn certain things which somehow fill out your philosophy as a legislator and I pretty much agree with this kind of language - that this free government is like an old waterlogged scow, it doesn't move very fast, it doesn't move very far at one time, but it never sinks and maybe that is the reason we have a free government today. I was thinking how many free governments are just in too great a hurry that suddenly flop over and take on a dictatorial and despotic cast because they can't wait for normal forces to undertake the changes that are necessary in the constant climb of people to a better life.

MR. MCCAFFREY: Senator Dirksen, you have been criticized at times for not being consistent. That over the years, your position on various issues has changed.

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well consistency is a hobgoblin of small minds - was it Emerson who said it? - a foolish consistency or an inconsistency and I have often thought the only people who do not change their minds are sleeping peacefully in some cemetery or they are in an institution -- involuntarily there-- and have lost the capacity to change their mind. So I hope that the time will never come when I can't adjust to new circumstances and new conditions because it is an accelerated world. How fast it moves -- and I need only to get a touch of nostalgia and dip into my past; go way back to my boyhood days--

to see the changes that have taken place to become thoroughly sensible of what has happened in this world.

MR. MCCAFFREY: How would you sum up your philosophy of life, Senator?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, I want to be ready for change at all times. I think I subscribe fully to the definition of progress as the constant and intelligent and undramatic action of life on what is here. Perhaps I can best illustrate it by saying the atom has been here ever since this world was created but it has taken all these millions of years to break it down, to fracture it, to find it, to see what is inside of it, and to lay open this great force that has changed the whole destiny of the world and the destiny of mankind.

MR. MCCAFFREY: Any senator has a hectic pace in life and because Senator Dirksen is the Minority Leader in the United States Senate, his pace is even more hectic. It is nothing for him, for example, to have 150-200 people to come to see him in the course of a day and how does he get away from this? We have some pictures which I would like to show you at this time to illustrate how a Senator, in this case Senator Dirksen, relaxes. These are pictures -- these are some of your flowers, Senator -- and this is Mrs. Dirksen with you at your home in Leesburg and what do you grow down there? What crops do you grow?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, frankly, we grow a little bit of everything. Not only in the vegetable line but in the flower line as well. I do not want to be an expert. I do not want to be a professional. I never want to lose my amateur standing ...

MR. MCCAFFREY: As a gardener?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: ...as a gardener and so I go for these very simple things that give me a lot of joy whether you grow them singly or in great masses.

People wonder some about my fidelity to the marigold. Well, take a marigold in great mass and it lasts right up to frost and are here all summer and fall. You can enjoy the mass color anywhere in the garden and it is a hardy flower. But I love petunias, I like to dabble a little in roses and on a small scale I do fairly well at it. I love zinnias because of their rich color. They just absorb all the color in the sun and what a gorgeous sight it is to see them in great mass colors all through the summer and it is another hardy flower, so hardy in fact that it has a way of resisting bugs. So does petunias. But that gives me a lot of fun and variety and then I garden a little in the vegetable field. Start early - that I learned as a boy - starting with radishes and lettuce and onions, the first to mature in early spring. And then you move on to carrots and turnips and to red beets and then of course you always have a stand of potatoes and a stand of tomatoes. I always have a little kale. There must be one green vegetable with plenty of iron content.

MR. MCCAFFREY: Senator, in your youth you aspired to be an actor. In fact, you did write and sell and produce some plays ...

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Very little but at least ...

MR. MCCAFFREY: ...well, you got paid for them and there are a lot of playwrights who have never been able to sell, you know. How related is politics to the theater, would you say?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, you have this common identity. To begin with, you deal with people. You are in front of people in political life even as you are on the stage and out of it there must develop a poise, a certain presence, a capacity for putting your thoughts in words, in poignant expression, so that it is conveyed to people and persuades them and in that respect there is complete identity between the theater and I think, political life.

MR. MCCAFFREY: One of the main requirements, it seems to me, of a man in public life is that he had patience, that he be able to suffer fools gladly and that he take all the other little inconveniences which comes along and doesn't let these things get to him. Is this something that you have to be born with or can men in public life learn to adjust to all these things?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: They can learn but ...

MR. MCCAFFREY: Some of them don't.

SENATOR DIRKSEN: No, the gift of patience, of course I think, is a highly desired attribute because you are dealing with people, they have fixations, they have convictions about any number of controversial matters. You have to hear them out. You have to be careful not to be too precipitous or capricious in pointing out what you think the weakness in the other fellows case may be, especially if he is on your side of the aisle politically speaking. So that requires, I think, gentle discussion and a very gentle oil can art as I call it, so that the bearings never get hot. You don't develop frictions that suddenly blow into pieces and if you can keep it on the quiet side and have every aspect of the matter explored without anybody becoming fractious at any time you're most likely to get results. What was it that Lincoln said, -- we shall sooner have the chicken by hatching the egg than by breaking it.

MR. MCCAFFREY: Is this the secret of your great ability to work compromises? Now there are many examples, in your case, of your ability to bring about a compromise, the most classic one and the one that will go on the history books certainly is the work you did on the Civil Rights Bill last year in the Senate. Is this the secret of being able to get men to work together?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Yes.

MR. MCCAFFREY: Restraining yourself first perhaps

SENATOR DIRKSEN: If you have a common objective it is the starting point of course. There may be a dozen roads to get there. Some of them tortuous some not satisfactory, some of them difficult, some of them over high ground-- where lies the best road with the fewest barriers or obstacles in it? Well, it takes some doing of course to finally work around until you get into that road and that does require patience and you do have to hear the other fellow's case. He may not agree with you at all but, little by little, whatever difficulties are in the way begin to yield and before you know it you are at the end of the road and it looks as if it has been consummated by a rather satisfactory joining. And you say, all right, that's the route to get there, that's the route back and that is the route up there again.

MR. MCCAFFREY: In your thirty years in Congress, you have served with hundreds of men and women. What do you think is the great hazard -- now we are speaking as human beings -- of public life? Do you think it is drinking or do you think it is the inability or refusal to grow as times go on or do you think it is a development toward cynicism that is apparent in some members?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: First of all, there is a danger of getting into a political rut, so to speak, and life may go by you. That's very unfortunate indeed. That means of course that you will not adjust. What was it that Lincoln said; "the dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present... As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew."

MR. MCCAFFREY: If you come from Illinois you have to know Lincoln, don't you.

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Yes, and then he added this one part. He said: "We must disenthral ourselves and then we shall save our Country." That is a great line and I think over and over a person in public life has to take inventory, to see where he is at the moment, to take a look back to see from whence you came and then see where the high road goes, and then if your thinking is not attuned to it you disenthral yourself. You take a new stance and a new

look and if you are willing to look long enough and hard enough, I am rather confident that the right cast of mind and the right thoughts will come which are adequate to what lies ahead.

MR. MCCAFFREY: As a person and also in your many public statements you are always the optimist. Does your optimism ever falter in the face of all of the problems that face us today not only at home but also abroad?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: No, because even if there are frustrations and goodness knows every life is attended with some frustrations certainly; there is still ample time and room and cause for optimism because there are so many good things and so many blessings that you can count in life that come. So I see no reason why one shouldn't look on the optimistic side. Besides how can you look on life constructively without being an optimist because it is the only aggressive, affirmative attitude of mind that will do you any good in coping with a problem there on the doorstep everyday.

MR. MCCAFFREY: You served under five Presidents, from FDR through Johnson. Taking them one at a time, how would you appraise these men beginning with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. You were elected the same year he was first elected, 1932. You survived his big sweep of 1936 too.

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, how should you appraise different personalities. Franklin Roosevelt with the mellifluous voice who had a way of charming people and did charm the country. There were so many things with which I disagreed in those days, many with which I agreed, many with which my constituents disagreed and then they used to scold me a good deal about it. But certainly a personality of a type all its own that is rather rare. Then followed by Truman, rather mundane, rather earthy who could chop off his words. I had a great regard for Truman. He could scold you in language that you could understand and at the same time he could pat you on the back. I



recall when I went to say goodbye to Truman after this eye malady struck me and I said I would wait in Washington until I went to say goodbye. And I said, Mr. President, the custom is to pack your bags and get out of this town overnight but I would not do it. And he said to me at the White House, "Why did you quit? We need fellows like you around here." Well, when I got around to the Senate race, finally after friends importuned me, I remember Truman took me apart as nobody ever did as if he had never seen me in his life, yet he thought they needed me around here. When they observed his 80th Birthday, I think, I was there and made a speech on the occasion and I joshed him a little about it and he laughed and he said, "Oh, Dirksen, life is like that." So he was a different type entirely but he had those who were devoted to him with a deep and affectionate devotion. And then of course, there came Dwight Eisenhower. As the whole world knows, I was for Bob Taft and I didn't know how President Eisenhower would think about me and particularly some of the remarks I made in the nominating speech in Chicago. You may remember that one line I said was that it wouldn't take a committee investigation to determine Bob Taft's politics. Maybe at the time I said it I wasn't fully conscious of the fact that it was quite a little dig but President Eisenhower and I became the firmest of friends and I carried the flag for him on issues and controversies ...

MR. MCCAFFREY: let you have that hot poker ...

SENATOR DIRKSEN: I used to say that if nobody will pick up the hot poker I will pick it up ... And then came the late John Kennedy. Of course, we had known each other for ten or twelve years before he acceded to the Presidency. We ~~knew~~ knew each other in the House and we knew each other in the Senate. I had great affection for him and I think it was reciprocated. There was something genteel and gracious, there was a sublime grace about

John Kennedy and it stuck to him all his days. And how often he called me to the White House to sit for perhaps an hour to talk about many things and say, "where am I on this." "Well, Mr. President, you're not." And then the question, how to get results? And of course, it is quite a compliment, I think, when the President who bears another party label from mine calls me to ask how he gets out of a difficulty and extricates himself from a real problem in the Senate. My duty as an American, of course, with an allegiance and fidelity to my country requires that I help him. I would be a poor citizen indeed if I didn't do the same for any President regardless of his politics where the country's interest is at stake. But he was truly a great character in my book. Now President Johnson and I sat across the aisle from each other ...

MR. MCCAFFREY: The man you probably know the best.

SENATOR DIRKSEN: ...Yes... he as Majority Leader and I as Minority Leader. We used to make medicine, as I say, over in his office. Of course we had to make book and make schedule on what come up. The Senate is a two-way street, that is one thing we are always agreed on. A Minority Leader with some backing could just truss up the Senate any old time with a filibuster or anything else and stop it in its tracks and the Majority Leader could do likewise. And so we agreed that we had to work together because the overriding interest was the well being and the welfare of the Republic, the United States of America. It was on that ground we used to battle it out and believe me we have had some hot and tempestuous times in his office and in mine but never at any time did either of us lose sight of the fact that the objective was the country and its people.

MR. MCCAFFREY: Let me ask you the final question, Senator Dirksen, and this is always an unfair question perhaps. But looking back over your life -- and

you said you do look back every once and a while -- looking back over your life is there anything that you would undo that you did or is there anything that you didn't do that you would like to have done?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Just one. That is when I voted for a bill while in the House of Representatives in the Truman Administration to send miners and perhaps railroaders into the Army unless they quit striking and went back to work. That is the bill that Senator Taft stopped in its tracks in the Senate and as I look back I think if I could undo a vote that vote I would undo.

MR. MCCAFFREY: A pretty good record with only one regret out of what -- maybe three thousand votes or five thousand votes that you've cast.

SENATOR DIRKSEN: It could be, but you see, there we were all caught up in a vortex of feeling that extended all through the country and people were getting pretty harsh about it and naturally that is reflected in the Halls of Congress so perhaps they will stake me one vote that I regret. I do regret that one, of course.

MR. MCCAFFREY: I'll be back in one minute ...

Senator Dirksen, I want to thank you very much for a delightful program.

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### Description

1. Item transferred

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DIRKSEN REMARKS AND RELEASES  
~~REDACTED~~ INTERVIEW  
WMAL-ABC INTERVIEW BY JOSEPH F. Mc CAFFREY

Initials FM

Date 1/12/77

THEODORE ROOSEVELT MCKINLEY DIRKSEN

COPY

"LINCOLN REVISITED"

Radio and television speech

February 3, 1953

Every year in this season I like to visit with Abraham Lincoln. How often we lament the fact that he is not here and sometimes in sheer agony people will say, even as John Milton once said of somebody, "Thou shouldst be living at this hour." Well, he is here. He still speaks to the American people like he always did. Perhaps you remember in the letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Hebrews he was commenting on the righteousness to be gained by Abel the brother of Cain and the sacrifice he made and then he said of Abel being dead, he had speaketh. Well, perhaps he is dead but he still speaks and he still speaks particularly to his fellow countrymen. We see him in the Memorial, we think of him in the Tomb in Springfield, but there are a thousand and one places where you can jump on the tombstone of some one that stands up that Lincoln is there and that he is speaking to us. There are so many reminders of him of course. At the moment we are dealing with a resolution for a constitutional amendment in the Congress to take care of the succession of the President and the Vice President in case something untoward like death, assassination, resignation or retirement should happen. The matter has been considered before. It was considered when William Henry Harrison died and John Tyler became President. It was considered when he was assassinated by an evil bullet and Andrew Johnson succeeded. It was considered when Garfield was shot and Arthur succeeded. It was considered when McKinley was shot and Theodore Roosevelt succeeded. And then in our own time, it was considered when the late John Kennedy was shot and President Johnson

February 8, 1965

succeeded. The problem is still here as a reminder of him. They are making plans now to reproduce the Second Inaugural all over again when he made that deathless Second Inaugural speech and that will be a reminder of him. If only those evil-dears and particularly he who pulled that trigger could have thought of the last sentence in the Second Inaugural "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right". See everywhere there are reminders of him and being dead yet speaketh it is so well that we revisit with him every so often and we need so desperately to do it today. We need his spirit as never before. His devotion, for instance, to fundamental things. You remember when Horace Greeley, the great editor, wrote that Prayer of the Twenty Millions and his appeal to the people of the country to somehow dissuade you from the course that you were pursuing. And then the letter that you wrote to Greeley and oh how you put him right. This powerful editor who influenced so many decisions and opinions in this country and when he got all through you wrote that short simple letter and you just said, "Dear Mr. Greeley: My paramount object is to save the Union." How many people tried to get you off that track? How many people tried to invest that civil strife with other reasons and other purposes? But there in a sentence, "My paramount object is to save the Union". That was it and that is the kind of devotion we need to fundamental things in what may be regarded as a kind of a superficial aid. So maybe there is a hope that we can retrieve some of those fundamentals in our national life before they become irretrievably lost. That is why we so desperately need your spirit. I think of your reliance upon the people, if only they have the facts. When was it

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February 8, 1965

that they tried to urge you to ~~take~~ some action against Maximilian, the Archduke who set himself up as the Emperor of Mexico? Knowing the fears that were here, there and everywhere and what did you say? You just said that you were going to put on some pressure to get those European powers to get Maximilian's troops out of Mexico and General Juarez and his people would take care of Maximilian. How truly you spoke, Mr. Lincoln. For when those troops came out they did take care of Maximilian and so our sister Republic to the South could go forward and somehow exemplify and achieve its own destiny as a Republic in the Northern Hemisphere. You had a capacity for striking through all the superficial and going to the heart of the problem to see just where the answer lay. And there again your trust was in the people, once they were given the facts that they would understand. We need something else, something that is so easily overlooked in this day and age. I think we need a little more of your courtesy. We need a little more of your good manners. In your day they associated you with uncourtness and with the backwoods as if you had no manners and as if you had no courtesy. What a delight it must have been to you when you walked out of the White House and took a stroll and came up along Riggs Bank in Washington and there every morning, as I understand, you used to see this colored man with one leg and I can just imagine the broad grin on his face as he took off his hat and doffed it to you and he said, good morning, Mr. President, and then you would take off your hat and doff it and say, good morning. A lot of people wondered why you did that to so humble a person and what did you say? You said you just couldn't be outdone in manners by a humble person. We need some manners in our

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February 3, 1965

life today. It has gotten out of hand a little. We need a little more courtesy, one toward another and we need a little more restraint of spirit that you have always manifested because it will add sweetness and it will add grace and it will add light to our society. We need a little of that and I hope we can recover it. There is another thing, your consummate patience. Sometimes I think this is the impatient age. Everything has to be done overnight, nothing can wait. Nothing can wait until the spirit and the mind and the heart reflect upon some of the crises and the challenges that confront us today. I think back to your last speech, the last speech you made before that evil bullet sent you down to the ages. That was the night you talked to that serenading crowd at the White House. I think it was on the eleventh of April, 1865. A move that was afoot in Louisiana, twelve thousand people had already signed a petition to come back into the Union and you were encouraging the idea to be sure there were some things to be decided but you did not want this opportunity to go by without giving encouragement to the people of Louisiana to adopt the right kind of a constitution, to make the right kind of concessions, and then to come back into the sisterhood of States. And while you were belaboring that point and doing it so very constructively it was on that occasion that you said this, "we shall sooner have the fowl by hatching the egg than by smashing it" and the crowd laughed. But how pointed and how appropriate that was. We shall sooner have the chicken, I might say, by hatching the egg rather than smashing it. But that is the kind of impatience that somehow is upon our country today. And may we sit at your feet and gather a little of that patience because there are crises, there are challenges,



there are so many things that require the utmost of patience, impartial judgment  
if you please, if they are to be hurriedly sound and so desperately we need that  
patience that you exemplified all during your existence, and then we need some  
restraint when we are under pressure. I think of your second election but  
particularly your second nomination. Do you remember that group that went to  
Cincinnati and set up a rump convention. They wanted you to withdraw and you  
had some premonition that you could not win. You remember when you took that piece  
of paper and laid it upside down on the table and had the cabinet members sign it.  
They didn't know what they had signed. It was put in the War Department files  
under Lock and Key but you had written that there was a possibility that you  
might not be re-elected if re-nominated and then there would have to be a career  
taker and you would have to give some instructions to whoever was to follow you  
in the Presidency. Why, some of your best friends were in that group. Senator  
Sumner, William Willmore a President of the United States, Horace Greeley,  
Cameron of Pennsylvania, people you knew and they wanted you to withdraw. Oh,  
you could have been so intolerant about it. You could have been intolerant about  
the effort to get the soldiers vote on your side. You might have gotten up your  
backles in the language of the day when they insisted on that peace conference  
on that vessel at Hampton Roads. You didn't want to do it and fortunately nothing  
came of it at the time and so you went on to fold up the destiny of this country  
and put the great golden mark of Peace upon it once more and then we could go  
forward and retrieve our real destiny. We need you and you are here, being dead  
yet speaketh. I wonder why don't we communicate with you often. We could get so  
many answers out of this period. I salute you.