

Interview with Frank Watson

ISL-A-L-2012-036

Interview # 06: May 8, 2013

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: I wanted to ask you some other questions and start with your experiences with Barack Obama when he was an Illinois State Senator. He was in the senate from January of 1997 to the fall of 2004. You were there the entire time. Did you have a lot of personal dealings with him?

Watson: The first time I met the man, I didn't know who he was. I think he took Alice Palmer's place. She might have died. Anyway, he comes over and I'm standing with Carl Hawkinson, who was a state senator from Galesburg, his hometown, the Peoria District, in that area. We're standing there together on the senate floor and this guy comes over and he said, "Are you Frank Watson?" I said, "I am." He said, "Well, I understand you're the education guy here in the senate." Well, I was chairman of the education committee, not necessarily I'm the education guy, but I happened to be chairman at one point in time when we were in the majority, the Republicans. I said, "Well, I was chairman of the committee," and he said, "I want to do good things for kids and I want to work with you in any way we can to accomplish that. Nice meeting you." And that was that. I remember turning to Carl and I said, "Can you believe it? A freshman senator coming over and acknowledging me like that?" That was my first time that I met him and just him being that aggressive, that concerned about kids and wanting to work together and all that, really made a big impression on me because I remembered it. It's not something you would just normally remember, but then of course he ascends to these higher offices. I

was very impressed with him the first time I met him. His philosophy and mine were totally different and they just went a different direction.

DePue: Did he serve on the education committee with you?

Watson: No. Not with me, when I was on it.

DePue: Did he indeed work with you on some educational issues over the next few years?

Watson: Not really, not much, no. We really already had done Chicago school reform when he got there and that was the big one. That would have been one he would have really probably got involved in and would have had a lot of interest in. He probably served on the education committee but I couldn't tell you whether I was on it when he was on it or not. Anyway, just the overture from a freshman, to someone who had been around a while, was pretty impressive, I thought so.

DePue: Did you have a lot of experiences with him beyond that point, not just in education but in other initiatives as well?

Watson: He pushed universal healthcare all the time for the State of Illinois, which was a budget buster. We didn't have the money to put into it but he kept pushing it, obviously that carried forward to his time in the presidency.

DePue: Was he in the lead on pushing that from the Democratic side?

Watson: He was a sponsor.

DePue: Was that right from his early years in the Illinois Senate?

Watson: Yes.

DePue: Or later on?

Watson: In his early years. He's obviously a very eloquent speaker and a very bright guy and we all recognized that right away. But he had a tendency of speaking down to people, I'm the smartest guy in the room, that kind of thing, and he did it even to his own members, privately they'd tell you that. Because he was a back bencher, I mean he was a rookie, he just got started. Where a lot of these people had been around a long time and all the leaders and people like that are generally more senior. So he wasn't really a leader at all in the senate.

DePue: Even his last couple years in the Illinois Senate?

Watson: No. I would not say that he was considered a major leader. Under Emil Jones he was given a lot of leeway to do things he wanted to do.

DePue: How would you define that relationship with Jones?

Watson: Very good. I can remember when Barack ran for the U.S. Senate in the primary Emil was his biggest supporter. I thought well, he's a member of the senate and he probably should support him, but I didn't think he had much of a chance, and of course, he gets nominated and we self-destruct, we being the Republicans.

DePue: Would you describe that relationship with Jones as a mentor relationship?

Watson: I would, because Emil was there forever, I mean he was there before I was. I came in '78, so yes, I'd say he guided him quite a bit through his state career.

DePue: So it was Emil Jones reaching down to help this young Illinois Senator who looked like he had a bright future, or was it more the other direction?

Watson: No, I think he looked down and thought of him as a bright future, but when you think about it, Barack Hussein Obama? Who would think he would have

any kind of national appeal, let alone statewide, to be a U.S. Senator from Illinois. With a name like that, it wasn't conducive for the ballot box. There's people who have a good ballot name and then there's those that don't, and that wasn't necessarily considered to be a good one back then, but to his credit he prevailed.

DePue: Do you have any other stories that you recall, encounters or dealings with him?

Watson: Well, I was the coach of the softball team. (laughs) We had a softball team, the senate did, and we played the house every year, and during the nineties I was the coach.. I thought man, here's this



House and Senate softball team stand for their formal portrait at Comisky Park for the 2nd Annual Clout Classen. Circa 1980s, courtesy of the Sporting News in Melrose Park, Illinois

young guy from Chicago, runs pretty good. But he couldn't throw and he couldn't hit, he could hardly catch. They talk about what a great athlete he is. He may be a decent basketball player and a bowler, golfer, whatever, but he couldn't play softball. and so he didn't. I think he got offended and I don't know that he ever came back to try to make the team. Everybody makes the team but some people think they ought to be anointed and play all the time. Well, it doesn't work that way.

DePue: Was this Senate Republicans against Senate Democrats?

Watson: No. It was the state senate played the house. Every year we have a charity game and we raise money for charity.

DePue: So wait a minute senator, you mean you cut the future President of the United States? (laughter)

Watson: I do say that, I cut him off the team, but it wasn't like that. He was not a good softball player. We had good softball players.

DePue: So the two memories you have of him in the senate is that first meeting and on the softball team?

Watson: No. I made a speech when he left and I had a lot of accolades from the other side for things that I said about him. It was kind of a bipartisan effort to wish him well as he goes to the U.S. Senate and represents the state as a whole, not just Chicago or his district. It was a big challenge for him, never knowing that he's going to aspire to a higher office. I wanted to see him do good and I want to see him do good as president. I want the country---for things to go well, and maybe they haven't gone as well.

DePue: A couple of the things that came up just in the presidential campaign for 2008 especially, I wanted to ask you about. One was the number of present votes that he had. Now was that something that you guys on the Republican side were paying any attention to at the time?

Watson: Very much so. I can remember turning to—in my row, where I sat, Ed Petka sat next to me and then Peter Roskam was on the aisle and there was a chair in between us. I remember turning to—there would be votes that would be fifty-eight to nothing to one, you know, one being a present vote. Well, what's that all about? It would be Obama. I think 240 times, because we looked this up, obviously for John McCain, and I was out doing stump speeches for McCain,

talking about this guy's inability to make a decision. Why was he doing this? Why would he vote present on all these bills? I thought Hillary Clinton would use it immensely in the primary but she didn't. She didn't use it much at all, but McCain did, and it was true, why do that? I always say the green button is there, that's a yes vote. The red button is a no vote and the present one is a yellow one, and that yellow for a design, you're there to take a position. Your district sent you there, you've got to vote yes or no. You might be wrong in their eyes or you might be right but at least take a position, don't be voting present all the time.

DePue: Did you ever hear any explanation for why he was avoiding doing that?

Watson: No.

DePue: Any speculation at the time?

Watson: That he didn't really want to take a position. It was all about the future that was the speculation.

DePue: Among the Republicans especially?

Watson: Yes.

DePue: How about his position on abortion, because there was a position he was willing to take?

Watson: Yes.

DePue: And partial birth abortion.

Watson: Oh, man.

DePue: Even this controversy about after birth abortion. Can you shed any light on that one?

Watson: Well, he was probably the most liberal of all senators, or at least one of them. There were probably several of them like him on abortion. The partial birth: I just never understood that, how anybody can support that, but he did. I guess he can explain it, some day he's going to have to.

DePue: Any other issues or policy issues that you recall?

Watson: Just universal healthcare, he kept pounding that down our throat and I mean it was costing—I think it had a price tag of almost three billion dollars for us to do that in the state, and of course, we would attract others from other states. It was not a good issue at the time because of the economy, with the financial situation in the state, which hasn't gotten any better, worse if anything, and he kept pushing that and no one could even understand it. Even Democrats would say this guy---why he wants this so bad, no one could really—other than it was a philosophical thing and he felt strongly about it.

DePue: Are you suggesting that he wasn't necessarily viewed as one of the top leaders among the Democrats in the senate?

Watson: No. No, he wasn't because he was—what did you say, eight years, is that what it was?

DePue: Ninety-seven to 2004.

Watson: So, eight years roughly he was there, so that's not really a long time for anybody to gather up any seniority for one, or any respect on going into a leadership position. I don't think he was ever put in the leadership. I shouldn't comment on that, but I don't think that Emil Jones ever had him.

DePue: Again, the things you were hearing as he was obviously preparing to launch his senatorial campaign and then the presidency as well, is that Emil Jones was taking other people's names off the header for a particular bill and putting his name there so he could get more visibility.

Watson: That goes on, I mean that goes on if you're a freshman member and you come from a very tough district and there's a good piece of legislation out there that you ought to have your name on, be associated with it, that happens.

DePue: So do you know that as a fact, that Jones did that on occasion?

Watson: I would assume he did, although he never needed any help in an election, I mean in that district up there. In the primary maybe but in general, that's when they would always elect a Democrat. I'm talking about in those marginal districts that could go one way or another, at least on maybe some bills you would cosponsor. But I always said you never got elected or failed to get elected by the votes you cast here in Springfield. Very few bills would make a difference back home. There would be a few but basically, you can vote on whatever you think is right and then you can answer to your constituency and usually that works.

DePue: So I'm assuming that part of your guys' confusion for why he voted present all the time is in part because he came from such a solidly Democratic district?

Watson: No, not necessarily. We just couldn't understand it. Do you have the numbers?
Was it 240?

DePue: I don't know.

Watson: That's what I was told. That's a lot of present votes. I don't even know if I voted present ten times in my thirty years. The only time I would is if it was a pharmacy bill and it would be a conflict of interest, or maybe we took a caucus position of just voting present on a bill, just to say we were there but we don't necessarily support it. It's a rarity that people vote present.

DePue: The other thing that you do hear about what he was doing once he was down here in Springfield, was the poker games. Do you know anything about that?

Watson: Oh yeah. I'm part of that group but I don't think I ever played in a game with him. I played a lot of cards here, but I was never in the IMA, that was the Illinois Manufacturers Association. They would have a game at their place and I don't think I ever played there. I played at Stan Weaver's apartment a lot of times, that's where we'd go to play cards, the Republicans.

DePue: How much do you remember about his senatorial campaign in 2004?

Watson: Well, I thought it was going to be an ill fated campaign, just on, again, the ballot name. Not timely, when you think about 2001, with all we went through there, and a long period after that, still going through it and today. So, I think it was Dan Hynes and Blair Hull, might have been one, there were three candidates I think.

DePue: I don't know that Roland Burriss would have been running in that one.

Watson: Well, he might have been, he might have been, but I do remember Dan Hynes and Blair Hull. Everybody thought it was going to be Hynes, because the regular organization in Cook County supported him and he was well known,

being comptroller at the time. Everybody thought he was the nominee and obviously, he wasn't.

DePue: What we're talking about now is on the Democratic primary side.

Watson: Yes.

DePue: And he emerged from that as the candidate. How about the general campaign? I think Jack Ryan started out as the candidate for the Republicans.

Watson: Right. It was Jack Ryan and there was, once again, in the primary, Steve Rauschenberger, a state senator, was a candidate and so was Jim Oberweis and others. Anyway, Jack Ryan came out of that primary and then of course his escapades with his former wife came out. There was a divorce paper of some sort that the media got a hold of, and he just kind of self-destructed and got off the ballot and in entered Alan Keyes, who was, I think, a Maryland resident and obviously didn't mount much of a campaign. He carried some counties downstate but other than that, it was a non-event.

DePue: Again, the whole story about Jack Ryan having to bow out, as I have heard, at least in some circles, is because the Obama campaign was trying to force the issue to get the release of these otherwise sealed divorce papers, the child custody papers. Any comments about that?

Watson: That was it, they were supposedly sealed in some court somewhere and the *Tribune* got a hold of them, I believe it was the *Chicago Tribune*, and of course, the report came out and it was not very good for Jack Ryan and as a result, he got off the ballot.

DePue: Do you see that as character in the context of the guy who kept voting present in the Illinois Senate, or is it kind of contrary there?

Watson: Well, for a guy not ever taking positions, which he did by voting present, I mean you've got to stand up for something, you know, even if it's right or wrong, stand up. He did run a pretty good campaign against Alan Keyes and was all over the state. He came into Greenville, my hometown, and went to the drugstore. I wasn't there at the time. So he was very active. His inability to make decisions though, I think sometimes we might even be seeing that today, after five years as President of the United States, the whole thing with the red line in Syria. I mean the media is making a joke of this, it keeps moving. Now it's purple, it's green. So it's, I think maybe, the makeup of his character is the fact that he has a tough time making his mind up. But he's very liberal, a very philosophical guy, but when it comes to punching that button and making your vote record, he had a difficult time.

DePue: It was even before the general election or right at the cusp of the general election, where he skyrocketed to fame because of the speech he made at the Democratic Convention. Obviously, you knew about it at the time. What was your response to hearing about that?

Watson: Well, I was proud of him. I mean here he was, kind of a junior senator from Illinois and here he had been selected to make the keynote speech at the Democrat National Convention. Somebody was pushing this guy, I mean that's what everybody thought, and he hit a homerun with that and just escalated from there.

DePue: Well, among you and your colleagues in the Illinois Senate, who were you thinking was pushing him?

Watson: Well, the word was John Kerry all the time that John Kerry made the decision that he was supposed to—or asked him to make that speech. Whether that was the case, I don't know, but that was what our speculation was. But there's always, you know, you hear all this background stuff.

DePue: Well, I thought you were going to say somebody from Illinois, because John Kerry, from Massachusetts, who's the head of the ticket, why would he select some obscure guy from Illinois to do that?

Watson: Well he, I guess, made a name for himself out there and he does speak well obviously, he's a very good communicator. Maybe he's wrong a lot of times, but he does communicate his thoughts well.

DePue: I'm putting you on the spot here, I apologize for that.

Watson: No, that's okay. I don't know that anybody from Illinois pushed that. Dick Durbin or Emil Jones, I don't think Emil had that kind of clout at the national level.

DePue: Was Durbin—he was already the Senate Majority Leader by that time, correct, Durbin was?

Watson: He probably was, although that never would have been—yeah.

DePue: At what point in time then did you think boy, this is a serious candidate for the presidency? Was it at that moment in time?

Watson: When he beat Hillary? No, I didn't think of him escalating that fast anyway. That was another issue, his lack of experience, being a senator for just that

short period of time really didn't give him the tools to go into a presidency knowing, I think, things that needed to be done, and surrounding himself with people that could get things done. That's always an issue. You're only as good as the people around you and I think he made some bad selections. Geithner hadn't paid his taxes and there was a multitude of problems with some of those people.

DePue: Tim Geithner you're talking about.

Watson: What is it?

DePue: Tim Geithner.

Watson: Yes.

DePue: The Secretary of Treasury.

Watson: Secretary of Treasury.

DePue: What did you think about his campaign?

Watson: Well, I was never a big John McCain guy.

DePue: But you just said you went out campaigning for him.

Watson: Well, I did, he was the standard bearer. I had to help him, support him. But if you meet people and talk to him a little bit, personally, I didn't like his maverick attitude, I mean this kind of standoffishness. I liked George Bush. I know a lot of people didn't, still don't, but I think time will give him a better place in history. And he took on Bush a lot.

DePue: McCain or Obama?

Watson: McCain. But then he became our candidate and so I supported him. A war hero, easy to support a guy like that. I certainly didn't want Barack Obama to be our next president.

DePue: Do you think Obama ran an effective campaign?

Watson: Yes, I do. He was the first one to do all the technology, the social media stuff that everybody uses now.

DePue: Would it be fair to say that it was the Democrats' election to lose, that they had all the advantages because of the animosity the country had about President Bush?

Watson: I would say it was tough for McCain to follow Bush, but he was independent of him because of his stands he took against him when he was in the Senate, took against Bush. So he distanced himself from him. It wasn't like Cheney running for president or somebody of that nature.

DePue: What does it say at the time, what did you think in 2008, the day after the election, about what that said about the United States as a country, that Barack Obama had been elected president?

Watson: Well, obviously, that a black man would get elected, that said good things, that that could happen. But from a purely philosophical point, I didn't think it was a good thing at all. Once again, I think, not many times am I proven right, but history, I think, is going to prove us right on this one because we are not in very good shape right now. All the policies that have been promoted by this administration, I think, have gotten us to the point that we are in now

economically I'm talking about. Maybe our place even in the world with the stature this country once had, I think, been eroded a little bit.

DePue: Now, jumping ahead...

Watson: And I think that goes right back to the yellow button, I really do. I think it goes right back to the yellow button, the fact that he's so hesitant to make a decision.

DePue: Were you surprised by the election results in 2012 with him being reelected?

Watson: Not necessarily, no. I really thought though that Romney was going to win.

DePue: Were you more a Romney guy than a McCain guy?

Watson: I was neither. They were not my Republicans. Not the wing I supported in the Republican Party.

DePue: What was wrong about them as Republicans did you see?

Watson: Well, about McCain, I just didn't like his independence and speaking ill of other Republicans and being so outspoken on it; to kind of focus the center on him versus maybe what it should be. He's still doing that today. (laughter) But that's John McCain, I guess, that's the nature of politics you bring the focus to yourself. Romney, I wasn't really a Romney guy over the years, although to be elected governor of Massachusetts that tells you something about the man's philosophy, to be elected in Massachusetts as a Republican, is obviously not a good thing for a Republican. (phone rings)

DePue: That doesn't sound like music typical of Greenville.

Watson: No it's not, that's my wife too. I told her I was doing this. No, that's typical of Florida.

DePue: It does sound more typical of Florida. Do you want to take that?

Watson: No, I just turned it off.

DePue: Was Romney too moderate?

Watson: Too moderate. I'm pretty conservative. But once again, I got involved in his campaign and felt good about his election, the possibilities of his election, but I knew running against an incumbent president is not always—I mean that's not a good thing generally. But things had not gone well for Obama and things weren't going well for the country, and I felt maybe the public would say it's time for a change. But our electorate has changed a lot. I'm not sure a conservative can get elected, even a moderate Republican like Romney. I'm not so sure that's what's in the future for politics in this country.

DePue: We've talked before about the demographic shifts and how that caused political shifts for the State of Illinois. So you're suggesting that's kind of being replicated on the national level as well?

Watson: I think so, yes.