

Return to H.W. [unclear]
Interview [unclear] that
Further speech on [unclear] [unclear]
History [unclear] 1/10/2002

Colmer: Churchill Wanted to

Last of Three Articles

By Richard L. Lyons
Washington Post Staff Writer

For Rep. William M. Colmer (D-Miss.), 82, the man who brought Fishbait Miller to Washington, the high point of 40 years in Congress was service as chairman of a select House committee created in World War II to help convert from a wartime to peacetime economy.

Colmer, chairman of the House Rules Committee, the powerful traffic cop that clears all major legislation to the House floor and can kill bills by not acting, reflected on his career in a taped interview last week, one of a series with departing House patriarchs.

For the Post-War Economic Policy and Planning Committee, Colmer tried unsuccessfully to hire Bernard Bafuch as his staff director, settled instead for Marion Folsom, later a Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare under President Eisenhower. They held hearings here, traveled through Europe after the war, met Stalin, but not Churchill ("the greatest of them all in my book"), whose government

had just been voted out of power.

In 1946, Colmer was invited to dinner with Churchill who was visiting friends in Florida as a private citizen. Colmer said he told Churchill how much he had admired a wartime speech to Congress by the then Prime Minister.

"Well, I've got another one I want to make," Churchill said. Colmer took this word back to Speaker Sam Rayburn, who was enthusiastic about another congressional appearance. But the State Department squelched the idea for fear of offending the new British Labor government of Clement Attlee.

"So Churchill went to Fulton, Missouri, and made his Iron Curtain speech there instead of to Congress," said Colmer.

Colmer came to Washington with Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933. "I didn't run as a New Dealer. I ran on an economy platform. We both ran on it. That's when Roosevelt said Hoover was a spendthrift. The first major piece of legislation I voted for that Roosevelt recommended was the economy bill. And it almost proved to

be my last because it cut back all veterans and federal employees, including members of Congress, 15 per cent. Boy, when I came up for re-election, those boys (veterans) jumped me. I had five opponents, one of them an old fraternity mate of mine. Someone said to him, 'You're not going to run against Bill?' He said, 'Hell, yes, somebody's going to beat him. It might as well be me.'

"At any rate, I survived that. I didn't leave Roosevelt. Roosevelt left me. Don't misunderstand me. I voted for practically everything Roosevelt recommended those first few years because . . . we were trying to get out of the slump. The country was in bad shape and somebody had to do something."

"Pump priming. I supported it. But I've said many times since then that we keep priming the pump in good times as well as bad times, and we're going to wind up there isn't going to be any water in the well."

Colmer had gone on the Rules Committee in 1939, but was bumped off when Republicans took control in 1947. Speaker Sam Rayburn "wasn't too keen" about the

THE WASHINGTON POST Friday, Oct. 27, 1973 A 3

Give Famed Speech on Hill

conservative Colmer going back on Rules in 1949 when the Democrats came back. "But John McCormack was." McCormack, then majority leader, was a Boston liberal. Rayburn was a Texas dirt farmer.

"Well, John was a great guy for helping his friends. And he was a stickler for following precedent. And the precedent was that you go back. This isn't something I'd want put in the Methodist record down home, but John and I belonged to the same poker club. He was a good poker player and I was a player.

"Sam didn't make too much fuss about it. He did later when they stacked the committee." In 1961, Rayburn enlarged the Rules Committee and broke the conservative Republican-Dixie control that had blocked much liberal legislation in the late 1950s.

The Rules Committee has been much tamer under Colmer, largely because he is hemmed in by new rules and is outvoted. But as chairman

for the past six years, he could delay or try to gut a bill by clearing it under a rule making a conservative non-germane proposal in order as a floor substitute.

"I said from the beginning I was going to cooperate with the leadership to the fullest extent except where a matter of grave principle was involved. And on those things I didn't, though when I found out I was going to be overridden I'd look for a good place to light."

"Like the Negro who was asked how he rode that baky mule, and he said, 'Well, when I see he's going to throw me, I get off.' I've done some of that, but on the whole I think I've cooperated with the leadership of both McCormack and (Carl) Albert. They both say I did, anyhow."

Like his predecessors, Colmer would never concede that the rules Committee

physical resemblance and some things in common, though my son was never as aggressive as Kennedy.

When Kennedy first came here, I went over and sat down by him (on the House floor) and had a visit with him. Well, you get the point. "Personal but not political warmth." Colmer never even voted for the Peace Corps, which Sargent Shriver sold to many old conservatives.

Because of his chairmanship, Colmer has had a closer official connection with President Nixon, who has been to each of Colmer's annual seafood lunches.

Did he serve catfish? "No. Hell, no, not catfish. Shrimp and gumbo. No man born and reared on a saltwater coastline likes catfish. He's prejudiced. I like freshwater fish, but not catfish."

So how did William E. (Fishbait) Miller get to Washington and rise to the \$40,000-a-year position of Doorkeeper of the House? (It's the Doorkeeper who bawls out the names of presidents and foreign dignitaries as they enter the House chamber to address a joint session of Congress.)

Back home in Pascagoula, "I had a law office right across from a drugstore," said Colmer, "and Fishbait used to bring me cigars and my stenographer Coca-Colas. He was in high school. When he finished school, I said, 'Bait, what ya gonna do now?' Miller, given the name because he was then so small, said he wanted to go to junior college but didn't have any money."

Colmer helped him get started and that same year ran for Congress. Fishbait came back to drive him around campaigning. Once he got to Congress, Colmer got word that Fishbait wanted to come, too. So he got him a job in the mailroom and Fishbait was on his way. "He was the greatest forager I ever knew," said Colmer.

should serve only a procedural function for the leadership. He thinks a Rules Committee member should vote against a bill if he thinks it bad, despite the fact that his President, his party leadership and the legislative committee in charge wants it.

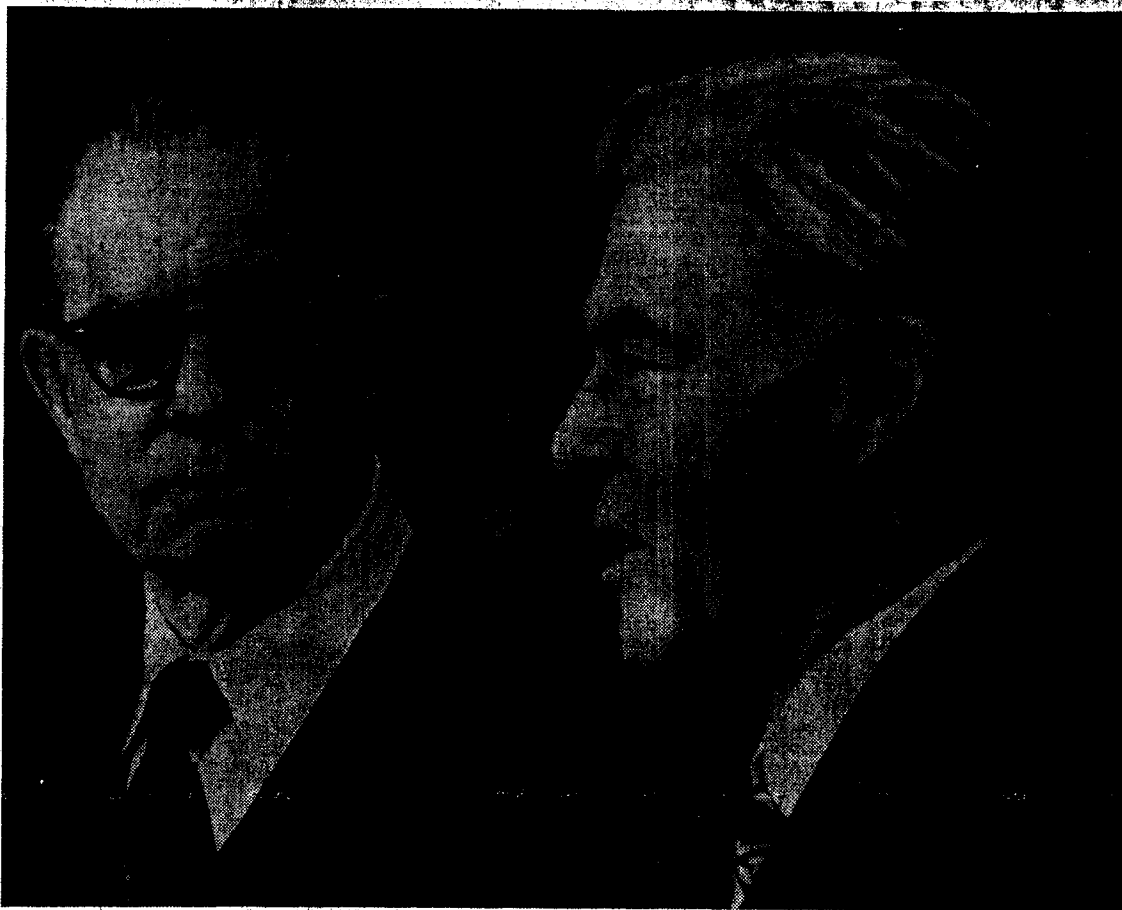
"Legislation is often the result of some national or local hysteria. Something becomes very popular overnight, so everybody wants to get on the bandwagon. I think one of the prime pur-

poses of the Rules Committee is that it can slow down hastily reported legislation. If I'm convinced it's not good for the country, I should exercise what power I have to slow it down a little bit. We've got pretty good results that way at times."

Colmer mentioned this year's minimum wage bill. "I held that for a long time without programming it. And then we finally got to the point of the Erlenborn substitute, making that in

order. That all took months." The conservative substitute of Rep. John Erlenborn (R-Ill.) passed the House, a stronger bill passed the Senate and the measure finally died without going to conference.

His favorite President? "On a personal basis, purely, Jack Kennedy. There's a story back of that, not worth writing about, but I have a son who is just a few years younger than he, and he was a lieutenant in the Navy. They had somewhat of a



Associated Press

Rep. Colmer, left, in March photo with Rep. Ray Madden, who is expected to succeed him as Rules chairman.