Governor Elmer A. Benson was born in Appleton in 1895 and attended public schools there. In 1916, he graduated from Saint Paul College of law and worked for a time at a law office in Saint Paul. He went on to work at the Farmers and Merchants State Bank in Appleton from 1923 to 1933 before serving as commissioner of banking under the administration of Governor Floyd B. Olson. Benson was commissioner until 1935, when he was appointed to complete the term of U.S. Senator Thomas Schall. With the strong support of the Farmer-Labor party, Benson was criticized for his so-called "left-wing" proposals and was accused of being a Communist. While governor, Benson developed a progressive package of legislation, which failed to become law due to a deadlock with the Senate. In 1938, Benson lost to the Republican Harold Stassen in his reelection attempt.

Benson continued to be politically active, although he was twice defeated in his bid for the U.S. Senate. He was elected chairman of the Farmer-Labor Association of Minnesota and worked towards the merging of the Democratic and Farmer-Labor parties in the state. Benson also served as chairman of the National Citizens Political Action Committee of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) from 1944 to 1946, and as chairman of the Progressive party into the 1950s. Throughout his life, he remained active in farming and real estate transactions.

Although many of his proposals were considered socialistic at the time, several have since become law. These include homestead property tax relief; higher income tax rates for wealthy individuals and corporations; mandatory workers' compensation coverage; a state civil service system; party designation for the legislature; and expanded state aid for schools, financed by income tax.

Benson married Frances Miller in 1922. They had two children, Thomas and Lois. Benson died in 1985 at the age of eighty-nine.

Photo of Elmer Benson (1978) courtesy of the Star Tribune.
INTERVIEW WITH ELMER BENSON

March 28, 1969

Interviewed by Russell W. Fridley, Lila M. Johnson, James Pederson, Robert E. Goff

Fridley: Was Rosenmeier's father in this?
Benson: Yes, he was, yes.
Goff: What was his name?
Benson: He was ....
Goff: Clarence or ....
Benson: That doesn't sound right.
Goff: C. Rosenmeier that was ...
Benson: He was a popular man in the Senate. I suppose A. J. Rockne and the two Sullivans and McKenzie and Charley Orr. Charley Orr, of course, was young at that time, but he was there. Many other men were, the powerful men; and he was carrying out orders, I think.

[Conversation about the tape recorder]

Pederson: Well, you said you weren't in the same groups that went drinking with Olson. You must have had quite a bit of social contact with Olson, didn't you?
Benson: Well, I don't know. I'd say no. Not much, no. I don't know how I sold myself to Olson. I must have done it, because as I think Russell [Fridley] knows, he appointed me to the United States Senate without ever talking to me or seeing me.

Goff: Is that right?
Benson: I mean after Tom Schall [U.S. Senator 1925-35] was killed. Tom Schall was killed and Olson never saw me or never talked to me on the telephone. He appointed me to the Senate without consulting me.

Pederson: There's an interesting story, and I've never known whether it's fact or hypothetical, about the influence of the party on Olson affecting your appointment. Are the stories that we have heard essentially true there?

Benson: No, most of the stories that you refer to - I have heard them too, of course - and I am sure they're entirely false. For instance, I'll give you a little example. Senator Lawson - Vic Lawson down at Willmar - he was an old-time populist, swell person. He owned the Willmar Tribune at that time. Well, his nephew owns it now, I guess. A good guy. He was in the Senate for many, many years; and he thought that Olson was going to appoint him to the Senate. And has said so later. In fact, when I went to his funeral - or when he died, O. B. Augeson, his nephew, had an article in the Willmar Tribune. He says that - among other things, he says that - Vic Lawson was Floyd Olson's choice for United States Senate on the death of Tom Schall later. Well, if he was Olson's choice, why wasn't he appointed? And that was one case.

And then - what's the name of that fellow down - Lieutenant Governor from down at Jordan - Arens, Henry Arens, was another one who thought he was going to be appointed. And I mean these stories went out that they thought that they were going to be appointed. And, oh I have forgotten who, there were others.

Well, anyway, let me tell you how I think, what might have happened, knowing Olson as well as I did. And I think I knew him pretty well. Vic Lawson had come in to him and jawing with him, "I'd sure appreciate
it if you would appoint me or consider me for this appointment." And Vic was a very mild mannered fellow; that's about the way he would put it to him. Well, then Olson would start orating, he would tell a story. "Well, Vic, there isn't anyone that I know of that's better qualified for this position than you. Going way back; the Populist party, the Nonpartisan League and the Farmer-Labor party, your service in the Senate, your knowledge of both state and national affairs ..." and give him a big buildup. He wouldn't say that he was going to appoint him and he wouldn't say that he wasn't. Vic could go away after that kind of a buildup, figuring, "Gosh, I'm going to get it." Henry Arens would come in and he says, "Henry, by gosh with your experience in the Senate, and Lieutenant Governor and a member of Congress and you've been a farmer; you know the farmer's problems ..." and Olson could - you give him - name a subject and he'd tell you a good story, I don't care what it was ... [Laughter] ... He could, for instance about money matters, I don't think he knew much more than how to write a check probably, but still he could ....

Goff: He could give a speech on it.

Benson: Darn right. If he'd just look at a brief of some kind a little, a little briefing on something, he could think through it that fast. He was a brilliant guy. Well, he'd give the same kind of story to Henry Arens and anyone else that might come in and with his big arms flying all around, he'd get up and walk to the door with them and arm around and pat them on the back. Sure, they went away thinking they were going to get it. And then this story about the pressure of the Farmer-Labor party, well, anytime you put pressure on Olson, he was more apt to go the other way. He was tough. He didn't want to be pressured into
anything. And then, of course, the story, I don't know if you've heard it or not, the story was that Abe Harris, the editor of the paper, got out the paper, you know, practically before he'd appointed me. Well, Abe Harris and Olson were just as close as two men could be, politically and personally. They grew up together as kids. Olson was his manager when he was a fighter at the University, and so on. And you wouldn't have to know that. If you just knew Abe Harris and didn't know that he had this relationship with Olson. He was really an honorable guy. I mean he wouldn't double-cross Olson if — he just knew he was Governor and that was all. As long as he was Governor and head of the Farmer-Labor movement he wouldn't have double-crossed him. So just a lot of nonsense. And in my case, I never asked him for it, I didn't know I was going to get it. I was out here at Appleton and Harris called me, as I remember. I think it was Harris; it may have been Roger Rutchick, but I think it was Harris. And told me I'd better come in. The story had been in the paper you know that I'd probably be — that I was being considered for the job and all that. When I got in there why I read it in the newspaper, and about five minutes after I read the newspaper I got a call from the Governor, asking me to come over. He said, "You better come over here, I think the newspapers want to take some pictures." That was the first time I ever heard of it.

Johnson: Had he talked to you before that about running for governor when he ran for the Senate?

Benson: No, I don't think he had. The only one thing that he might have been referring to that — oh, I suppose he did in some ways. He did, later, of course, I know, but one time I had vetoed the licensing of the Minneapolis Brewery stock as chairman of the Commerce Commission and
he called me over that time and had lunch with me and he says, "Elmer, what the hell's the matter with you?" He says, "Don't you know someday you may want that wet vote?" [Laughter] Well, that was in 1933, I guess, maybe he had it in mind for years; I don't know anything about it. At least he hadn't said anything about it definitely, as I recall.

Fridley: Elmer, in your administration, who was closer to you, Abe Harris or Roger Rutchick?

Benson: I suppose Roger was because he was my attorney and then my secretary. But they were both close.

Fridley: They were both key men in the administration?

Benson: Yes, that's right. Abe was editor of the paper, he had no official job. I wouldn't want to judge between them; they were both good.

Goff: Governor, there is something I think that many people have been very curious about as far as Floyd Olson was concerned. I suppose now with his wife being dead, it's a little easier to talk about some of these things. He, from all reports and whoever you talk to, led a rather spectacular personal life on all counts. How was he able to get away with this in the political sense? If one tenth of what you hear about his swath was true, it seems incredible that a man like that could have been as powerful politically. It apparently never touched him politically.

Benson: They certainly tried. But, I wouldn't know. He was a fantastic person. Well, I'll tell you a story. I don't remember what year, it was right after the election, one of his elections, I suppose the second time he ran, that would be in '33.

Fridley: '32.

Benson: '32. It was a meeting, a dinner meeting in one of the hotels in
Minneapolis, there probably were a hundred people there, something like that. Olson got up to talk and he says, "Well," he says, "you know there's been a lot of ugly stories been going around the state during this campaign. And there's a woman out at the University of Minnesota who's husband's a professor there, a medical doctor, and she's a medical doctor herself, put on a party and all the women there, they were telling about that I was intimate with some woman down at Rochester; and I had a child by some woman up at Duluth; and that I was intimate with some woman over here and down there and all over. Now this woman listened to these stories for a long time and finally she called the attention to these women at the party, she says, 'Now listen, first as a married woman and second as a medical doctor, I want you to know that all these stories biologically couldn't be true.'" So he was conscious of the story, though. [Laughter]

One thing, he drank a lot, you know. One thing he didn't do, he didn't drink in the Capitol. He did his drinking outside. There was no liquor there.

Goff: But were there public displays of this? You hear stories about the Minneapolis Athletic Club and....

Benson: Well, there again, I wasn't in on these drinking parties; I wouldn't know. I know he drank a lot with Dick Lilly. And, oh, I could tell a couple stories, but I won't.

Fridley: Was he a hard driver in the office? Did he work hard?

Benson: Yes, he did; but for some reason, whether this was always true, I don't know, he seemed to lose control of people that he appointed to office. I know he told me one time, "Elmer," he said, "I haven't got any influence in this administration. Bill Elsberg is the only one
that I've got influence with." I says, "But Governor, Cripes Almighty, he hasn't got any political sense and his wife is crazy." He says, "But you got to feel sorry for him for that, don't you?" He was pretty disgusted with most of the people in there that he had appointed to office, I'm pretty sure he was from the way he talked.

Pederson: Governor, there are those who say - and getting back a little to the question of your relationship with Olson - the appointment to the Senate and subsequent nomination for the Governorship - there are those who say that Olson appointed you to the Senate with the understanding that you would come back and run for the gubernatorial nomination and that he would then run for the Senate, and that there was this kind of an understanding, and it was kind of a caretaker appointment.

Benson: There never was any understanding. He never even mentioned it in any way whatever. I think that later, after I was appointed to the Senate, I remember coming back one time from Washington to kind of - well, I don't know what I came back for - but anyway, I was back and I went to see him and I told him, "Now Governor," I says, "I've been observing down there in the Senate." Everyone knew he was going to run for the Senate, I mean that was no secret. I knew that and everybody did, and I'm sure he knew without asking me or telling me that I would step aside. He knew I would. I mean, there was no question about that. But the point I'm making is he didn't ask me or never mentioned it. But I know I told him this, I says, "I've been in Washington now for six months and I've been observing these fellows down there with you in mind. You're coming to the Senate." I says, "Tom Connolly, he's a flowery guy and talks off the top of his hat but a lot of times he don't make sense. But he's a clever orator and
all that." And then I pointed out about Burt Wheeler being a shrewd guy and all of that. I named a lot of the fellows in the Senate, you know, that were prominent at that time. I said, "Governor," I said, "I made up my mind and I've studied this thing pretty carefully and when you come down there, if you lay off the booze and do a little reading, in six months you'll be the top dog down there." Well, he just put on, you know kind of put on a - shrugged it off and put on kind of a shill - he was an actor, besides being a politician. But I was sincere about that, I think he would have been, no question about it because I mentioned a little while ago about his being able to read a brief on something that he didn't know anything about, and after reading it he'd know more than the fellow who prepared the brief. He was really a brilliant guy and if he'd gone to the Senate he'd - he's a commanding fellow you know, he was six feet two, wasn't he or something like that and handsome and terrific orator and brilliant.

Pederson: At what point in time was it becoming obvious that his health was seriously deteriorating and that he might not be able to make the Senate race?

Benson: Well, it was early in that year, I thought. You see he died in August ....

Fridley: '36.

Benson: I think that a lot of people felt that in June, in May or June, that he might not make it. He was pretty sick. He was getting thinner all the time and weaker.

Pederson: Did he recognize it at that time?

Benson: I don't know, I don't know.

Fridley: What kind of a relationship did he have with his wife? I mean,
were they at all compatible?

Benson: I don't think it was too good, no.

Goff: They seemed to have kind of lived apart or something during this time.

Benson: Yeah, I think so, I think so.

Goff: Was she ever at functions, state functions, things of this kind?

Benson: No, no. I only met her two or three times. I had dinner with her two or three times, that was about all. I would just judge that.

Fridley: How was he at state functions? Did he enjoy them?

Benson: Oh, I think so. He enjoyed making a speech anyway. I don't know if he enjoyed the rest of it. He didn't stay very long.

Fridley: He enjoyed dressing up or did he dress casually?

Benson: No, he was a good dresser. He was a good dresser.

Fridley: At ease with people, I suppose.

Benson: Oh, yes, he was, yes.

Goff: That Minneapolis business crowd were kind of his cronies, weren't they?


Oh, Dick Lilly was one of his cronies. Charlie Ward was another.

Fridley: Was Charlie Ward close to you personally?

Benson: Oh, I don't think so. I don't think he voted for me. I couldn't say definitely. I don't think he did.

Goff: He never asked for anything?

Benson: He never asked for anything, no. He never asked for anything.

Fridley: Would you relate that story of Phillip LaFollette coming to Minnesota - wasn't it a secret meeting or supposedly?

Benson: Yeah, supposedly so and it was a time of - well, let's see, what
year would that be - it would be in '36, wouldn't it?

Fridley: I think so.

Benson: Roosevelt was up for reelection, and Phil got ambitions, I don't know whether he - I don't know, he must have been - Phil was an ambitious fellow and somewhat of a prima donna, you know; more so than Bob. And Roosevelt must have hurt him in some way, I mean offended him in some way. I don't know. But anyway, Phil got the idea of forming a new party, a third party. I don't know what he called it even. And he sent General Emel, the head of the Wisconsin National Guard, to Minnesota. Phil and Charlie Ward were very good friends, you know. Charlie had his home in Wisconsin. And General Emel and Ward were good friends. And he sent General Emel to Minnesota and he canvassed all the leading people in the Farmer-Labor party. I didn't know it till probably two or three days before the meeting.

Pederson: Is this while you were Governor?

Benson: Yes.

Fridley: This would be '37, then.

Benson: Yes, I suppose it was, that's right. It must have been '37 or '38 then. Yes, sure, it was while I was Governor; so it must have been '37 or '38. And, I don't know how they got by with it without my knowing it. I guess it must be that some of my appointees or Olson's appointees weren't very close to me either because we didn't know about it until a few days before the meeting. They'd arranged for a meeting out at Charlie Ward's home in Hudson, Wisconsin. And then they came and invited me and invited Abe Harris and Roger Rutchick. I think General Emel was the one that came.

Well, anyway, then they had this meeting and Phil was there and
General Emel and they had some newspapermen from the East - I've forgotten where they were from - New York and Boston and Washington. Oh, I've forgotten who else he had there. Then he was talking about how he was going to organize this new party. And the proposition was, he wanted the endorsement of the Farmer-Labor party in Minnesota. Well, I - they called on me after Phil had talked and General Emel had talked. Well, I told them I couldn't commit the Farmer-Labor party to it. I told them as far as I was personally concerned I was opposed to it and wouldn't go along. And the Farmer-Labor party, well, they just didn't do business that way, they had to make up their own minds at a meeting. Well, then later, I think before the meeting, Phil called me on the telephone and wanted to know what was what; was I coming? No, I wasn't coming there. Well, some of the fellows did go and I don't know if you remember it or not, but part of their program was they had an emblem and they had buttons that they wore and they had a big emblem, a drop back of the stage with this emblem on it. And I'll have to tell you what Roosevelt said to me and it will describe the emblem in a way, he - I don't know what I was there to see him about, anyway I was in to see the President; maybe he asked me to come see him about this meeting - and he says, "Well, I understand you didn't go to that meeting of Phil's down in Madison." "No," I says, "I didn't go." "Well," he says, "one of my men was there and he told me that they had a big emblem backdrop on the stage, and he says the emblem is a circumscised swastika. [Laughter] And that's the only time I ever heard it described that way, but it was very much like a swastika. It seems to me it had a circle around it too, or something like that. It did look like a swastika.

Johnson: What kind of a party was it?
Benson: Well, it never did amount to much, just in Wisconsin principally, I think as I remember it.

Goff: Was it partially opposition to the involvement in European problems?

Benson: No, I don't remember. I think Phil just had great ambitions. He thought he was really going to break through the ....

Goff: Like his father.

Benson: Yeah, and I think, as I said before, I think whether he asked the President to appoint him to the Supreme Court or member of the Cabinet or what, I don't know; but I always had a feeling that perhaps he had been pushed aside by the President some way or offended in some way.

Fridley: It had an authoritarian tone to it.

Benson: Yeah, that's right, it did. Well, he'd been over to Europe, you know, and he'd called on Hitler and Mussolini and had their autographed pictures. I saw those in his mansion there, in his home, in his sitting room.

Fridley: Okay, just one other story, and I know these people want to visit with you, Elmer. Just to get the story about the Archbishop on tape. I think we've missed that one.

Benson: Well, it was during the special session of the legislature and again Abe Harris came to me and said that Dick Lilly wanted to see me. I says, "No, I didn't want to see him." He says, "Well Charlie Ward would like very much to arrange a meeting for him." "Well," I says, "I don't care to see him." Well, he came back in a day or two and he says, "I think you ought to have that meeting with Dick Lilly." Well, then he convinced me I should see him. So I says, "All right, but I don't want to see him here in this office." He says, "How about seeing him in Charlie Ward's apartment at the Athletic Club?" I says, "That's
all right, but I don't want anyone there except Lilly and Mr. Ward." All right.

So I went down there and we ordered dinner and while we were waiting for the dinner to come up, why, Dick Lilly started talking about this tax situation in the legislature. The special session had been on probably a couple of weeks at the time and we discussed this for some time and he saw he wasn't getting any place and finally he leaned over the table to me and shook his finger at me and he says, "Governor, I've talked to his Archbishop the other day and he told me he considered you to be a dangerous man. Unless you change your attitude, he's going to organize the Catholic Church against you and the other churches as well."

Well, that didn't please me very much. [Laughter] So I said, "Now, Mr. Lilly, you can go back and tell the Archbishop that I'm going ahead with this tax program in Minnesota and get the best kind of tax legislation I know how to get for the people of this state, even though it costs you and the Archbishop plenty of money. You can tell the Archbishop I said he could go to hell." Well, that ended it. [Laughter] We ate our dinner with very few words after that, and after he left, I remember this, Ward shook hands with me. He said, "Elmer (or Governor; I guess he called me Governor), I'm glad you told him what you did. That's the first time anyone's ever talked to Dick Lilly that way."

Well, after I was defeated for Governor, I met Charlie Ward - I've forgotten where but I'll always remember - he shook hands with me. He said, "Governor, you know when you got into trouble? When you told Dick Lilly what you did in my apartment at the Athletic Club." Well, there he was pleased and after I was defeated then he - that's where you made your mistake. So that's the way it goes.
Well, I was sure the Archbishop wasn't fearful of my sending him to hell because he thinks he's protected against that, I think. [Laughter] More than I could protect him, anyhow.

Pederson: In 1936, what role did the major newspapers play in that campaign? Did they take an active position against you that time?

Benson: Oh, yes. Not only the daily papers but also the weekly newspapers. I only had a handful of newspapers for me.

Goff: Who was your opponent that time? Martin Nelson?

Benson: Martin Nelson, yes. Martin Nelson was an old friend of mine too. We were roommates, in fact.

Goff: Where was that? At the University?

Benson: At the St. Paul College of Law. It's now the ... William Mitchell College of Law.

Benson: Yes. I hadn't seen Martin then for, oh, twenty years, I guess. I saw him at - oh, more than that. I saw him at that meeting they had for Staff King [State Auditor under Olson] a couple years ago. First time in many years.

Pederson: I understand that Floyd Olson had a very good personal relationship with Staff King, and that he actually often would go in and cry on his shoulder and that Staff King kind of was a good listening boy for Floyd Olson. Is that true?

Benson: I don't know. I wouldn't know.

Goff: How about your relationship with him, Governor?

Benson: With Staff?

Goff: Yes.

Benson: Well, not - I didn't have much - the only contact I had with him was on the Executive Council. Not too friendly, I don't suppose. Not
too good. My relationship with Mike Holm [Secretary of State] was, I think, better than [with] Staff.

Pederson: If you don't care to answer this question, just feel free not to; but what were your relations with Hjalmar Petersen [Governor, Aug. 1936 - Jan. 1937] during the '36 period and then prior to '38? That must have been a difficult time for both of you.

Benson: Yes, I suppose. I never disliked Hjalmar. I thought his wife was pushing him too hard. She was a very ambitious woman, I always thought. And I think he would have been a better person and easier to get along with if he hadn't been pushed so hard. Whether that's true or not, I don't know, but that's my feeling.

I don't suppose I had too much to do with Hjalmar. Of course he wanted me to - when Olson died of course he wanted me to step aside and run for the Senate. I'd been nominated then, you see. And the people in the party, most all of the people in there, the leadership of the party, didn't want that. So I went along with their wishes and, of course, I felt that I had been nominated and it wouldn't be the thing to just step aside.

Johnson: Did he have a philosophical argument with you or did he just think that it was his turn to be Governor?

Benson: He didn't argue with me, no. He thought as I recall it, Hjalmar started out by criticizing me; by saying I was too conservative, and I was an All-Party man they called me at that time. You remember they - Olson had a lot of All-Party committees.

Johnson: Including Republicans?

Benson: Yes, and he thought I was too conservative. Then he wound up by saying I was too radical; that I was a Communist or near-Communist or too
Fridley: Well, when he switched himself and ran as a Republican 

Benson: Yes, he did, he did, yes. I don't think there was any - there was 

no justification for either of these allegations. I never was conserva-

tive and I never was Communist, so someplace in between there 

Goff: You bring up the Communist issue, Governor. Once again it occurs

in this book [The 21st Ballot by David Lededoff]. It has become, it 

seems like, almost an article of faith that there was a great deal of 

Communist involvement in the Farmer-Labor party into the '40's, and 

particularly at the time of the merger. To what do you attribute this 

and what element of truth is in it? Could you discuss that?

Benson: Well, I think it was primarily just simply a case of some people 

were probably honestly hysterical on the question of Communism. They 

see Communists under every table and under chairs and under beds. I 

never did that. I think there are some Communists in the country and 

probably a few in the state and maybe there's one in Appleton, I don't 

know. Maybe there is two, maybe there's three, and maybe there aren't 

any, I don't know. I have never been concerned about that question. I 

mean, there probably wasn't over one-tenth or one-hundredth of one per-

cent of the population of this country were Communists, at least some-

thing like that anyway. It's so small that I never thought it was worth 

talking about hardly. But you had to talk about it because they were 

throwing it around and I know it never applied to me. I mean it's just 

utter nonsense.

Johnson: Were you ever approached to join the Communist party?

Benson: Never have, no.

Goff: Here's another work that's out now, this book that we were talking
about earlier, and within the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party there is the folklore that's accepted almost as fact, I think, by most people in the party that Hubert Humphrey, Orville Freeman, et cetera, et cetera drove the Communists kicking and screaming out of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party.

Benson: Well, of course it's really a lot of nonsense. Actually, Hubert Humphrey's support came from the left-wing - his principal support in the early days - came principally from the left-wing of the CIO and from the Communists themselves. They were his chief supporters. They were hysterical.

I remember meetings - take Marion LeSueur - her daughter is a Communist, but Marion never was. She admired her daughter very much but disagreed with her. I remember meetings where Marion LeSueur would try to - she would try to quiet some of these left-wing CIO people and Communist people - tone them down and I fought against them; but they were a hundred percent for Humphrey, one hundred percent. And they were hysterical, just as hysterical in favor of Humphrey as Humphrey later became hysterical on the Communist issue, against Communism. So it doesn't make any sense to me. I don't know who he's driving out of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party. For instance, one person we know was a Communist was Martin Maki. Martin Maki was the chairman of the Communist party. Lord sakes, he used to hang out down at the City Hall in the mayor's office when Humphrey was mayor!

Fridley: Wasn't one technique used was to take some of your statements or the programs you were for, and these would bear some similiarity or they said they did to what came out in the Communist platform? I think many things that have been adopted into law today.

Benson: I don't remember specifically, but I remember one thing just like
that. I was in New York, during the days of the National Citizens Political Action Committee and I was chairman of that. And Sidney Holman was chairman of the CIO pact and I don't know what the subject was, but anyway I'd taken and made a public statement about something, I've forgotten what it was. And Sidney either came into my office or he called me into his or I was in his office, anyway he said, "Say, Elmer, this statement you just made, that's the Communist position." I says, "What of it? I took that position long before the Communists ever did and I'm not going to change my position, my views on the subject just because the Communists have taken that position. If the Communists are in favor of greater appropriations for education, I'm not going to oppose it."

Fridley: Well, as I've read it - I think this is how much of the folklore got started, Bob.

Goff: Now, I am talking about the '40's now rather than the ...

Benson: You are talking about the time of the merger.

Goff: Yes.

Benson: Now another thing, talking about folklore, we've constantly read and constantly heard about Hubert Humphrey organized the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party and brought about the merger. He didn't have a damm thing to do with the merger of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party! Nothing! Not any more than you did and you weren't there, were you? In fact, Judge Slen ... I don't know if you read the letter in the paper ... Judge Slen of Madison, who was right in with that clique, I mean he was in with the Elmer Kelm. I don't know whether the treasurer ... I don't know what his name was ... at that time treasurer of the Democrat party; Kelm was chairman; and the treasurer, and Humphrey and Freeman and that crowd, he was right in with them and he even wrote a letter to the paper saying it was
false.

Johnson: Would you tell the story of the merger from the first - that they started thinking seriously about it and who was involved?

Benson: Well, I think the first that we talked seriously about it is when Roosevelt asked me if it was possible to bring about a merger.

Johnson: Was this while you were Governor or after?

Benson: No, no. After.

Pederson: Was this prior to and in preparation for the '44 campaign?

Benson: Well, probably two years before. I don't know. It may be that long.

Pederson: Did he - was he anxious to effect this because of concern over the '44 election, or for other reasons?

Benson: For that reason, I think. At least, that's the reason he gave. He may have had other reasons too.

Pederson: Did he initiate the visit? Did he call you down?

Benson: He did. He called me down through Jack Ewing, Oscar Ewing, who was - well Oscar was I think vice chairman of the Democratic National Committee. He was a Wall Street lawyer. I know that.

Pederson: He had something to do with the Manpower Resources Mobilization effort or something like that.

Benson: It may be. I think he's dead now.

Pederson: Yes.

Benson: But Oscar Ewing had a lot to do with the merger. In fact, I don't know if it would have come about if it hadn't been for him. After the Farmer-Labor party had voted to merge and recessed their convention and went over to the Radisson Hotel where the Democrats were meeting; they were throwing obstacles in the way. I've forgotten what they were, I knew of course at the time; this and that and the other thing.
Patronage and things like that?

That's right. Yes, their treasurer, do you remember the treasurer's name at that time, Elmer Kelm's treasurer?

That wasn't Harrington, was it? A state employee?

No, he was in a little later.

He was later.

He was active, but he wasn't .... No, this guy was the state treasurer, treasurer of the party. Well, anyway, after all he was there as a collector; I mean he was interested in the money part of it and Kelm was interested in that and the patronage.

Are you talking about the treasurer of the Democratic party?

Yes. And they threw a lot of obstacles in the way and Oscar Ewing didn't show up. Finally he came in; he looked pretty drunk, too. He came in late, he arrived on an airplane. I didn't go to the meeting but I talked to him and he went to the meeting and he told them in no uncertain words, "You just got to live up to our agreements. We made these agreements with the Farmer-Labor people and you've got to carry them through." Otherwise, they were trying to block it.

Who was the head of the Farmer-Labor party at that time? Were you considered the head? Did they approach you?

I think I was. Yes, I guess I was chairman.

And so when you gave your okay, you talked to the people in the Farmer-Labor party and they went along with it?

Yes.

Now the story is told of Humphrey going to Washington and waiting to see somebody and almost not getting to see him. It seems to me it was Frank Walker ....
Benson: Frank Walker.

Pederson: Yes, Frank Walker. And that he finally did get to see him. I have heard Humphrey tell this story; but many people put that as one of the turning points and they peg that as evidence of Humphrey's role in ....

Benson: In the merger?

Pederson: Yes.

Benson: I don't think Frank Walker was even chairman at that time, was he? I thought Hannigan was, but maybe no.

Pederson: No, Hannigan didn't become chairman until Truman became President, I don't think.

Benson: Well maybe, I don't know. I knew Frank, too, very well. But Frank didn't have a thing to do with the merger.

Pederson: He didn't?

Benson: Nothing. I never talked to him, not once.

Johnson: What did Humphrey have to do? He was a very young man at that time.

What did he have to do with it?

Benson: One thing they wanted - the only thing that I recall that they asked is - Kelm wanted Humphrey to make the speech at the time of - you know after we'd agreed to it. We didn't agree to that.

Johnson: Why was that? Because he was a protege or because he was going to run for mayor?

Benson: He was going to run for mayor, I think. I think so.

Goff: So Humphrey and Freeman and all of those were really Democrats at that time ... 

Benson: Yes, they were. That's right.

Goff: ... as opposed to Farmer-Laborites.

Benson: And they were a handful compared to the Farmer-Labor party.
Johnson: When he ran as mayor of Minneapolis the first time, wasn't he de-
feated the first time in '43?

Pederson: '43 he was defeated.

Johnson: '43. So he was a Democrat at that time.

Benson: Yes.

Johnson: And did a Farmer-Laborite run against him?

Pederson: He ran against Marvin Kline that year but without party. Even in
those days ... of course it was non-partisan then too ... but the parties
didn't endorse and so he really ran as an independent. But a lot of
Democrats backed him.

Benson: No doubt lots of Farmer-Laborites did too, I am quite sure.

Pederson: Yes, but by 1945, of course, a year after the merger he had a united
party behind him and whether it was that or Marvin Kline's administration
or what, but he won overwhelmingly then in '45.

Benson: He always had good labor support, I think.

Johnson: Was Freeman active in that? He was in the war at some period.

Benson: I don't remember Freeman at that time. Maybe he was but I don't
remember him.

Pederson: Freeman got out of the service after the merger and so Freeman
doesn't really appear on the scene until '45 and '46. In '46 he was
elected secretary [of the D.F.L.].

Benson: In '46, here is another thing. In 1946 we elected Barker chairman
and Barney Allen vice-chairman, Freeman secretary, Paul Tinge, I guess,
was treasurer, wasn't he, something like that. Anyway we put Freeman
in as secretary and Barney Allen in as vice-chairman. We didn't have to
put any - we had absolute control at that time - we didn't have to put
any of them in and we put them in because we wanted to make for harmony.
Anyone we wanted to put in at that time, we could have put him in.

Johnson: When you say we, does that mean the Farmer-Labor party?

Benson: The Farmer-Labor party, the old Farmer-Labor group in the - because we were, I suppose, ten to one. I'm just picking a number out of the air.

Fridley: You regretted that though, didn't you?

Benson: Yes, I do, yes I regret that. I think it was a mistake because they immediately started to undermine Harold Barker. I don't know, did they ever charge him with being a left-winger or a Communist or anything? I don't know.

Pederson: No, I don't think so. I think that generally he was considered to be ineffective and I'm now using their terms. I obviously wasn't around. I don't know. I did know Mrs. Barker very well. She is still alive and I do see her occasionally.

Benson: Yes. I get a Christmas card from her every year. But Harold, I knew him very well - he was a newspaperman over here at ...

Goff: Elbow Lake.

Benson: Yes, and speaker of the house, a middle-of-the-roader; a mild ...

I'd say a .... Farmer-Laborite. Actually a Democrat. I don't think he was ever a member of the Farmer-Labor party. He might have been, but not that I know of. I think he had the endorsement of the Farmer-Labor party when he ran for office.

Fridley: Later on when Humphrey and Freeman laid these attacks on you, did Eugene McCarthy join in on any of these?

Benson: Yes, yes he did.

Johnson: Was he a Democrat at that time?

Benson: Yes.

Johnson: Not a Farmer-Labor?

Pederson: He really came after, he was nothing before the merger, and so I
Yes, he was - I think he's always been a Democrat, but not active. He was a professor out at St. Thomas.

So he wasn't really heard of before, say '48 when he was endorsed?

Oh, it would be ....

He ran for county chairman in 1947. I think that's the first time he went to a precinct caucus, isn't that right? He was brand new, him and that whole St. Thomas gang, and he took the ...

He had to fight for the endorsement in '48. There was a fight between party and labor.

What do you think of the new politics that he's been allowing to ...

Gosh, I can't understand him. No, I don't understand him. Of course I never knew McCarthy well. I didn't know him at all hardly. I just met him a couple times is all. And I admired him for what he did. No man has ever done it before and I think it was the right thing to do.

Do you seem to think that he kind of threw it all away now since then, Governor?

I don't know because I can't understand it. I don't think I would unless I - there's a lot of things I don't know and I suppose there are but it seems to me from just what I know, I wouldn't have done what he's done.

He seemed to just kind of ...

Given up. For instance, resigning from the Foreign Relations Committee. I wouldn't know why he would do that. And why he'd vote for Russell Long, I wouldn't know either.

Despite what he might feel about the Kennedys.

That's right.
The choice there is ....

Can I ask you, as a young person, what do you think of the Kennedys? Ted Kennedy ....

Well, I like some of the things they are saying. For instance Robert Kennedy, the last months of his life I thought he - either he developed a lot or else he's a darn good politician or both - but I liked what he was saying the last weeks of his life. Nobody in running for the presidency has ever said those things before, I think. I think he was wonderful.

I think we all felt that, particularly after his death when we had a chance to see and hear what he'd been saying. Many of us perhaps weren't paying very close attention before that.

For instance that last speech that he made, I listened. I remember listening to that over television. He was really good.

Yes, I think he put it very well. I think between the time he declared and the time he was killed, there was a ... he sort of lifted the campaign. There was a freshness to it.

Probably history will say that since Floyd Olson, the most significant political figure in the state of Minnesota has been Hubert Humphrey and so the interest is going to be there. There's not much question about that.

What's your assessment of the man, particularly what seems to be his almost unbelievable ability to change sides or adapt to any position no matter what the circumstances are? Could we speak for just a few minutes about your impressions of him, and your judgment of what his career has been.

Well, I have always thought that he was a very unstable person. I don't see how he can maneuver around, just like you said; take this position one day and another position another day. He just seems inconsistent to me. I can't make sense out of it, myself. And I don't see how a person
like that could be trusted in high office. I don't see how he can. [unclear]

Benson: For instance his position on the Vietnam war. It was horrible. He practically called Senators Robert Kennedy and Senator McCarthy a - I guess he didn't call them traitors but he might just as well have. Criticized them so severely because they were trying to make an effort to bring about peace in Vietnam and his embrace of Ky, Marshall Ky and Lester Mattocks for instance, and Daley in Chicago. It just doesn't make any sense to me. How liberal can - he had the South - he had the support of the whole South; I mean the politicians in the South. Well, it just doesn't make sense when you think of what he's supposed to represent. That is, for instance, in civil rights and so on.

Goff: But yet he still seems to be [identified] with liberalism.

Benson: That's right. It seems so.

Goff: How do you account for that?

Benson: I don't. I can't account for it, can you?

Johnson: His speech in - his civil rights speech say in '48 at the national convention marked him as a young liberal.

Benson: Yes, sure. But what about his support of - his support coming from all the reactionary Senators in the South since that time?

Johnson: Well, yes that was - do you think he became more conservative or do you think he just goes back and forth?

Benson: I don't know, I don't know. He certainly - they don't support him unless there is a reason for it. You can bet your life on that. Those old-time Southern Senators, when they support somebody they're - they know what they're doing. They aren't being fooled.

Goff: They've got the deal somewhere.
For instance in Minnesota I know, during one of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor administrations they had—they named a lake up in northern Minnesota for Cameron Johnson. Well, I'm sure Cameron Johnson wasn't moved by that. They did more than that for Cameron Johnson.

Who's Cameron Johnson?

He was the chairman of the....

Northwest Bank Corporation. He doesn't care for a lake being named for him. When those fellows—when they get their pay they get it [for] more than that.

Was there any talk during the merger about why wasn't Hubert Humphrey fighting in the war?

Not that I remember. I think at that speech that he made at the time of the merger, as I recall it; he did say I'm leaving to join my generation in this conflict, or something like that. I'm sorry I can't ...

Stick around.

Yes, and be a candidate for governor, or something like that. I'm leaving to join my generation in the....

Would you say that Freeman was more consistent, more clear-cut in the positions he took than Humphrey?

Oh, I suppose. I don't like his—like his administration in the Department of Agriculture. I think it was terrible. I think it was awful.

Now let me go back a ways with talking about Harold Barker and Freeman and Humphrey and all that. I remember we were having a state committee meeting of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party—now what year
it was I don't know - but Harold Markhart, I remember, was chairing the meeting. And he left the meeting to address a meeting of Young Democrats at which Humphrey and Freeman were the main show. And Lee came back to our meeting and took over the chair. You could see that he was upset; emotionally upset. His face was just green; and he started out something like this, "I've just come from a meeting and I saw American Fascists in action." He says, "I think I know what I'm talking about because I served as an officer in the First World War and the Second World War. [In] the Second World War, I was an officer in military government. It was my duty to instruct the younger officers on the method of detecting fascist tactics and fascist tendencies. And I have just seen it in action." Then he - well I have forgotten what - he went on to describe this meeting that he had been at. Well, Harold Barker, a mild-mannered fellow that he was, you could just see that he was upset. He was disturbed.

Johnson: Was this - I think I've ....
Benson: That was after the merger. Now, what year it was, I don't ...
Goff: About '46 or '47?
Johnson: When they were organizing for the '48 convention to take it over; they were organizing Young Democrats for the fight ....
Benson: Perhaps. I don't know. I don't know what it was. But I think, as I remember it; I think the group was meeting, I believe, at the .... What's that hotel up on Eighth Street in Minneapolis?
Johnson: The Curtis?
Benson: No.
Pederson: The Radisson or the Dyckman?
Benson: No, no. Way up ....
Goff: The Leamington?
Benson: No, no. Is there a Maryland?
Pederson: Yes, the Maryland.
Benson: Where they sell these big hamburgers; a pound hamburger or ....
Goff: Normandy.
Benson: Normandy. We were meeting at the Normandy Hotel and I think they were having their meeting at the Nicollet. But anyway, he was very, very disturbed; and he wasn't a fellow that would be that way. Well I got off the ....
Pederson: I have heard it said or I may have read - I don't recall where - that in one of these meetings you allegedly called Freeman a fascist. Is there any truth to that?
Benson: I don't know. I don't remember it.
Goff: Possibly ....
Benson: If I did, I don't regret it because I think he is. I'll tell you what his father-in-law said about him one time. He says, "That fellow's got the makings that stormtroopers are made out of." I heard his father-in-law say that. He's got the makings of the things that stormtroopers are made of.
Pederson: Well aside from the philosophical differences, which are terribly important obviously, how did you judge his administration as governor?
Benson: Well, I suppose that was the time - during that time I was pretty bad. I was worse off then than I am now physically, I think, and mentally too, you know. I was almost invalided at that time, most of his time. Let's see what years - I've forgotten even when he was governor.
Goff: '55 to '61.
Fridley: '54 to '60.
Benson: Yes, see I was in pretty bad shape during '52. I couldn't walk. There was a long period there, I could neither walk nor talk.

Goff: Governor, I remember from one of your earlier tapes, one of your closing statements, and you'd obviously thought long and deeply about it, that - I think it was a few years ago. At that time you said that you thought that we were living in an age of cowardice and retreat. Do you see anything in these newer people and perhaps in some of the moves of the Kennedys and some of the things that are going on in public life now that would make you soften that judgment a little bit? Do you see some hope?

Benson: Yes, I listened - I think there's some - but I think we're living in a terribly dangerous period. I'm impressed with the, for instance, the hearings of the Foreign Relations Committee, and the ... and with [U.S. Senator] Fulbright in particular ... well even now with their reactionaries like [Senator] Symington, for instance, speaking out pretty forcefully. And even an old man like Senator Aiken. So I suppose we shouldn't be too, too discouraged, although I don't see much hope.

Pederson: What direction do you see it heading?

Benson: Well, it seems to me that we've had pretty much a military-industrial takeover, haven't we, in this country. The military have got much, much too much power and influence, both in the diplomatic service and in the government generally. With the purse strings that they have, spending more than eighty billion dollars a year almost at will, there's been some little reaction now lately to - but I don't know - I said that I was impressed with these hearings of the Foreign Relations Committee that are on television, but here's one thing I find fault with. And that is seems to me they'll have a McNamara; they have a Rusk; or they'll
have this Laird on the stand, and they'll get him right up to where — and with a prize fighter he's on the ropes — and then they let him go. We'll say that Fulbright's time is up and he's got him on the ropes, and he really hasn't answered the question that he was asked. And the next man up, maybe it's a Morris; maybe it's Church; and instead of carrying on, and giving him a final punch and knocking him out, they just go on to something else. And Fulbright does that too. Fulbright's powerful and I think — I would judge him as the most intelligent man in the Senate perhaps — but he'd practically annihilate a man, and then he lets him go. Why doesn't he knock him out? I don't know.

Fridley: This is an issue you debated thirty years ago. How has it changed; or has it much? What kind of a hold did the military have thirty years ago?

Benson: I don't think they had much of a hold at that time. For instance, I remember — of course the appropriations were so small then, but I remember one thing when I was in the Senate for instance — Carter Glass was chairman of the Finance Committee at that time, but he was an old man; he was failing, and I remember he turned over the military appropriation bill to Burns, Jimmy Burns ... who later became Justice of the Supreme Court, Secretary of State and Governor of South Carolina. Anyway there was an appropriation in there for battleships. And I remember Lynn Frazier and I went to him and said that we were opposed to the whole military appropriation bill. We thought it was a lot of nonsense, but especially battleships. We thought they were just obsolete, and that we'd vote for the bill if he'd put in huge appropriations for airplanes, even to the extent of subsidizing commercial aviation. No, he said, we're giving the army and the navy everything they want
for airplanes, everything they want. So we can't give them any more.
We told him, well, we're going to vote against it, and we're going to
try to get a recorded vote on it and so we did. We got — I think we
got thirteen votes against the whole bill. But of course that was
thirteen out of — how many were there then — ninety?

Fridley: Was Shipstead one of those thirteen?

Benson: Probably. I don't remember. I think fellows like Homer Bone
would have been one of them, and Frazier and J. Nye and Bob LaFollette

Fridley: Norris?

Benson: Norris. A few like that.

Goff: Johnson, probably. Hiram Johnson.

Fridley: Borah, was he in then?

Benson: Borah was there. He probably was. I don't remember just who we
got but ....

Goff: Burkhardt — now was he in there at that time?

Benson: No. I forgot who took his place.

Pederson: Guy Gillette?

Benson: Gillette was there and Murray was there.

Fridley: In articles I have read about you — and they seem to me among the
more perceptive [and] I wouldn't say there were very many of those —
you're characterized during World War I, anyway, and later on as a
pacifist. Would you accept that?

Benson: Well, I don't think I was a pacifist. No, I don't think so. I'm
terribly opposed to war. I think it's just nonsensical. It's a strange
way of settling disputes ... you go out and kill a lot of people and
destroy property, and then sit down and talk over the table and settle
it anyway. It just doesn't make any sense to me.

Fridley: Would it be more accurate to say you would agree with pacifists under certain conditions?

Benson: Yes, that's right. I've got a grandson I think is a pacifist. And if it wasn't for his father - the influence of his father - I'm sure he would be one of these draft resisters.

Fridley: You fought ROTC didn't you?

Benson: Yes, yes.

Johnson: Did you oppose entry into the First World War? Our entry into it?


Fridley: You might tell them the story, which again I don't think we have on tape, of your trying to get a commission during World War II.

Benson: Yes. During the Second World War - who was it? Somebody in Washington, whether it was Henry Morgenthau or somebody anyway - said to me ...

Fridley: Oscar Chapman, maybe?

Benson: Well, he referred me to Chapman.

Fridley: Oh.

Benson: He said, "I understand you'd like to get a" (I suppose I'd mentioned it to somebody) "like to go into military government?" I thought probably I could be of some service there, and this fellow said, "I understand you'd like to get into military government." I said, "Yes, I think I would." And he said, "Well, I'll call up Oscar Chapman. He's chairman of the Officers Procurement Board." Oscar was Secretary of the Interior at that time. And he made an appointment for me, and I went over to see Oscar.
"Well," he says, "I tell you. I'm sure we can get you a commission as a Lieutenant Colonel, probably a Colonel." I said, "I don't care. It don't make any difference to me." And he said, "I want you to go over and see so-and-so" - some general in the Pentagon I guess it was, or did they have a pentagon building at that time? - the War Department anyway.

So I went over and talked to the guy and he says, "You're just the kind of a person we want." And he says, "You go back to Minneapolis and put in your application with somebody in one of the buildings there" - I've forgotten who it was, some major - and he made out an application; asked a lot of questions; and he said, "You're just the kind of person we want. We'll send you out to Fort Snelling to take the examination." So I went out and passed the examination.

I didn't hear anything and I didn't hear anything. Oscar says, "You'll hear from me when we're ..." So I didn't hear anything; didn't hear anything about it. Six weeks later I was in Washington - or maybe longer - two months.

I went to see Oscar and said, "What's the matter?" "Well", he says, "I tell you, Elmer, General Oberhoffer or General somebody" - I don't know who it was - "filed an objection to you. He claims that you're - you have connections with Communists." "Well, I'll tell you, Oscar, what I'd like to do. I wish you'd call a meeting of your board. I'd like to appear before your board and have the general there." "Well," he said, "we can't do that. There's a" - I've forgotten what excuse he gave. "Well then," I says, "what I'd like to have you do - you get me that letter, a copy of his letter that he filed with the board - I want to answer it and have my answer in there in the file." "And all right,"
he'd do that. But he never did. I asked him for it a couple of times - "I forgot," he said.

They're a bunch of cowards. The only time they dare to do anything is when they know they can really harass you. They couldn't harass me at that time. I was making money in those days. I think that's one reason they thought I was a good applicant. I'd made a lot of money. They made you tell in that application; they made you tell them how much you'd made that year, and back years and so on.

So - well, another fellow is just as bad or worse - John Bernard. Roosevelt called John in and told John, he says, "How would you like to get in Military Government?" He said, "I'd like it." He says, "I think you could be of service over there in Italy dealing with the prisoners and one thing and another." So they sent John out to the University of Minnesota to take an examination for some French teacher, and the French teacher talked to him for awhile and said, "Well, there's no use my going ahead with this examination," he said. "You understand the language better than I do, it's your native language." Of course John spoke Italian and French and various dialects over there. He never heard another thing. He never heard about it again after ...

Pederson: He served only one term in the Congress, didn't he? Was that a rather vicious campaign against him for reelection?

Benson: Terrible, terrible. I'm pleased with one of the fellows that really opposed him and opposed me at that time has now come out against the war in Vietnam. And that's Bishop Sheen.

Fridley: Fulton Sheen.

Benson: Fulton Sheen. He was a monsignor at that time. He came to Minnesota and spoke against John and I - well, the Farmer-Labor party. But I'll
forgive him. I'll forgive him. He came out against the war in Vietnam. I don't know if he needs my forgiveness or not.

Fridley: Well, there was Joe Blatnik in the very early '40s. Did you have much contact with him?

Benson: Oh, not a great deal. He was a teacher there in St. Louis County.

Goff: A Farmer-Laborite or ....

Benson: Yes, yes he was. He worked for the - seems to me he worked for the County Superintendent of Schools up there and he ....

Goff: I think he did, yes.

Benson: I have forgotten the county superintendent's name. He was an active Farmer-Laborite too.

Fridley: In terms of political ideology or philosophically - political philosophy - where would you place yourself? Did any one political philosophy - like populism - do you feel, influence you more than others?

Benson: I suppose that would, yes. I suppose probably I'm close to being a socialist, I don't know, I'm a prohibitionist. I voted the prohibition ticket for president. I have done that, and my mother did too.

Johnson: Was that when the other candidates were so bad or because you ....

Benson: I don't remember now, you see that was a long time ago. I've forgotten now. I remember I voted for Harley Christianson one time. I knew him quite well, but it wasn't because I knew him that I voted for him.

Fridley: What would your socialism be in relation to that of Norman Thomas?

Benson: Well, I didn't know too much about him. I think Norman Thomas became kind of hysterical on the Communist issue. With that I would disagree because I don't - it doesn't make any sense to me. I think we've made - I think the United States, our leaders and all the people, too,
because they back them up I'm sure - made the greatest mistake in the history of this country when they have taken the attitude they have on the Soviet Union and Communism. The Soviet Union in my opinion might have saved this country, and certainly saved millions of lives in the Second World War; of our lives I mean. And at the end of the war, we had a monopoly on the atom bomb, and still we went on with this fanatical anti-Communist cold war; later a hot war, that's cost us hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and billions. It's cost us more than a trillion dollars and now we find ourselves less secure than we were at the end of the Second World War. And it's cost us a lot of lives too. Already nearly thirty-five thousand - thirty-three thousand in this war, and thirty-three, four, five thousand in the Korean War. It just doesn't make sense to me. I think that we've - and this trillion and a quarter or trillion and a half dollars that we've spent on the military - it's been a terrible condition. It's almost impossible to conceive what we could have done with that. And of course they've done the same. I'm not excusing or justifying anything the Soviet Union's done. They've probably spent almost as much as we have. And the combined military expenditure of the rest of the world is about equal to ours, I guess. Just think what we could have done with that, if we'd used it for constructive purposes.

Pederson: You think that the declining health and then death of Franklin Roosevelt was the turning point in the change with our relationships with the Soviet Union?

Benson: Yes, I think so.

Pederson: You think [that] had he lived there might have been a different kind of ....
Benson: I would think so, don't you?

Pederson: Yes, I would ....

Benson: I think so.

Fridley: Truman was a very different person.

Benson: Yes, I remember right after '45, just a matter of weeks after his death - Roosevelt's death - Bea Baldwin of New York and I went in to see Truman. We were going to make a trip to the West Coast from New York, and just wanted to have a word with him. We were friendly at that time, politically. And of course we were - both of us where we talked about it afterwards - we were surprised, or amazed I suppose you would say, surprised when Truman came and met us at the door, you know. You see going in to see Roosevelt, we'd be accustomed to have him be sitting at his desk. He'd never get up, you'd have to walk over there. He [Truman] met us at the door and shook hands, you know, like a good politician and, "Glad to see you, Elmer," and "Never forget the first day you were in the Senate. Charley McNary went up to you and says, 'Senator, I want to help you, be helpful to you, get you seated on our side of the aisle.' You said, 'No, thank you. I'll sit on the other side of the aisle.'"

My gosh, for the President of the United States to be talking such nonsense as that was - it was true, I mean - but after all you'd think he had more important things to think about than that. And then he greeted Bea some way, I've forgotten how he did, but anyway. Well, then, he said, "What can I do for you?" Then we told him well, we're making a trip out. Well, Bea says, "Elmer will tell you what we're planning to do, and then if I think he's overlooked anything why I'll try to bring it up."

So I said, "Well, we're planning a trip across the country and we're
concerned about - you've got some big appointments coming up like Secretary of Agriculture. I've forgotten who was resigned at that time or died or what; and head of the Veterans Bureau. I said, "We're interested in agriculture first because I'm a farmer and second because there's a lot of farmers voting; and [in] the Veterans Administration because I'm a veteran, and because the Veteran's Administration is important politically," and so on. And there's still a third department I've forgotten what that was - Secretary of State I guess. I don't know. So ... and then I says, "We're also concerned about some of the stories that are coming out of San Francisco." "Why," he says, "what do you mean, the story?" I says, "You know, stories critical of the Soviet Union."

"Well," he says, "you want to remember, Elmer," he says, "the Soviet Union is only" - what did he say, thirty-five years old or twenty-five years old, whatever it was - England is ... and we're one hundred and fifty years old; England is much older than we are. We've got to teach the Soviet Union how to behave. They're acting like a bull in the china shop.

"Well," I said, "maybe that's true, Mr. President. But you want to remember they're our principal ally in this war, and they're the second most powerful nation in the world. And we've got to learn how to get along with them, no matter what you think about it."

"Well," he says, "that's right," he says. But so on, and I, well, I couldn't say any more, I mean. You can only go so far with the President of the United States and then he shuts you up. They do it just quietly, but they do it.

Then he said something about the Secretary of Agriculture and our
interest in country farmers and tells us that's important. "Elmer," he says, "I've got - I'm going to announce the appointment in just a few days and you'll be pleased with it." Well of course, he didn't tell me who it was. And same way with the Veterans Administration, "You will be pleased with the appointment. You will be pleased with the choice."

Well I've forgotten who he appointed; Anderson, I believe.

Goff: Clinton Anderson.

Benson: Clinton Anderson as Secretary of Agriculture. I don't know why that should please farmers. But and I think he appointed Bradley - Omar Bradley - head of the Veterans Administration.

Johnson: Was it then that you started supporting Henry Wallace?

Benson: Well, that wasn't until '48. While we are talking about - while you've mentioned Wallace - I'll tell you a story. One time we were in Washington - I don't know why this came to my mind now - one of our crowd - we were eating dinner at some restaurant right across from the Mayflower Hotel was there I remember, or near there anyway. One of the fellows went to the men's room and he came back laughing. He says, "I've got a good story to tell you."

Remember the time when Wallace and Jessie Jones were quarreling and they were exchanging letters back and forth you know, and rapping each other? This fellow said, "I said to the attendant there in the men's room, 'Well, what do you think of these letters that are being exchanged between Jessie Jones and Henry Wallace?' And this attendant says, 'Oh,' he says, 'just one millionaire writing to another.'

Pederson: Do you have any recollections of Truman as Senator Truman, besides the one you related?
Benson: Well, we sat close to one another in the Senate. We were in the back. He was in the back row and I was in the back row. He was on a couple of committees with me. The hearings - I remember they were trying to dismember the Minneapolis and St. Louis Railroad - I remember he was on that committee with me. I thought he was a - just an ordinary dub like myself. He was on the committee - I don't know what they called the committee dealing with claims against the government - wasn't he? I thought he was just a very ordinary sort of a fellow.

Pederson: Did you ever reestablish any kind of communications after he left the White House?

Benson: No, after he left the White House, no. I've never seen him.

Fridley: Back to this question of your socialism. Would you limit incomes?

Benson: Oh, I certainly would. Yes, definitely.

Fridley: What level would you put on it, currently?

Benson: Well, I'll tell you a story. About two months before Jake Preus died, I was visiting with him and he says, "Elmer, you know there's one thing I agreed with President Roosevelt in, and that was this. He tried to - by executive order - he tried to limit the personal incomes to $25,000 a year net. You know $25,000 is enough for any man to raise a family on." And I agreed with him.

Well, I wrote a letter here awhile ago. I don't think anyone ever published it, probably. But anyway, I sent it to some places that ... in which I advocated that if they were serious about controlling inflation, and were serious about this disparity in the - what do you call this ....

Fridley: Balance of payments?

Benson: Balance of payments, that they should set the salary of the
President of the United States and the Vice President and members of the cabinet and members of the Congress and members of the military at the same price as the highest non-commissioned officer. And they should tax away all net personal income over $25,000. They should pass an excess profits tax on corporations, and they should tax away all income between $5000 and $25,000 and give the payor of that tax a certificate payable in five years at five percent interest. Then, if they do that then they'd be serious about this business. Otherwise they were not.

I think, for instance, a lot of workers who are making, say $10,000 a year now, maybe some are making $15,000 a year in airplane plants or defense industries of various kinds. I think they want this war to go on, they want this military expenditure to go on. Why not tax it away from them and give them a certificate, say you will pay them back in five years everything over $5,000. Make them get along on $5000 a year.

I think I had a letter from some preacher down in Willmar and to show how senseless they are, he said, "Would you be willing to give one of your farms in this tax program that you're proposing?"

I couldn't answer him because he just said, "I'm a preacher at Willmar, Minnesota." If he'd give me his name I'd say, "You're darn right, I'd be glad to give a farm, yes."

I would.

Fridley: How far would you go in public ownership of key industries; vital industries?

Benson: I don't think it's too important who owns the industries, as long as we control them - the government controls them.

Fridley: And the taxation is adequate?
Benson: I was on the - I had to go into the hospital here awhile ago and it was during that extreme weather and we couldn't drive in. So we went in on the bus. And on the way in I was reading a book. The Constitution and something else, a little paperback book that I had picked up. And some fellow tapped me on the shoulder.

He says, "Say, I notice that book you're reading. How does it happen you're reading a book like that?" "Oh, I just wanted something to read. I thought it would be interesting reading." And he says, "Well, I'm a lawyer from Webster, South Dakota. I just thought it was rather strange that you'd be reading a book like that on the bus," he says. "What business are you in?" I told him I'm retired. "Retired from what?" he says. "Farming." Well, we visited quite a while ... and then he was going down to Chicago to visit a son-in-law who was in the hospital there - a veteran - war.

And my gosh when we came back on the bus - we went in on Tuesday and came back on Sunday - we couldn't get back in the meantime, the busses were stalled. My gosh, this fellow came in the bus station on Sunday. He was going back to Webster. So we got to visiting and he says, "Say, you know, my gosh, I'm a Republican but I'd be in favor of the government taking over the railroads. They couldn't do a worse job than they're doing now." And I think there's something to that. Railroads, of course, have always been, I think, manipulated by grafters and bankers and others.

Goff: Governor, there's a kind of prevailing myth about you, I think, and your administration that is that Floyd Olson, who was a very strong personable governor, put together a kind of strange assortment of birds - a strange coalition - political coalition - to get the power that it took
to elect him. And then you as the heir of that coalition couldn't run it. That's basically what - you know the near history says. That's what the accounts now from this vantage point say. What would your answer to that point of view be?

Benson: Well, I suppose there's some truth in that. He had connections that I couldn't possibly have. I mean, whether they were good or bad, that's for others to judge. I can't - I'm not a good compromiser. I admit that. For instance, I couldn't compromise with - oh, I couldn't compromise with Dick Lilly, for instance. I couldn't compromise with the liquor interests.

Goff: And Floyd Olson could?

Benson: Oh, I'm sure he could. I'm sure he could. I'm sure he could have had a better income tax law than he got. I'm sure he could have had a statement out on the liquor if he wanted. Those are two things that I can think of right now.

Pederson: Along the same line - or were you going to say something else?

Goff: No, basically this is the kind of response I wanted to elicit and then if you want to go on that, that's fine, because it's really a key to your whole ....

Benson: I think that's - we can carry that further. I mean carry out further, well ....

Fridley: Well, I think another part of it, a collorary to it, is that you were really not concerned with when, if you had to compromise.

Benson: That's right, I wasn't.

Fridley: You would rather lose.

Benson: That's right. I wouldn't want to be Governor if I was just there as an errand boy for special interests.

Fridley: I think that attitude surprises a lot of people today.
Benson: I suppose.

Goff: You don't see that very often in public affairs.

Benson: No, I suppose not.

Johnson: Can you think of anything, if you could do it over again, that you would do differently as governor?

Benson: Oh, I suppose I could think of several things. One thing I don't...

Well, I don't know if I would or not. Right along the lines that we are talking about, I'll have to tell you what my mother said to me when I got this call to come back to St. Paul after Tom Schall had been killed. I was home here in this house and when I got this - they told me I ought to come in. Of course newspapers were carrying stories about I'd probably be appointed and of course all that sort of thing. And when I got ready to leave, kissing my mother goodbye, and she said, "Now, Elmer, if they offer you this job, I wish you wouldn't take it."

"Well," I says, "why?" "If you take it, they're going to say some awful things about you."

Well, how true she was. She knew, she knew.

Pederson: Another part of the mythology perhaps is that corruption ran rampant through the Farmer-Labor party, and then it's indirectly suggested, through your administration as Governor. I've never been a subscriber to that, partly because I never knew. And it seemed rather a serious charge to level unless you knew what you were talking about. I never felt I knew what I was talking about, so if you don't mind my asking the question, would you comment on the allegations?

Benson: I'm sure there was corruption in the - during my administration - I'm sure of that. But it was penny-ante corruption. The real corruption came before my administration and following my administration. You
wouldn't expect, for instance - you wouldn't expect the Twin City newspapers or radio stations to publicize the fact that the steel corporation had received great benefits through tax legislation or through executive orders. But if some minor contractor or some minor deal that the state made during my administration was - say there was some corruption in it, and there is, I have known. A person would be stupid if they didn't think there was corruption in every administration. But if someone in my administration had made, we'll say a thousand dollars, that would be publicized if it was exposed. But if someone made twenty million in Stassen's administration, there wouldn't be anything said about it. A good example would be this; take the pardons, the pardon of Schafer and Young, there's a good example. Two men who were sentenced to the penitentiary for life. They killed two men on University and Snelling I think it was, yes.

Goff: Yes, that's right. On the corner of University ....

Benson: They were in there for life and every time they were - during my term in office - every time, I think it's every six months they have a right to apply for a pardon. They were turned down. I mean there was never a thought given to it. They were turned down.

Goff: They were mobsters brought in from Chicago, weren't they?

Benson: They were members of Murder, Inc. They were hired by Murder, Inc. And I remember when we had meetings down at - down at the prison, one of these fellows, whether it was Schafer or Young, come up to me as I walked through the prison and he said I was unfair to them. Well, anyway, after I had been defeated, the Pardon Board held its last meeting there in my general office and the Minneapolis papers carried stories about a fellow by the name of - he was later killed out in Washington
or Los Angeles I think – being in Minneapolis. He was supposed to have $50,000, these were the newspaper stories, to work for the release of Schafer and Young. Siegel, Bugsy Siegel was his name. And there was a story came out that Bugsy Siegel isn't going to lose it all because he made $20,000 in the poker game the other night. There were all kinds of stories like that. So the pressure was on. I think Archie Carey was his chief attorney and ....

Goff: Who were the other guys?

Benson: Oh, former chief justice, Jack Delaney, a good friend of mine, you know, was one of his lawyers, their lawyers. And they had another one, oh, yes, and my wife's uncle, Bob Siberting was on the case too. And I was out here during Christmas and I got a call from my secretary saying that the – oh, I'm ahead of my story. They put the pressure on for these pardons, and they got the Chief Justice, Henry Gallagher to sign it. And you've got the pardons, duplicates.

Fridley: In your papers [Benson papers in the Minnesota Historical Society]?

Benson: Yeah. Remember I told you not to release them until Henry A. Gallagher died.

Fridley: It's the only part of your papers we restricted.

Benson: Well, anyway they got the Chief Justice Henry Gallagher to sign the pardon, and they got the Attorney General to sign them. And I said, "Nothing doing, I will not sign them. Those men are just professional gangsters – killers – they're going to stay there the rest of their life." Well, to come to this call from my secretary, saying Jack Delaney was trying to get a hold of me and he wanted to come out and see me.

Fridley: Was he Chief Justice?

Benson: No, he had retired and Henry Gallagher was Chief Justice. So
finally I talked to Jack and he wanted to come out here and I said, no, I'll see you at the St. Paul Hotel at such and such a time. So I met him there and he had Bob Siberling with him, my wife's uncle. And in the meantime I had called the secretary - or I told my secretary to have the secretary of the Pardon Board down there and have those pardons with him. So when he got there, I asked for the pardons and I put them in my pocket, and Jack Delaney put on a great story about when he resigned; his family was too expensive a family. He couldn't live on Chief Justice's pay and so on. I said, "I know that, Jack. I want to help you in any way I can, but not to let out a couple of professional killers. No, sir." "Well," he says, "tell you, Elmer, this fellow is going to go back to New Jersey and stand trial for murder back there too." "I can't help it." He says, "I've gotten $15,000. If you sign those pardons, I get $15,000 more. And Bob's gotten $5,000, he gets $5,000 more if you sign them." "Can't help it. I cannot sign those pardons." After a couple of hours of this wrangling why - or his talking - he shook hands and he said, "Elmer, I think you've done the right thing."

Well here a few years ago, probably four years ago, they let these two men out, and Judge - former Chief Justice Roger Dell - had retired. And I read the story on the front page of the Minneapolis newspapers in which he criticized them for letting them out. So I wrote the - Roger - and told him I was glad that he gave the story he did about keeping these men in, and he wrote back saying that he knew that I had been instrumental in keeping there two of them.

But one day I got a call - this was after I was out of office and after I lived here - I got a call from Lief Gilstad of the Minneapolis Star and he said, "Say, Elmer, was Jack Delaney out to see you during
the Christmas vacation regarding the Schafer and Young case?" I said no. "He wasn't out at that time — no." He says, "Was Roger Rutchick, your secretary, out to see you?" "No, he wasn't out that time or any other time, and furthermore he's just as much opposed to letting those men out as I am."

[End of side 1; beginning of side 2]

Benson: Lief Gilstad called and he asked several question, you know, about this Schafer and Young matter, and so after I had finished talking to him, I called the Chief Justice and told him that he called and I thought he'd want to know. And I says, "I thought perhaps you'd want to know also that I have those pardons that you and the Attorney General signed. I have them in my safe here."

Goff: Was this Roger Dell, now?

Benson: This was Henry Gallagher.

Goff: Henry Gallagher.

Benson: "And oh, he says, "is that so? Why don't you come in and see me, Elmer?" And I says, "Yes, the next time I'm in town, I'll come and see you." He says, "You know, Lief has been in to see me several times. And I told him. I says, 'Lief, I know what you're trying to do. You're trying to get something to pin on Elmer. But you aren't going to find it because I'm going to be indebted to him the rest of my life, because Bill Irwin and I signed those pardons and Elmer refused to sign them. If he signed them, those men would be let out. So I will be indebted to him the rest."

Then he says, "I've been up to the Pardon Board office several times looking for those pardons." "Well," I says, "I have them."

I went in and he asked if I wouldn't give them to him. I says,
"Yes, I will, but I want to show them to the newspapers here in town first - Twin Cities." So I did. I showed them to Stuffy Walters over at the Star, and - what's the name of that fellow, he's dead now - at the Tribune? Anyway ... and Russ Wiggins over at the Dispatch and Pioneer Press. So anyway, the only one that I thought was fair about it was this old man at the Tribune.

He says, "Well, listen, I agree with you, Governor, they aren't handling this very well, but I don't do anything but write editorials around here. It's the only thing I've - I haven't any other authority." The other fellows, both Stuffy Walters and Russ Wiggins, they tried to polish it up.

Well, anyway, ... at the same time these men had signed pardons for a gangster there in Minneapolis. He's still around Minneapolis, because I read something about him in the paper the other day. He owns a lot of real estate there. But he's been in two or three penitentiaries - I've forgotten his name - he threw acid on some drycleaning establishment, a fellow by the name of Shapiro's Place, and every time he came up for pardon, this old man Shapiro - an old man with a beard - came to call on the pardon board.

I says, "Mr. Shapiro, you don't have to worry. We aren't going to let that man out." The newspapers always played it up every time that he was up for pardon. Well, about a month after I was out of office, they let him out. Not a damn word was said about it in the papers, nothing. Well, if I had let - if they had let him out while I was Governor - you'd had headlines in all the Minneapolis papers that big. What was the man's name? What was that famous, infamous character around Minneapolis?
Goff: Still living?

Benson: Yes, he's still living and doing business down there. He was in, I'm sure, three penitentiaries. He shot a man in Minneapolis and he hit the man's watch and cartridge belt, otherwise it would have killed him. What landed him in the penitentiary was throwing acid on these clothes in the - it was in this war between - you remember, in the drycleaning war on years ago.

Well anyway, and when Schafer and Young were let out, if Roger Dell hadn't criticized them, nothing would have been said about it. If I had let him out when I was Governor, you'd have had headlines that really screamed. And I think properly so. I don't think he should have been let out. I think that in a way explains that. We were talking about corruption though.

I think there's ... sure there's all ... where are you going to find - how many - fifteen thousand people working for the state; where are you going to find fifteen thousand people that a few of them aren't dishonest. If you belong to a church with 150 people in it, you're going to find somebody who's a crook or dishonest or a faker or a shyster of some kind, aren't you? You even find a preacher sometimes who's that kind of a person.

Pederson: One of the things sometimes pointed to, and it's called corruption, was the alleged shakedown of state employees for party purposes.

Benson: Yes, well, that's a lot of .... They never shook anyone down but they asked them to pay; and properly, so, with my endorsement. You're darn right. You bet your life they did. But they weren't - but there were plenty of shakedowns after Stassen got in there, plenty of it. I know we had a young girl from Appleton working in the banking department,
just an ordinary clerk's job. And they called her in and gave her a good grilling over, and a week later they fired her. And she was just a fine young girl. She's married and lives over in Alexandria now. But that was many, many hundreds of them; they did that too, and well ....

Pederson: How do you maintain this sense of perspective, and not get totally disillusioned about the process of government?

Benson: Oh, I don't know. I was ... sure I was disappointed when I was defeated, of course I was; no question about that. I had great hopes when I went ... actually, when I delivered my inaugural address I had great hopes that we were on our way to having a better government, a better society. It was a real disappointment to me. I had had more faith in the people than I had a right to have.

Fridley: Do you think Olson had similar hopes?

Benson: I think so. I think so. But he was probably a little bit more practical than I. I like to think that was the reason I was defeated.

Fridley: Did you - do you have your administration ... labels are the thing now ... and he talked about a cooperative commonwealth, didn't he?

Benson: Yes.

Fridley: Did you have any such ... ?

Benson: No, I never .... I didn't like that. He used a couple of expressions like that. I didn't care much for them, and I don't think we were ready for anything like that. I didn't think so then. But I thought we would make some strides.

Goff: I imagine it was difficult too, wasn't it, Governor, just the notion of working in the shadow [of Olson], particularly taken untimely as he was and everything ....

Benson: Yes, I suppose.
Goff: ... the sentiment on the part of the people, no matter what you did really, you would have had a difficult time measuring up to ....

Benson: That's right. I think anyone would have.

Goff: Yes. Well then ... [unclear]

Benson: At least I would. I don't know ....

Goff: Anyhow that's exactly the point. Anyone would.

Benson: Anyone would, but I had probably ... I'm sure I did.

Pederson: Yes, sure.

Benson: You know, after all he was a popular, glamorous, able, personable ....

Goff: And very young.

Benson: Yes.

Goff: Of course, you were young too.

Benson: I was young, yes. But - were any of you newspaper men at any time?

Goff: No, not really.

Benson: Well, I'll tell you a story. Do you know Mike - at least you know of him - Mike Halloran, don't you? He was a political writer for the Minneapolis papers, very friendly with Olson, and not unkind to me, either. Talking about writing history made me think of - right now about that. I think Charley Chaney was writing at the same time Mike was. Charley Chaney had a peculiar ability to have the correct facts; but his interpretation of the facts was something terrific, I'm telling you. That was something else. But Mike was more honest, I thought.

Well, anyway, I'll tell you a story about Mike and newspapermen. One time I came into Olson's office. He'd called for me, and he and Vince Day were sitting there, and he had his feet up on the desk and he looked real glum and ugly, you know. I said, "What's the matter with you this morning?" "Well," he says, "I wish I was out of this damn
office and up in Crookston practicing law." I don't know why Crookston, but anyway, I says, "What's the matter with you, anyway?" "Oh," he says, "these damn newspapermen." "What's the matter with newspapers?" I says, "You've sure got a lot of friends in newspaper men. You haven't got any kick coming." Oh, "Those damn newspapermen." "Well," I says, "if you talked about the newspaper publishers, that's one thing, sure. But among the newspapermen you've got a lot of friends, man."

Well, he kept on, you know, raving, and finally he got up and usually he'd act out anything that he thought was [unclear]. He got up there on his great big arms and he reached way out and he says, "Elmer, you are way up here [indicating sky] newspapermen way up there [indicating lower level]." [Laughter] And with his acting, you know ... gosh, with those great arms of his raised up almost to the sky. That wasn't what I was going to tell you about Mike Halloran. I told Mike this story, later, oh years later, you know, after Olson was dead. He didn't get mad in my presence but he told my secretary he was mad. He said, "Elmer shouldn't tell that story." [Laughter]

Goff: It's a great story, and remarkably accurate, I think.

Pederson: I would agree.

Johnson: You mentioned something before that Olson, some of his - I suppose appointees and people in his administration - didn't work with him very well, and he was disappointed. Did he, was he able to do something about it? Did he fire people or did he just let it go?

Benson: No, he didn't. The one thing he did do .... When he was nominated for the Senate and I was nominated for Governor, was one of the times I saw him. It wasn't too often during that period because he was ill. He said to me, "Now, Elmer, you're going to be elected governor. Do you
like Bill Ellsberg?" I says, "Yes, I like him. But he doesn't know anything about politics, and he's certainly got a crazy wife." "That don't make any difference," he says, "he's the one person I would like to have you re-appoint if you - when you're elected governor. I don't want you to ..." "I'll appoint anyone you want me to," I said. "No," he said, "I don't care about anyone else.

So he must have been pretty disgusted with most of them, because he was the only one he mentioned.

Pederson: What was Ellsberg?
Benson: Highway Commissioner.
Pederson: Highway Commissioner.
Benson: And he, talking about - well, we were talking about graft - Ellsberg you know was convicted.
Pederson: Yes. I was going ...,
Benson: And then the Supreme Court overruled, overturned, his conviction. I don't think there was anything corrupt or dishonest about Ellsberg. I'll tell you what happened. He let a contract - I've forgotten who the contractors were - but I think it was up on the North Shore.

There was extra work outside the contract, and if he had gone to the so-called big three, the Administration and Finance - I guess that's what they called it at that time, they called it the big three - and had them approve this extra work it would have been perfectly proper and all, but he didn't do it. He hadn't done it. Just carelessness I suppose. Maybe his attorney neglected it. Maybe he didn't know anything about it, I don't know. But anyway he was convicted and the Supreme Court overruled them.

But we had another case and the Chief Oil Inspector was a fellow
by the name of George Griffith - similar case. And some oil company
that has filling stations ... I've forgotten the name of the .... Any-
way Billy Mitchell down near Tracy, state commander of the American
Legion at that time was their attorney - Webb Oil Company, Webb Oil
Company, don't they still have stations around? The chief clerk in the
Oil Inspection Department and Mr. Webb connived together so they hadn't
paid the - they were delinquent I think $54,000 in gasoline taxes that
they hadn't reported and turned in. As Chief Inspector, George Griffith
discovered it, and he made a deal with Webb Oil Company and they were
paying it back, I don't know, a thousand or ten thousand a month, ten
thousand a month or two thousand, anyway a certain amount every month
they had to pay back. After I was out of office and after Griffith
was out, they dug this up. They'd paid back all the money, but the law
says that if you find a wrong-doing of that kind, you're supposed to
report it to the county attorney. George Griffith hadn't done it. If
he had done it, chances are he wouldn't have got the money. He wouldn't
have got the $54,000. He got the money back, but he hadn't reported it
to the county attorney, so they found him guilty and sent him to the
workhouse for a year. He served it out, too.

But, another example ... when I was Commissioner of Banks we had
I don't know how many cases where a banker defaulted maybe $2500, maybe
$5000. We got the money. I never reported any of them to the county
attorney except one. In fact, I don't know if I knew about it - that
you were supposed to - maybe I did. I don't think I did.

Well, anyway, we had a man down at Montevideo. I don't know how
much he was short, seems to me he was short $1600 in the closed bank
department. Damn good man. He was a holdover from the Republican
administration, but I thought he was one of the best men in the department, Lee Culp. And he was short. We found that out and his father-in-law paid it up. Lud Rowe, [who] was a good friend of mine, a newspaperman at Montevideo at that time, wrote an editorial criticizing the Bank Department. Politics, politics—well, no, this is later, I'm getting ahead of my story. Nothing was said. His father-in-law paid the money. We sent the examiners back just ten days later. We usually went about once every six months. And they found out he was $2500 short again. So, he paid it up. His father-in-law did, and the guy got a job down at the Federal Land Bank, a better job than he had with us.

Lud Rowe came out with that terrific blast, criticizing ... for playing politics. We fired him. He got this job, and so I didn't say anything. Then the next week he came out with another .... So I [unclear] at Appleton. I drove down to see Lud. He was down in Wisconsin visiting his relatives. He had a big family down there. Anyway, I went to see old man Fossness, C. A. Fossness, a lawyer and a good friend of Lud's and a good friend of mine too. I told him the situation. I told him just what had happened.

"Now," I says, "Lud wants me to blast this fellow, expose him. He'll lose his job down at the Federal Land Bank and won't help us any. And probably every depositer, or every man who owes money to that bank will come in and say they've paid their debt. So we don't want any publicity on it. But I'm not going to take any chances. I'm telling you and if you want to tell Lud, all right."

But I also, when I got back, wrote a letter to the county attorney of Chippewa County and told him the situation. Well, he was a good friend of Lud's and a good friend of Fossness too. I didn't hear
any more about it.

Goff: No more editorials?

Benson: No, no more editorials. That ... I don't know. I've seen many things in these last years. Well, for instance when they let Schafer and Young out. Such publicity if I had let them out, holy moses. And properly so. But not when this crowd let them out.

Johnson: When did they get out, finally?

Benson: Oh, I don't know, it was not ... it isn't too long ago.

Pederson: Six or seven years ago they got their pardon and got out.

Benson: I know I ... at the time up on the North Shore I met a fellow who is this ... he and his wife are both either psychiatrists or psychologists at the University and they have a canoe campers outfitting joint out on the ... one of the trails there. I've forgotten which trail it is. And I was out there at the end of the trail one day, and met them and visited with them. And I was curious about another man who had just been let out at that time. And I had forgotten his name, but I had described the incident and then this fellow knew right away who it was and everything. I says, what ... I've been thinking about this man they'd let out of the penitentiary the other day or they didn't let him out. I said this man shot a man in a bar in Minneapolis, and he was tried and he jumped his bail, and was found guilty in his absence and sentenced to life imprisonment. And a couple years later he was found out in California and brought back, and put into prison. And he served some time there and got a new trial, and he was found not guilty. About six months later he went down to Kansas and he committed highway robbery and was sentenced to forty or fifty or sixty years in the penitentiary.

"Now," I says, "what kind of a man would that be; what kind of
thinking process goes on there? It seems to me if I had been found guilty and sentenced to prison for life and got a new trial; was found not guilty; seems to me if I couldn't protect myself any other way I'd go out in Wyoming, get away forty miles from the ... get a ranch forty miles from any town and stay there the rest of my life, rather than to get mixed up in crime again."

"Well," he says, "the trouble ...." and then he ... right away he knew who I was talking about and knew the man and everything. "Well," he says, "I'll tell you about those kind of people. They're ... we think some ... a lot of us think we're smarter than they are. Now that fellow probably wasn't a very smart," - Rubishesky - I just thought of his name now. Rubishesky was his name. He says, "He probably wasn't a very smart guy or he wouldn't have done that."

And then he told me about Schafer and Young. He says that one of the guards that took either Schafer or Young to the airport to take his plane back to Pennsylvania, where he was going to live with his sister to show you how they think - he came into the airport and he saw one of these machines where you can buy life insurance. He'd never seen one before and he was really carried away and the guard explained to him what it was. "Well," he says, "that's a good gamble." And he took a lot of life insurance. That was his thinking. It was a good gamble.

Goff: It cost you $500 or $5. You might make $5,000.
Benson: Yes. So I don't ... we sort of got off the subject.
Fridley: No, not at all.
Benson: But, well, I haven't any .... Well, for instance talking about corruption, you know, after I was defeated, the legislature appropriated $50,000 to investigate me. And they did everything, they went to stores
in Minneapolis, and they went to banks to check my bank account, check my charge accounts at stores, and they called in all kinds of people. Oh, I suppose they spent the $50,000 and they used the whole examining force of the Bank Department to check on me. And they used the Comptroller's Office, the State Comptroller's Office, and for many years thereafter their income tax department. Why, oh, they'd spend about a week here with me, every year, to check my income tax. Well, I wasn't that big. I'd made money sure, but I hadn't made that much. If they'd spent as much time on one of the big corporations - I mean that much more - the time they spent on me, if they'd spent it on them, they'd recovered a hundred for one that they recovered from me, I'm sure of that. Even if they had given them a square deal, but they don't do that any more. And the federal government did it for years too.

Pederson: Hum.

Benson: I'd spend a week or ten days here examining it. Nonsense. My business wasn't that big.

Johnson: Let me ask you about when you were Banking Commissioner. You replaced John Peyton who was quite a conservative but he did some kind of radical things with the Banking Department. Did you agree with his policies when ...

Benson: No, I didn't ...

Johnson: ... you were commissioner?

Benson: No, I didn't agree with his policies, no. John was a pretty harsh governor. Here is a guy ... he was a wealthy man, but I don't have much respect for wealth, just because of wealth.

Fridley: Well, Elmer, we ought to give you a rest.

Benson: Probably you better tell me more about that question that I asked
you about history. It really troubles ....

Fridley: I don't think I gave you a very good answer, except it seems to me a historian's job is to try, through his own skills, to use his own judgment and insight to determine what are the accurate sources. And the more of these you can gather the more sure you can be of your facts. Of course what you draw out of the facts, you're talking about interpretation. This probably takes even more skill. Well, I think there's a great deal of - great deal printed under the guise of history, such as this book, that should never be printed. Just because it appears in print, a lot of people are mesmerized. This gives it a certain sanctity, and that's why I think these tapes are important. I think here we're getting down to the bedrock. And it doesn't mean that people are going to agree with you on all your interpretations, but I think you're dealing with some points that have been badly confused and not researched.

Johnson: It's a lot like the politician in a way. You look at many sources and come up with conclusions. Some politicians come up with one conclusion, tax less or tax more, and they consider that they're right.

Goff: You made an interesting statement earlier, Governor, when you were talking about this newspaperman who would get the facts right but where he went from there was all wrong, and the conclusions he would draw would be entirely erroneous.

Benson: And he was a very able fellow, too, very able.

Pederson: Well, unfortunately, the ... excuse me.

Goff: Then it becomes a matter of ... becomes almost, in reading history or in trying to interpret it strikes me it becomes almost a judicial process. You look ahead and [judge], do the facts warrant the conclusions that he arrives at. If not, then you don't have to accept it as a
conclusion.

Pederson: And unfortunately, too often, before a truly historical account is written, the primary sources are gone. And then you've got to rely on well, newspaper accounts for example, which are often used in writing of historical ... [unclear] ... and you have no alternative. That may be the farthest you can go to get it. And we all know how inaccurate they can be.

Fridley: We share your opinion about newspapermen. The book on the Non-partisan League, Political Prairie-fire by Morlan, which I thought was a pretty good book .... And it brought Townley to life and so on. You know, it was written almost entirely from newspaper accounts which are probably the most unreliable of all sources.

Goff: Your role in history, for instance, Governor, I think this is why it's important for you, for instance, to set down your point of view, because when you made mention of the fact that your income tax returns were checked ... and everything else. The Republicans in the 1938 election and the Communist catspaw segment and other groups made some extraordinarily damaging charges against you and your administration, and the Department of the Treasury. The elements of the Catholic Church and the veterans organizations and others were wading in on the same sort of thing. Then for a period of time, particularly when they came to power, it was important for them to vindicate their position by proof, by demonstrating somehow that it had happened. This is the first time in my judgment that your ... at least future historians looking at your administration would be able to look at it and say, well, this is what he said that it was, and this is what he said that it meant. Then they've got at least some reference or some bench mark somewhere to
start working toward what truth might be. The Republican point of view - your enemy's point of view - is laid out there pretty clearly. The papers of the Republican party - they've told posterity what they thought of you and your administration. That's why I think it's important that your point of view be set out there, and then somewhere down the line when all the principals are gone, the ones that have a vested interest in proving that they were right or wrong, somebody can take a look at it and say here's where truth was.

Benson: I remember just a - I don't know how long ago it is now, it isn't too long ago - there was a lot on the North Shore right next to my cabin that was owned by the State Highway Department. I never thought it was very valuable lot. The back part of it's low, a lot of water. When it's heavy rains it gets - water stands there and so on. And there's only small lake frontage, I think a hundred and twenty-five, fifty feet, something like that. Well, anyway, I thought ... oh, yes, the fish house that was on there, fisherman's cabin, burnt down. So I thought, well, perhaps I'd better buy that, so someone doesn't buy it and put up a beer stand or something of that sort. And so I went down to see the Highway Commissioner - I think his name was Mr. Hoffman - and I said, "I'm willing to pay a thousand dollars to have it. If you think it's worth more than that I'll pay fifteen hundred dollars for it."

"No," he says, "that's all it's worth, but I can't sell it. It's got to be - have a bill introduced in the legislature authorizing the sale of it. Is there anyone down there that you could get to introduce the bill?" I says, "Yes, I think so." So I went down to see Claude Allen who was a member of the legislature and a conservative now,
chairman, I think he was chairman of the Appropriations Committee, a St. Paul lawyer. In fact he'd been my lawyer at one time. And I told him the situation. He says he'd introduce a bill, so he did. And some fellow up here at Ada, Minnesota, Larson, Senator Larson, got up on the floor of the Senate and opposed this.

He says, "This fellow Benson has made all the money he's going to make out of the State of Minnesota. We aren't going to sell it to him. We're going to put it up for bids." So they did, they put it up for bids. And some fellow down in St. Louis - the president of the St. Louis Railroad I think he said he was - he told me to buy it. In the yard there one day at the cabin ... I was sitting there ... he wanted to know if I could tell him where this lot was the state was advertising for sale. I took him over there and told him where I thought the lot was, the boundaries and all. And then I left him, and I don't think he was over there ten minutes and he came back and got in his car and drove away. By gosh, he put in a bid and bought it for thirty-five hundred dollars. Well, I thought ... I put in a bid for fifteen hundred. I thought that was all it was worth. In fact I didn't think it was worth that. Well, for a man like Larson to say that ... I'd never made any money on the State of Minnesota that I know of. I got a damn poor salary when I was there, I know that; and I never made a nickel any other way out of the state.

And - what was I going to say? - he kept this lot. He cleared off - he bulldozed and cleared off a spot there - and he run the hi-line there, and he kept it about five years. Then he bought a place down the shore with a building on it and he never did use it. He finally - oh, years later - he sold it. I don't know what he got for it. I haven't any
idea. Never paid any attention to it. But that's one instance how ridiculous they can be.

And then another instance - I can tell you this - where I did make some money. That is, the Banking Department was advertising the assets of the Minneapolis - the St. Paul - no, the Capitol Trust and Savings Bank for sale. The property was located in North Dakota and Montana; most all of it. Some of it in Minnesota. Contracts and land - land contracts and land - and a fellow out in Montana wrote me and told me about it. I didn't know anything about it. So we hired a lawyer in St. Paul, Bob Quinn, who was the former attorney for the Bank Department, Closed Bank Department. I thought a logical man to hire, he knows all about the methods and procedures. We went in. We put in a bid, and ours was the highest bid .... My partner and I. I have forgotten who the other - there was one other bid in there.

And the judge - Loevinger - said that he approved the sale, but he wanted the Banking Commissioner to approve it before he made it final. About ten days later, the Banking Department turned it down. Here they had advertised it for sale. We were the high bidder, and they turned it down. Well, I didn't think anything about it, fuss over it. Pretty soon they offered it for sale again; I think maybe a year later, maybe six months later. We went in. We were the high bidders again - same lawyer, same bidders - turned down the second time.

So I was talking to my former secretary, Roger Rutchick, one day. He wasn't acting as my lawyer in this case, Bob Quinn was. And he says, "Say, Elmer, why don't you hire some other lawyer in that Bank Department case?" And I says, "Why?" "Well," he says, "after all, Bob Quinn's an old Democrat, an old Farmer-Laborite. Don't you think you better -
you've been turned down twice now - don't you think you'd better get some other lawyer?" And I says, "Who've you got in mind?" He says, "Claude Allen. He's a Republican, chairman of the Appropriations Committee, and a big shot." I said, "Why didn't you tell me this before?" He says, "I thought you'd get too damn mad."

Well, we hired Claude Allen and went before Judge Parks, I believe it was, and we were again .... He auctioned it off; he actually conducted an auction. We went up, up, up, and we were finally the high bidder. And he sold it and we got it. Well, we did make some money, but that wasn't the state's property. It was the Capitol Trust and Savings Bank and the state was merely custodian. But the reason we didn't get it in the first place, and we would have been .... If we had got that first bid we would have paid about a quarter of a million more than we did. And the reason we didn't get it was because we weren't supposed to get it, that's all.

Johnson: Was this during the '40's? When was this?

Benson: It was 1939.

You know, I think I've got kind of an interesting story to tell about economists. Economists can't always be right either, you know. I think that's rather .... Their predictions are quite often wrong.

In 19--, I suppose it was 1937, the President - Roosevelt - and Henry Morgenthau, the Secretary of the Treasury, announced that there was going to be a retrenchment program. They were going to pull in on WPA and pull back on - what are the other, all the Triple A, and well, all the government spending programs. And their advisor at that time was Professor Jacob Leiner of the University of Chicago. Well, I don't remember now how we got together, but I think there were seven or eight
governors got together in Governor Lehman's home in New York City. We were all opposed to this retrenchment program, of course. I don't remember how we got together. But anyway we did, and all day we discussed this proposed program with the President and we decided at the end of the day that Lehman, who knew Roosevelt intimately, should call him up and tell him we wanted to see him.

So he did, and we had lunch with the President the next noon. And we talked and the President .... He was really in a good spirit. He told stories and told stories, you know, story after story. Finally after a couple hours, a couple attendents came in with a wheelchair and lifted him into the chair. Lehman was sitting right next to the President and I was sitting next to Lehman, and he turned to me and he says, "Well, he's going." Yeah, sure. It's very apparent that he's going. He says, "We haven't talked to him about the subject that we came here to talk about." "No," I says, "that's true." "What will we do?" he said. "Well," I says, "you know him better than any of us. You better give it to him because he's going."

So Lehman did. Oh, he really laid it in to him. When he got through, I followed up, and Philip [?] followed then, and Governor Horner and well ... and Frank Murphy did. All of them did. So we kept him there a couple hours more. Then he turned us over to Morgenthau and Harry Hopkins and the Director of the Budget, they were all there too. Well, Morgenthau you know ... and when he left, finally left, the President didn't say yes or no. We just heard a lot of stories from him.

And then Morgan told me to talk to him. Well, Morgenthau just, he just clams up, he don't talk, you know Roosevelt used to call him "Henry the Morgue" you know, and it's right too. He just wouldn't talk. Then Harry - he was more slippery than the President - so we got no
place.

And on the way home that night - I took the train - the newspapers in Washington had big headlines - Seven or Eight Governors are Here; Spent all Day with the President, Opposed to Retrenchment Program. So when we went into the dining car, there was an insurance man from Minneapolis and an electrical engineer from Minneapolis that I had met on the train. Why, I knew the insurance man. And we went into the dining car and sat down, and there was a vacant chair next to me. And a fellow came in, and he asked if he could sit down here? And I said certainly. And these two fellows from Minneapolis were talking about the newspaper story, you know, and about this retrenchment program. Well, I was tired and I didn't say much of anything. Maybe I was hungry too, probably. I don't know.

But anyway, finally this fellow entered into the discussion with these fellows. Then he turned to me and he says, "Say, Governor Benson, you know I don't agree with this mission you've been on here in Washington." Well, I had already detected that the guy was a smart dude the way he was talking to these fellows. "Well," I said, "You seem to know who I am. I suppose I have a right to know who you are." "Yes," he says, "my name is Jacob Viner." "Oh," I says, "is that so? Well," I says, introducing these fellows, "this is Professor Viner from the University of Chicago. Well, professor, you know I've read quite a bit of your stuff, and I usually agree with you, [and] I know you've got all the answers today, but I just know I'm right."

So you can't argue with this fellows. Well, they did go into this retrenchment program, and the economy went all to pieces - in just a matter of days, you know, or weeks. And the claim is that they had to
spend five billion dollars to get the economy back to where it was.

So Jacob Viner, the brilliant man that he was, he was dead wrong, and so was Morgenthau and the President. And some of us ordinary guys, we probably didn't know a hundred reasons why it was the wrong thing to do, but we just knew it was wrong, that's all.

And I think that's true in so many things. Take this guy Rusk. He talks with such authority. Well, he doesn't know any ... and a lot of people think because he is Secretary of State, that his word is it. But he can be so wrong. And the same thing is certainly true of the man you mentioned earlier, and that is Humphrey. God, how wrong that guy can be, and still the people believe it. And on the farm question for instance, he pretends to be a friend of the farmer and all that, goes to these GTA meetings and they whoop it up for him. I'll never forget the letter that just a couple of years ago Bill Thatcher wrote to Humphrey just before the GTA was over. And he wrote a good letter asking him to explain why prices had gone the way they had after he had said they were going the opposite way.

Goff: Just two years ago you were here, and you said this and that. And this is what's happened, now why?

Benson: Now why? And when Humphrey got up to speak he just didn't say anything about ... he didn't answer anything and they ...

Goff: Cheered and ....

Benson: Sure. The farmers cheered and then Bill Thatcher got up and said, "I've just had the best answer I've ever received from any letter that I ever wrote." What are you going to do with such crooks? Bill Thatcher knew better than that. Bill's a shrewd guy. Course maybe he's getting senile. I haven't seen him for years. But I can't think he was so senile
that he didn't know that that wasn't an answer.

Pederson: That outfit has kind of sold out there, they're really a profit-making concern now, rather than a co-op, in the sense that they were intended to be, aren't they?

Benson: Why I suppose so. After all, they brought - Bill Thatcher brought Andreas in there to run things for awhile. Well, I'm sure he hadn't had ... I am sure that Andreas is not a ... he is no doubt a shrewd businessman, but I don't think his interests are with the farmer.

Fridley: What's the ... we'll bring this to a close shortly. Was the Black issue at all an issue?

Benson: No, not that I recall, no.

Fridley: Did you have any contacts with the Negro groups or ....

Benson: No, I knew Frank Boyd real well in St. Paul.

Goff: Outside of Billy Williams [aide to several governors] you probably ....

Benson: ... Billy Williams. Billy was a ....

Fridley: How about on the national scene?

Benson: Well, I naturally ... during my term as Governor I didn't know very many, no. Later I got to know Paul Robeson and, oh his wife ....

Goff: What was his name - with the Pullman workers?

Benson: Yes. Frank Boyd.

Goff: Frank Boyd, yes.

Benson: Anyhow, you are probably thinking of the national one, Phillip Randolph.

Goff: Yes. Phillip Randolph.

Benson: I didn't know him well, but I knew DuBois well, and Paul Robeson well. And then there were others that I don't recall right now.

Johnson: It wasn't a big issue at that time?
Benson: No, I don't think it was. No.

Pederson: Governor, you - this is an aside - you would be interested to know the Governor's office has been completely redone, refinished ....

Benson: Yes.

Pederson: The desk that I am using in Russ's office is the desk that Billy Williams used all ....

Benson: Is that so? Billy Williams, I thought, was a very able person, very ....

Pederson: Yes, I did know him somewhat. I used to be over there quite a bit, partly as a student, so I got to know him very well; heard many of his stories and descriptions of the paintings, and the gold leaf in the Capitol as it was being finished before he'd moved in.

Benson: A remarkable memory ....

Pederson: Yes.

Benson: ... for names and faces.

Pederson: Yes.

Fridley: A good storyteller.

Benson: Yes, a good storyteller.

Fridley: Well, I think we ought to bring this to a close.

Johnson: Yes, we've ....

Goff: We have tapped you very hard, so far.

Benson: [unclear] worked on it.

Fridley: It started out to be a social visit.

Benson: I wish you could have had something of this kind twenty-five years ago because I know I have deteriorated during the years. I know that; both physically and intellectually, don't you know?

Goff: You are in good shape today.
Benson: Thank you but ....

Goff: If you have deteriorated, I would very loved to have interviewed you twenty-five years ago.

Benson: You know half my brain doesn't work at all, any more.

[End of interview]