

“A Hard Kind of Negotiation”

Interviewee: John H. Sununu

Interview Date: June 8–9, 2000

Project: George H. W. Bush Oral History Project

President George H. W. Bush’s chief of staff John H. Sununu recalls working with Congress to pass the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Sununu describes the challenges faced and the relationships that helped pass the legislation.

John H. Sununu: ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990]. On the House side, Tony Coelho was a strong advocate of the rights of the disabled. In the Senate, [Edward M.] Kennedy was there. The first ADA bill looked like it had 110 Senators supporting it out of a hundred. Nobody had read anything but the title and how could you vote “no” for a piece of legislation called the Americans with Disabilities Act? But the first bill was terrible, the first draft. It created about a hundred new entitlements, slight exaggeration but only slight, and really, all of the problems it caused added to none of the real benefits that the disabled would get. I asked Dick Thornburgh to really have his people go over it and identify the problem areas. We got our legislative guys together and the first thing they did was go up and present the President’s version of the bill and tried to get Republicans to support it.

We finally did that. It was a very special kind of legislative battle. It was a very hard kind of negotiations because at no point did we ever think there were less than 90 votes for it. I’m very serious. I’m not exaggerating now. So almost anything would have gotten 90 votes and we’re struggling to build into it provisions that the business community was desperately coming to us with concerns about. But over time it evolved, and it evolved primarily because of the chairman, Kennedy, and his relationship, and the fact that he could have almost anything he wanted from his committee. And that worked out well.

End of excerpt.

Interview 1 with John H. Sununu, June 8–9, 2000, George H. W. Bush Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia. URL: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/john-h-sununu-oral-history-062000>