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Guest (s): Senator Carl T. Curtis (R-NE)

Title: Usurpation of Power by Federal Government

Note: Questions were paraphrased and/or shortened by the transcriber. For the exact question, please consult the audiotapes.

Morphew: Introduction...Senate Finance Committee, Committee on Government Operations and the Committee on Rules and Administration...to begin, are there fields where you believe the federal government is usurping the rights and responsibilities of the state governments?

Curtis: Oh, there's no question about that. Our federal government has just continued to grow and grow and grow. That's the reason they have usurped all of, not only function, not all but many of the functions that belong to the people locally and to the states but every available source of revenue. The federal government has laid their hands on it. Whenever you move government farther from the people you get poorer government and you get more costly government. I have faith in American citizens' ability to govern themselves and I do not think they need guardians and wet nurses in Washington to tell them how to do it.

Morphew: What are some of the fields in which the federal government is active which you feel would better be under the states?

Curtis: Well, as to the present time, I think that we should turn our attention to these new proposals, 'cause after all a program that's started and the states rely on it and individuals rely on it and communities rely on it, it's most difficult to change but one thing we can do, we can exert our efforts from making it worst. I believe that education is a state and local function primarily because I believe that the people in America who are more interested in good schools are the parents and I think that if we let the federal government move into that area, offering a little money now and it'll be added to a little more, sooner or later a bureau in Washington that no one knows, a bureau not elected by anyone will be determining curricula, they will be determining who will teach and what and that's one illustration of keeping power in the hands of the people.

Morphew: In the minds of those people who really know is there any doubt that federal aid eventually leads to federal control?

Curtis: It'll lead to it gradually. I think that they could write some safeguards and for a few years there wouldn't be too much, but little by little the federal government takes over and runs the show. That's been the history of all programs.

Morphew: Sort of like the camel getting into the tent?

Curtis: That's right. If you have any doubt about it, visit with one of your farmer friends. If 25 years ago he would have been told that farmers would be penalized, put in jail, had all sorts of penalties imposed on them and their farm regulated, it'd have been hard to believe. There's an existing program but I do not care to discuss now because it takes a lot of time but it's an example that the more the government puts into it the more Washington's going to have to say about it.

Morphew: What about this field of labor relations? Do you feel this is another example of the federal government exercising too much control?

Curtis: Well, I would divide in two parts. The Supreme Court, rightly or wrongly, have held in substance that with the passage of the Wagner Act, the minimum wage, the Taft-Hartley law, and more recently the Landrum-Griffin Act, that it's a federal question. So, we have to accept that fact now, and that's the reason that I served on the Labor Investigating Committee and I supported on the corrective legislation to stop hoodlums from robbing the honest working people of the country. Now I do think this, that too many local officials and now and then even a governor have been afraid of the political power of labor bosses and they have failed to maintain law and order. Now that's definitely a responsibility of the localities and the states. Uncle Sam just cannot regulate the traffic in every little hamlet and town in the country and he shouldn't. When there's labor trouble and windows are broken and trucks tipped over and people are beaten up, it is the responsibility of local communities and states to protect their citizens and their citizens' property and I'm sometimes irked when they come running to Washington asking Uncle Sam to police everything. So far as the collective bargaining and those fields already entered into the federal government's there and we have to face it and many of these things are, do cross state lines but much of the suffering coming from labor disturbances which are not the fault of rank and file working people but are the promoters and a few racketeers that have abused good organizations, good labor organizations, the localities and the states should face up to their responsibility to maintain law and order for the benefit of all the people.

Morphew: As a member of the Finance Committee, I know you are concerned with maintaining the economic strength of this nation. Is there any proposal which would help the government get on a more sound financial footing?

Curtis: Yes, I can mention two things. My home state of Nebraska has a constitutional provision against bonded indebtedness. We pay as you go. We have the most beautiful capitol in America and when it was completed, it was paid for. Our roads are paid for as we go. These states that issue bonds, they spend about a dollar and a half or about a dollar

and sixty cents and get a dollar's worth of roads because the rest goes for interest. And all through my congressional career I have tried to get a constitutional provision that would compel the federal government in peacetime to go on a pay as you go basis. At the present time Senator Byrd of Virginia, whom I regard as one of the nation's great, and another great man, Senator Bridges of New Hampshire and myself have sponsored a constitutional amendment which would force the federal government to live within their means in ordinary times. The reason we have to say 'in ordinary times' and 'in peacetime' is this, the states do not have a responsibility to defend to the country. That's a federal responsibility. It would be foolish to so tie our hands with an ironclad constitutional amendment that we couldn't use the credit of the United States if this country was at war and in danger. That's one. I have another bill, relates the item veto. Now many states have a provision that after the legislature passes an appropriation bill that the governor can veto certain items in there that he thinks are not necessary. That can be done on the federal level either of two ways. It can be done by a constitutional amendment, but there's another way. I have introduced a bill on that, it's had considerable approval, including the approval of the Bureau of the Budget under the Eisenhower administration and under the Kennedy administration. My bill provides that the president, if Congress is in session, can by executive order eliminate or reduce an item in an appropriation bill and that unless one House or the other overrides that action within sixty days, the president's action in eliminating that item, that item veto power, if you want to call it that, stands. Now the reason it's necessary to do that is because the constitution gives to the Congress the power over the purse strings, it gives them the last say on money matters, but it will have a very salutary effect because if the President makes a finding and regulation says, here this item isn't needed and it's necessary to balance the budget and to serve our economy, the attention is called to the whole country of that and then Congress must have a roll call and it'll be a great restraint on spending and even though the Congress might override him now and then, I think most of the time they would not.

Morphew: So much of the time the people in the states are told, let's go to Washington and get the money and people have the idea that federal aid means something for nothing...how would you explain this idea?

Curtis: Well, you're right. The only real money that the federal government has is that which it takes away from the people. And also I think some of the politicians promote that. I started out by saying I had faith in the people. I do not think they are demanding these programs that are being promoted. They know they cost money.