

*Forty years now a revered and independent leader in Vermont and the Nation's capital, is*

## AIKEN OF VERMONT

*Here interviewed  
by BERNARD SANDERS*

*George David Aiken, the ranking Republican in the U. S. Senate, is a Vermonter of 80 years, forty-one of them devoted to political office, the past 32 in Washington. But Aiken's intimate knowledge and understanding of Vermont and Vermonters still is matched by none.*

*In our independent tradition, he always has voted as his conscience dictated. As it is in Washington, Vermonters have returned to George Aiken an affection, admiration and support unparalleled in the long political annals of the State.*

—ED.

SANDERS — *Could you describe a little bit the Vermont that you knew as a child? Where you grew up and the style of life that existed then?*

AIKEN — Well, I think I described that in a speech that I gave at the World's Fair in New York in 1938. After several governors had spoken and told of the wonderful things they had in their states, it came my turn, and I said that Vermont may not have as much as some of these other states do, but what we have is paid for.

Of course, in the flood of 1927, when 80 people drowned and there were millions of dollars in damage, the state did have to go into debt. But we were on a pay-as-you-go basis up until a few years

ago when we were really forced into indebtedness. You can't keep up with your competition really without offering some of the things that they do.

S. — *Did you grow up on a farm?*

A. — Oh yes, yes. I never lived off the farm until I came to Washington. It was up on West Hill in the town of Putney. A small farm. You could learn quite a lot there. Got most of my education, my formal education, in a little red school house — No. 5. And we learned quite a lot of things you didn't learn in town.

S. — *How far was your home from the schoolhouse?*

A. — Then I had to go down to Putney Village. That was not quite four miles away.

S. — *How did you get to school?*

A. — Walked.

S. — *Through the snow?*

A. — Yes, sometimes snow up to your knees. Of course we didn't have busing, but we didn't have recreational facilities either. We got our exercise going to school and back.

I took three years of high school in Putney's new school house. It cost the town \$12,000, and everybody said how in the world are they ever going to pay for it? But they did. And I had one teacher for three years of high school in one room. I think there were three of us who finally got through the junior year there.

Then I went to Brattleboro for the final year of high school. That meant walking an extra mile to the depot and taking the train from Putney to Brattleboro. I think it cost us nine cents each way, every day. Of course that was a lot of money, but I finally made it. I do recall coming to Washington with the Senior Class — just before we graduated. President Taft was in the White House then and he shook hands with every one of us personally. Presidents don't do that anymore.

S. — *What are some of the strongest memories that you have from your childhood?*

A. — Oh, all of them, all of them. A big oak tree in back of the house on the top of the hill. Supposed to be about 550

years old. It was on the next farm but I own that tree now. I imagine it's the largest tree in Vermont and maybe the largest in New England. It's about seven feet in diameter two feet from the ground. And you learn a lot from that. You learn a lot that you don't get out of books.

S. — *You wrote a book, I believe, on wild flowers.*

A. — That was in 1933. I dictated it. The book still sells.

S. — *Where did you develop your interest in wild flowers? Did it come naturally?*

A. — Naturally. My father and mother always raised things. My father raised vegetables and peddled them down in the village. My mother always had a bigger flower garden than she could take care of. And then, in the District School, we had wild flower contests. We would see who could find them first and the most varieties. And that came naturally. I suppose I started when I was about five- or six-years-old in that field.

S. — *Let me ask you a question. Vermont, over the years, has changed considerably, of course . . .*

A. — Yes, it has changed. Of course the population has increased. More people are coming into Vermont now than are leaving it by several times over. I understand. And the situation has changed. Land values have changed. Land that used to be \$5 or \$10 an acre is \$5 or \$10 thousand an acre now, if it's rightly located, has a view or water on it anywhere.

S. — *How do you view the change? Does it make you sad?*

A. — Why I view the change as inevitable. You can't stop that change. The best we can do is try to guide it so that we can derive the most benefit and the least harm from the change. But certainly, when people say we won't permit any more change, we won't permit any more people to come into the state, that's nonsense. They can't stop it.

S. — *How did you get drawn into politics? Were your parents involved in politics?*

A. — I think there was an Aiken in the State Legislature about as far back as they had state legislatures. My father got into politics almost by accident in 1912. That was a Bull Moose year. He was a supporter of Teddy Roosevelt and somebody persuaded him to run for town representative from Putney. And he was elected, much to his surprise.

And I ran for the House in 1923 and didn't make it. Somebody said I would do away with our little district schools and I was so mad I wouldn't answer — so I lost by a few votes.

S. — *What happened between 1923 and 1931?*

A. — I tended the business — the nursery and the farm. And just got over losing the election. In 1923 I suppose I could have changed the course of my political career, but I never was any hand to deny accusations. But I got up there, to Montpelier, in 1931 and that was the year Vermont established a statewide highway system and put a state income tax into effect. And at that time — in the year 1931 — there was a proposal in the Legislature to construct about 80 dams on all the streams in Vermont, primarily on the Connecticut River system. Ostensibly they were for flood control purposes. Actually they were to benefit the power companies. And about that time I got the idea that somebody besides politicians ought to get involved in politics. In 1933 some of my friends thought that I ought to run for Speaker of the House.

S. — *This was after one term in the legislature?*

A. — After one term in the legislature. And I don't know why I did it, but my two opponents who wanted to be Speaker were both bankers and, you know, in 1933 a banker couldn't have been elected dog catcher anywhere. Everybody was mad at them. So I did get to be Speaker. Had a very good session. I recall I didn't have to rap for order at any time. Had no lawyers — oh yes, had two lawyers in the House — out of 248 members.

S. — *That's what I would like you to talk a little about. Now, in Vermont, as in all the states, legislatures are getting to be kind of professional, in that there are now relatively few farmers or small businessmen. What was the Legislature like in 1933?*

A. — Every town, large and small, had a representative. Of course we had the 30-member Senate then as we do now. But it so happens that it was the representatives from the small towns that usually had the experience, headed the committees and ran the Legislature. The larger towns were not in the habit of returning their members.

S. — *Was the composition of the Legislature then mostly farmers?*

A. — I'd say they predominated. As I say, in 1933 there were just two lawyers — three lawyers, but one died. Just two lawyers and, of course, they offset each other beautifully. So you might say we had no lawyers in the House. And two years later when I presided over the Senate as Lieutenant Governor we didn't have any lawyers in the Senate. In the House I'd say there were more farmers than anything else, because I know when

sap started running they wanted the Legislature to wind up so they could go home. In the Senate, though, you'd get more business people, store-keepers. I've forgotten exactly, but they were a good cross-section.

S. — *Is there any truth to the rumor that in the old days the small towns used to send to the Legislature those people who were on relief so that the town could save money?*

A. — Occasionally, yes, it was true. I remember when my father was a member of the House, one member from a nearby town didn't show up, and they found him down on the Winooski River cutting ice. Of course that wouldn't be permitted now because of the pollution.

S. — *Do you have any feelings about the quality of life in those days as compared to now? Do you think people were living better then? Were they happier than they are today?*

A. — No, no. They're better off now. The better off they get the more discontented they get. The more educated they get, the more they get discouraged with public life. The people are better off now. They wouldn't go back to the "good old days."

I have a standard answer to those who complain about not being able to attain their objectives right off. I say if you're not satisfied look over your shoulder and see where you came from. Do you want to go back 5 years, 10 years, 20 years — maybe 500 years? Do you want that? No, none of them wants to go back. They are — and that's a worldwide occurrence — living better than the human race has ever lived before. You can go into old cemeteries in Vermont and see rows of little headstones where a family of children was wiped out by a contagious disease — scarlet fever, diphtheria or something like that.

### **"The Pentagon wasn't telling [Truman] what was going on."**

S. — *What about the difference in politics in Vermont, say, from 1923 when you first began, and now? How has it changed?*

A. — Well of course the Legislature's been reduced in size. I think that probably was inevitable. But it takes away the identity of the towns. And here's another thing we'd better be careful about. The smaller the state legislature, the more the members become sitting ducks for lobbyists and big business.

S. — *What year did you first come to the U.S. Senate?*

A. — After I was Speaker in 1933-35 I was elected Lieutenant Governor and in

1937 Governor for 4 years (two terms), and then I came down here to the Senate. S. — *So you've served under quite a few presidents: Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and now Nixon. What personal reminiscences do you have of the various presidents?*

A. — Well, President Roosevelt didn't like me very well when I was Governor of Vermont because I objected to the federal government taking over everything in the state.

At that time they were going to move people off the land that couldn't support them properly, and take them off the hills and put them in the valleys, and take jurisdiction over the water and the land everywhere. And I objected very stren-

well indeed.

He was very strong for the St. Lawrence Seaway and power project, which the utility companies were very much opposed to. And I well recall that after he went down to Hot Springs that winter and I had constantly put in amendments and so forth — and bills — he sent a wire to me urging the Senate to approve the St. Lawrence Seaway project. And, of course, the Democratic leadership didn't think very much of that. So, we got along very well from the last, shall I say, the last November to the April that he lived. And then Harry Truman, whom I worked pretty closely with, came on as President. S. — *You knew Truman in the Senate, I imagine?*

A. — Yes, yes indeed. And I used to go down there at least once a week, just to talk with him. He was having very difficult times.

S. — *In what sense?*

A. — Well, for one reason, the Pentagon wasn't telling him what was going on with the war, although he was, constitutionally Commander in Chief of all our forces. So that was one thing. Another thing I recall is that Japan was trying to get out of the war, and he didn't know whether the American public would stand for our letting them get out of the war without invading Japan at an estimated cost of about 200,000 killed or wounded. So he called me down there in May. I had a couple of Memorial Day talks to give and I told him I'd sound the people out and see what they thought about letting Japan out of it, which I did. And there was no objection so far as I could see. And I reported back to him. But after that the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki came later in August, and the war ended.

S. — *Did you have any idea that the atom bomb was ready for use?*

A. — No, and at that time I don't think that he did either. I don't think that the Pentagon had even told him that the atom bomb was about ready. At that time Ernest Gibson was a Colonel in the Pentagon. I told the President that Ernest was over there and he said to bring him in, that he'd like to talk with him. So we went in one morning, and then he arranged with Ernest Gibson to fix things up through the Commanding Officer of G-2, General Clark, so that he would get a report every day on what was going on in the war.

S. — *You mean that he was that far away . . . ?*

A. — Oh, the Pentagon didn't think that Harry Truman had any business knowing about that war for the first two or three months he was President.

S. — *So he had to work outside of channels to get information about what was happening?*

A. — He got it, finally. He had to find the channels because, as I say, the Pentagon felt that it was *the* United States, or *the* whatever you want to call it, and they didn't think that the President had to know these things. I think times have changed a little in that respect.

S. — *And what about Eisenhower?*

A. — Ike was good. When he first came in as President I told him that I was not going to be telling him what he ought to do all the time, but that if I could help him at any time to let me know. He had Sherm Adams with him. Sherm was good. Sherm was born and raised in Windham County, Vermont, and his wife in Windsor County. I found him good. But, unfortunately, Sherm said "no" two or three times when the boys wanted him to say "yes" and, of course, they got him out of the White House.

But Ike was one of the better presidents. You could talk with him on the telephone, call him up, and he'd almost answer the telephone himself. He'd say: "I'll tend to that right away," and that was it. We look back on it now and find that we had eight years with no American killed in foreign countries because of war, no inflation during those eight years. He looks better every day.

Jack Kennedy, of course, had the office next to me and Jack and I got along fine, until he decided he wanted to run for President. And then, of course, he had to do things that we couldn't work together on very well.

S. — *You mean for political reasons?*

A. — Yes, when he got to be President he thought it was a grand social affair for about two or three months. And then they had the Bay of Pigs episode down in Cuba which didn't work to our advantage. The next day he called up and asked me to come down to visit and talk.

For the last six months before he was assassinated I talked with him very frequently. In fact I went to Moscow for him for the signing of the test ban treaty. He said he wouldn't send a Congressional delegation unless I did go, so I had to go.

**"Lyndon . . . loved to be asked but he didn't like to be told."**

After that, of course, we had Lyndon Johnson who was different from any of the others. I think I can describe Lyndon in a single sentence. He loved to be asked, but he didn't like to be told.

S. — *Was this true of him as a Senator as well as a President?*



Governor Aiken back home in Putney, 1937.

uously to that. In fact so many of us objected that it was not done. Then I know that President Roosevelt was very much upset because he proposed a highway over the tops of all our mountains, an extension of the Appalachian Highway, and we, Vermont, voted that down. He regretted that. After he was elected, though, the fourth time in 1944, the White House called up and asked me to come down. He just wanted to visit.

S. — *Had you met him personally before that?*

A. — Oh, yes. I'd met him before that, but not on favorable conditions. And I went down there and I stayed quite a while. I remember that his aide, General Watson, kept trying to get me out and the President wouldn't let him. After that, until he died, we got along very

A. — I think so. He was different. But he was awfully good in some respects. As far as rural development — the rural water bill, which the Budget Bureau was deadly against. He just snapped them into line one day and that legislation went through.

He used to ask me to go places for him. I went to Mexico I think twice. I went to Canada with him once. . . . He came up to New England on my birthday one year. Finally, I went around the world to visit the heads of state in 16 different countries with Senator Mansfield and three other members of the Senate at the request of President Johnson. . . .

And now we have Richard Nixon. I think he's doing pretty well — and I'll use the old Vermont escape clause — so far. Certainly he's had the benefit of his predecessor's mistakes. I want to say this: Although we got into a bad situation over in Indo-China, we went in with the

**“We can't stop people from coming into Vermont.”**

best of intentions to keep the North Vietnamese from slaughtering several hundred thousand more Catholics and people they considered persona non grata. We had a responsibility for those refugees we had moved, and we got into that war by trying to exercise that responsibility. And every time that President Kennedy or Johnson committed more troops and got us further involved, I'm sure they thought they were doing the right thing to bring the situation to a satisfactory conclusion. But it didn't work out that way.

S. — *Have any things happened in your political life which you've regretted — decisions which you've made which, in retrospect seem basically wrong, that you'd re-do if you had the chance?*

A. — That's a hard question to answer. I think everybody's made mistakes. I have found it good policy if you make a mistake to admit it right away and let people forget it. But so many people that make a mistake spend the rest of their lives trying to justify the mistake. It just doesn't work — it doesn't pay. I've often said that anyone in high position in government ought to make at least one mistake so that he could admit it.

When Jack Kennedy said that he was to blame for the fiasco at the Bay of Pigs, his stock went right up high in public estimation. Jack was not to blame for the fiasco at the Bay of Pigs. I know that. But he said he was. And then when the U-2 spy plane was brought down over Russia and President Eisenhower said; “Yes, that was our plane. We got caught.” That

was the end of it. Nobody blamed him anymore. We knew perfectly well that the Russians had their own system too — but when Ike said we got caught that was the end of it.

S. — *You talked a lot, in the book you wrote called Speaking From Vermont back in 1938, about the philosophy of self-reliance. Could you go into that a bit? Do you still feel the same basically or have you changed your views?*

A. — I have a copy of every talk I've given since 1936. I've got them bound, and once in a while I look back to see if I've changed my mind. I don't think so. Not the philosophy. You have to change your mind with changing circumstances — but I feel about the same now as I did then.

S. — *What does the philosophy of self-reliance mean to you?*

A. — Well, I don't think I'm the one to point that out. As I say right now, I'm concerned with the widening spread between the haves and the have-nots. Even though the have-nots are having better medical attention, better food, better clothing, better education than they ever had before, the spread is widening.

S. — *There was a time when Vermont was populated by small farmers who really ran their own farms, and sank or swam, depending on how well they did on their own efforts. That's not really the case anymore. People are now more dependent on employers or government.*

A. — I had a letter the other day from a person living in Vermont who wound up by saying; “It's about time that some hard-headed businessmen ran this government.” And I had to write back and tell him that when the shoe pinches those hard-headed businessmen are the first ones in Washington looking for federal assistance. And that is true.

S. — *Could you talk a little bit about your political campaigns and the fact that you are known to spend very little money on them?*

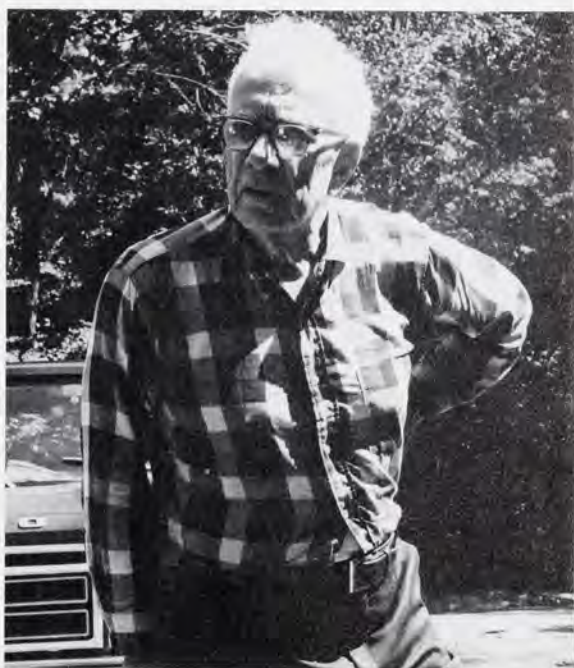
A. — Well, if I spent a lot of money in Vermont it would have reacted against me. I think what helped me in state-wide elections in Vermont at first was that I had about 10,000 customers for trees and plants in the state of Vermont. And I never talked politics to any extent. I simply talked about things of interest to the community. One big mistake that political parties make is trying to make all candidates subscribe to the same platform and the same ideas. And you just can't do it and win elections.

Although I've always run on the Republican ticket I feel when I get down here I represent all the people of the state

and I've been very fortunate in my relationship with the Democratic Party in Vermont.

S. — *There's been some discussion lately about the state of Vermont being, in a sense, dominated or over-run by out of state interests. For example, a lot of the large Vermont industries are selling out to out of state corporations.*

A. — As I say it's something that's inevitable. We can't stop people from coming into Vermont. They're coming more and more and more — and land values have gone up, and up and up. We can't stop it. We are trying to guide the influx so that we will keep Vermont as it was as far as we can, but still realize that changes are inevitable. . . . I hate to see Vermont



On his eightieth birthday.

JAMES SOPER

industries sell out to the conglomerates, but that is the order of the day. . . . We've paid a little price there. On the other hand we've got a lot of small industries still in Vermont, and coming into Vermont. We've got the recreational industry which is probably the fastest growing industry in the world. So that's a change you can't help. We do hate to see the old homeowned, home-grown industries fall into the hands of a giant corporation. But it's something we can't stop and it's a world-wide situation.

When you can't stop it — you've got to guide it. I used to say that if you stand on the track and see a train coming down you can do one of two things. You can stand still and get run over, or you can hop on it and try to control it. We've done pretty well in Vermont.