

George A. Smathers

United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969

Interview #2: From the House to the Senate

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Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie



U.S. Senate Historical Office
Senator Smathers with Administrative Assistant Scott Peek
Senate Historical Office

Ritchie: You grew up in the [Franklin Roosevelt](#) era, and you ran for Congress in the [Harry Truman](#) era. What did you consider yourself then? Did you think of yourself as a New Dealer or a Fair Dealer?

Smathers: I was always a Truman man. I had read about Roosevelt, and I saw him when I was a kid. He came through what was then the Great Smoky National Park. He was the fellow who did a magnificent job, later on it turns out, by sponsoring that whole area of the Appalachians as a park. My daddy and my mother both lived in Waynesville, North Carolina. So when I was a kid I saw Roosevelt come by, and I stood very close to him. He was in a roadster type car, and I had a chance to get within ten yards, or twelve yards of him. As a child I was very much impressed, but I never saw him after that.

Ritchie: But politically, how did you define yourself?

Smathers: How I defined myself? I did not define myself as . . . I was for Roosevelt, thought he was great, as did everybody. I didn't know anybody who wasn't for Roosevelt. When I went to college, of course, he was the president at that time. He was the president during the war. But I always thought he was a great man, that's just about all I know. I didn't know him like I knew these others fellows, so I can't tell you much about him. You asked me was I a New Dealer. The answer is no, not necessarily, but I wasn't anti. I just hadn't thought about it that much.

Ritchie: I did see a reference recently that your uncle said in 1942, when he lost his race, that it was mostly because of the anti-New Deal wave that year.

Smathers: He was a big New Dealer. My uncle, [Bill Smathers](#) from New Jersey, was very definitely a New Dealer, very definitely a Roosevelt man. But I wasn't. I don't know to me during those years, but I really wasn't as involved in politics as you would have thought I would have been, or probably should have been. But I just wasn't.

Ritchie: But you pretty much identified with Harry Truman's programs?

Smathers: Oh yes, very much, all of his programs. I was very much for his programs.

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Ritchie: When you went into the House of Representatives, your party was in the minority, for the first time in years.

Smathers: Right.

Ritchie: Did that have any impact on you, coming in as a new Congressman?

Smathers: Not especially. [Joe Martin](#) was the Speaker. He was a nice fellow. I never thought he was very efficient. [Sam Rayburn](#), who had been Speaker before and succeeded him later, was so much better as a Speaker. Joe Martin was constantly making little gaffs, making little mistakes, calling people by the wrong name, saying the wrong thing, and somebody was always having to correct him. He was a nice enough fellow, but I wasn't impressed with him at all, except as being a very nice guy. But he couldn't compare with Sam Rayburn, who later became Speaker, and of course John McCormack, who was then minority leader and became [majority leader](#). Naturally I was prejudiced considerably, being a Democrat, they being Republicans, but I've never been a great anti-Republican just because I've been a Democrat. Joe Martin was just a sweet fellow, but he was rather inept. [Charlie Halleck](#) was good, who was his assistant. Charlie from Indiana, he was very able, but Joe wasn't.

Ritchie: I was wondering, coming in as a freshman member of the House, does it make much difference if your party is the majority or the minority, or are you just pretty well down at the tail end no matter what?

Smathers: Oh, you're down at the tail end either way. But I still got a very good assignment, as I think I mentioned before. I was put on the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House, when [Sol Bloom](#) was the chairman. I think two years later after I got in there, the Democrats came into control. But the party wasn't a big thing, as far as I was concerned in those days. We all supported. . . I had been elected as a Democrat. I had run against a Republican. I don't even remember what his name was now, but it wasn't much of a race. Of course, my big race as had always been the case was in the Democratic primary. If you won the Democratic primary you almost automatically were the Congressman or the Senator. In those days, Republicans weren't very strong. So having Joe Martin as the Speaker, Charlie Halleck as I said was effective, very good. I don't remember anything else really significant.

Ritchie: Can you tell me a little more about Sam Rayburn, what your impressions were of him? Did you have much dealings with him?

Smathers: Well, actually I got to know Sam Rayburn a little bit as a member of the House. He told me, when I was thinking about running for the Senate, that I would be making a big mistake. He said that in the House you are much more effective than you are in the Senate. He thought that House service was much to be preferred over Senate service, and he listed off a long list of names of people who had been in the House who had gone to the Senate and

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hadn't amounted to much, had finally been defeated, and so on. He was a real House of Representatives man. He talked about legislation, tax legislation. He pointed out that all revenue bills had to originate in the House, and he would talk about that as being a very important thing. He said, "You're making a big mistake to give up your seat in the House." But I was not too impressed with that speech.

Now, after I went to the Senate, and when [Johnson](#) was majority leader, I got to know Rayburn a lot better, because I became very friendly with Johnson and Johnson moved me up very rapidly in the Senate. Johnson was continually in touch with Rayburn. He and Rayburn were very, very close. Johnson used to eat supper with Rayburn, it seemed to me about two times a week. Finally, Johnson got me in on that, which was of dubious value, or distinction, but I do remember Johnson would say, "Now we're going over and have a couple of drinks with Sam." We'd go over to Rayburn's office and we would have a couple of drinks, and Rayburn would always have a great big pail of onions, raw big round onions, and he would pull up the cuff of his coat and reach in there and pull one out, and ask, "Would you like an onion?" I don't know whether Johnson liked them or not, but

he would eat a raw onion. Sam Rayburn would sit there and peel it off. Mostly they looked to me like Vidalia onions. That was one of Sam Rayburn's fetishes. One of his little idiosyncrasies, that he liked those raw onions, and he would have those with his bourbon, and apparently do this every night.

A couple of times we went out to dinner at a restaurant or two around town. Johnson was always the fellow who made the arrangements. They would know when the Speaker showed up that they had to have onions. They would have them in a pot right beside his chair, never up on the table. He would reach in and feel these onions, and pull them out and hand them around to anybody who might want one. So during that period of time I got to know Rayburn a lot better than I did when I was a member of the House of Representatives.

But I got to know Rayburn primarily through Lyndon Johnson. This is why I said earlier that at one point in time Lyndon Johnson really ran the government. He controlled the Senate, there wasn't any doubt about it. Through Rayburn he controlled the House. [Eisenhower](#) was president, and Eisenhower listened to Johnson much more than he listened to any Republican senator, or any other Republican, so far as I know. So Johnson literally ran the government. He didn't call up and tell Eisenhower what he was going to do, or anything like that, but he was very persuasive with Eisenhower. Eisenhower would call him all the time and visit with him about various pieces of legislation, what they were.

We were all over at the White House to talk about the extension of Public Law 480, which was the agriculture bill where the government subsidized corn growers, wheat growers, it had been a big heavy item of debate and contention in both the House and the Senate. We went over there one day, Eisenhower apparently asked Johnson to come over and talk. . . no, I guess it was the other

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way around, Johnson said "I want to come over and talk to you about this." I guess that's what happened, but anyway, the scenario was that here we are sitting there, Lyndon Johnson, and [Hubert Humphrey](#), and myself, representing the Democrats, and [Bill Knowland](#) and [Tom Kuchel](#) and somebody else representing the Republicans, and the then Secretary of Agriculture.

Ritchie: Benson?

Smathers: Was it Ezra Benson?

Ritchie: Yes.

Smathers: He was there, and everybody was talking sort of at one time, it seemed though that was the case to me, but after we had discussed it back and forth, the Democrats got into a discussion with the Republicans about how far it

should extend and to just what type of farmers should it extend to. It had come down into the South. Johnson was trying to get it naturally to go all the way into Texas, to take care of whatever they were growing in Texas, he wanted to expand it to cattle farmers, cattle ranchers, and all that sort of thing. Eisenhower sat there and listened and after a while he finally said, "Lyndon, what the hell is Public Law 480 anyway?" We had been discussing 480 but nobody had called it 480, it was just the farm bill, but every now and then somebody would say Public Law 480, and Eisenhower sat there--I was amazed--for thirty minutes apparently he wasn't sure what the hell we were talking about. I think Rayburn was there from the House, there were House people there too, a couple of House guys.

You ask me about my service in the House of Representatives. That's when I really began to become greatly interested in South America. Miami, of course, was my home and my home district. It was close to South America. Key West, I represented, was ninety miles from Cuba. It was very normal, it seems to me, for me to become interested in Latin America, which I did. Sol Bloom let me make a trip to Latin America. I went another time with Jack Kennedy to Cuba. Bill Thompson and Jack Kennedy and myself, and I think a boy named Roy Anderson was with us from Palm Beach. We didn't do much on that, we had a nice time, and we met all the governing people in Cuba. I made another trip to Central America, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, as a member of that committee, and filed some sort of a report, recommending that we give some further consideration. That's when I first began to develop the theme that we should put less emphasis on East-West trade and more emphasis on North-South trade. It was very apparent to me that the Latin countries actually had no better country to trade with than the United States. We needed very much, and still do, to help them become more industrialized, to help them become more sophisticated, and they really would be on our side in all of these confrontations, in those days, with the Soviet Union, and with the rest of the world. The Latins would more normally be with us.

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Also I think I told you about making a trip to Berlin with the Senate side, [Scott Lucas](#) who was then the majority leader of the Senate and [Bill Fulbright](#), who I don't think was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee at that time, but shortly was to become chairman.

The things that I did in the House I'm having looked up now. I guess the thing that I accomplished was the final realization of the creation of the Everglades National Park. That was of course, much of it, in my district. It had originally been the idea of Congressman [Mark Wilcox](#), who was the Congressman who preceded [Pat Cannon](#), as the Congressman from that District. Mark Wilcox was a very able fellow. Little bit of a fellow, only about five foot two, had a great big voice, marvelous speaker. I remember hearing him a number of times, and he talked about the creation of the Everglades National Park, preserving the Everglades. He was the man who originated the idea, and who got it started,

however it did not become law until 1947, at which time I was the Congressman. Pat Cannon, and there was somebody else in between, a lady who was William Jennings Bryan's step daughter or something, she served one term [[Ruth Bryan Owen](#), 1929-1931]. Maybe she was before Mark, I don't know. But anyway, Mark was the originator of the Everglades National Park idea. Senator [Holland](#), who was then governor, was much for it. When he got to be senator he picked up the idea. It became law in 1947 finally, so naturally it fell to me to introduce the legislation, which I did, so I was in effect the sponsor of the Everglades National Park. It was not originally my idea, but it was a great idea. It's still one of the great parks, and will be.

Ritchie: I was interested to see that your maiden speech in the House was in favor of a defense bill. Republicans were talking about cutting President Truman's defense spending, and you stood up to speak in favor of retaining the President's proposal.

Smathers: Yes. I was very much of a Truman man. I got to know him really after I got to the House of Representatives. I did not know Harry Truman prior to my election. But I liked him right away and I always have liked what he stood for. I particularly liked his ideas with respect to defense. I was very much on his side with his concern, as was Churchill's concern, about the incursion of the Soviet Union from the east into the western part of Europe, from their obvious--at that time--statements that they could take over the world. Some people believed it, and some people didn't. I'm one of those who believed what Truman was doing was the right thing to do. I was for him when he dropped the atomic bomb, I didn't know him of course, I was in the service when that happened, but I thought that was the right thing to do, I always did. I liked him and admired him, of course still do. He's my very favorite president.

Ritchie: I was going to ask you about your interest in South America at that time. Did you see that as primarily an economic issue, or was it also a national security issue?

Smathers: It was also a national security issue. See, the United Nations was created just at that time when I came in. That was Truman who went to San Francisco and made a big speech, signed some bills, and everything like that. But it was very evident that we were going to need votes, we being the United States of America, in all of the issues that came up. And it looked to me that the best way we could get the votes was to get those of the Latin American countries whom everybody had ignored up to that time. So to me it was a political step that should have been taken, and should have been taken a long time before I began to talk about it. In addition to that, it's an economic problem, not a problem but an economic issue that in time has already proven to be a big economic issue, and it's going to be even bigger.

Now, how's it going to be bigger? I'll tell you how it's going to be bigger. When they create this European Community, which is coming into being in 1991 or 92, and when all the countries of Western Europe, and pretty soon they'll bring in the Soviet Union with them, there are going to be no more economic barriers between these countries. There are going to be no tariffs. They're all going to be producing that which they produce best. You're going to find one of the countries, Germany, will probably end up producing all of the cars, and Italy will wind up producing all of the clothes, and France will end up producing all the wine, and so on. They're going to then say: Look, we're not going to trade with the United States, we don't have to trade with the United States. We are fourteen countries over here who are now against the rest of the world--and the rest of the world is not well off economically except for the United States.

At that point, when these barriers, which mark my word will come down, trade between the United States, France, Italy, Germany, Great Britain is going to be more difficult. When that comes on, we're going to have to hope that we've developed considerable trade with the Latin countries, all the way to Argentina and down into Chile and those countries that still have a lot of the basic things that we have to have. They're going to be our market when the Europeans stop buying from us. That's coming, but I've talked about that long before this. Eventually, you're a young man, you'll live to see the day when we're going to need trade partners very badly, and the best trade partners we'll have will be those countries, from Mexico right on down.

Ritchie: When you started talking about Latin America, how receptive was the rest of the Congress? Was it a big issue as far as Congress was concerned?

Smathers: No, oh no. No issue. It was sort of a humorous issue, as a matter of fact. When I see [Vance Hartke](#), the senator from Indiana, when I see him even today, he says, "Hello there, the Senator from Latin America, how are you?" One day he was presiding in the Senate, and I was trying for some reason to gain recognition to make some sort of a speech or do something, I forget what it was precisely. Hartke was presiding, which was the job of all the junior senators. Nobody ever wanted to preside, because it was a very boring job just

listening to one senator after another make a speech. Then sometimes you had a vote. When you did have a tough vote, why the vice president would come in and decide it, or the senior presiding officer [[president pro tempore](#)] would preside. But anyway, I was out there seeking recognition one day. I kept calling, "Mr. President, Mr. President." Finally he said in exasperation, "The chair will now recognize the Senator from Latin America." There must have been fifty, sixty senators on the floor, and they all broke out laughing. That was written up in some of the papers, so I got to be called the Senator from Latin America. A lot of

people even say it today, Hartke still calls me that. But that's when I got interested in Latin America, as a Congressman, and later as a senator.

Ritchie: You were a Congressman from Miami, which was even then I suspect the most liberal part of the state of Florida.

Smathers: Right.

Ritchie: When you started to think about running for office statewide, did you have to adjust, to in a sense package yourself for the whole state?

Smathers: Well, I had gone to school at the University of Florida, like my father had wanted, and for the very reasons that he said he proved to be very prophetic. I had been up at Gainesville, Florida, which is the northern end of the state, for six years. I had been, as I told you before, president of the student body and active in politics. So when I began to run statewide I did know people all from all over the state very well. Then when I began to think about it and call these people who were former classmates of mine, in the university together, I would ask them what were they thinking about, like in Pensacola, or in Milton, Florida, or Tallahassee, or Panama City, or some of those far western counties in our state, they were all very conservative.

They had previously been [Claude Pepper](#)'s main support, and I could tell that they had become totally disenamored with him. They were very disappointed in his constant bragging about the Soviet Union, and about Joe Stalin, saying you've got to pray for Joe Stalin. He made that speech in Tallahassee, Florida, which is in the northern end of the state. But I knew that he was also very strong in my home district. That proved to be the case when we ran in 1950. There were ninety-eight precincts. I carried something like seventy-five of them. Claude got some votes in all of those seventy-five, but I carried them by a pretty substantial majority. The remaining twenty or twenty one, which were the minority groups, the black community, the Jewish community, he carried them so heavily that while I counted more precincts spread out over the county, he carried a certain segment of them so heavily that he actually won the whole county. He won my home county in that race in 1950. I, interestingly enough, carried his county, his area of the state. The area up there that he normally had been strong in, I carried all that. He carried my

home county, not by a big vote but by a good vote, but I still carried more of the precincts spread out around the county.

But you were right that Dade County was the most liberal county in the state, has been, is today. Today it's changing somewhat, it hasn't changed completely, but because of the influx of the Cubans, who are all conservative and Republicans.

The county now is having a big fight remaining Democratic. Claude, had he lived, would have been reelected easily, because he had two careers. His first career as a senator was the one that I stopped him on, but after he stayed out eight years--Holland, as I told you, beat him in 1958--then he got elected in 1962 to the House from the Miami district, a rather liberal district. Then he began speaking for the elderly people and all that sort of thing, and he was really a tremendously effective Congressman. There was no way that anybody would have beaten him. They're running for his seat now, today the Democrats are having a vote to see which Democrat will succeed him, but the chances are whichever Democrat succeeds him, the Republicans are going to win anyway. They could have never beat Claude, but they can beat whomever is the Democratic nominee, I do believe. That's not for quotation in publication before the election or anything, but that's just what it looks like to me now.

So the Cubans have brought about a political change, and I'm the guy that brought most of the Cubans in there. I'm not saying it just exactly right, but when Castro came in, I was the first and only voice in the United States Congress that spoke out against Castro in 1959 and 1960, when he was being feted and wined and dined by the American Society of Newspaper Editors and all the big groups. I knew what he was and I knew what he was going to be, but I couldn't get anybody to believe me that this guy's a bad guy. But when he began to persecute the people down there who had opposed him, they began to try to get out. I introduced legislation which made it possible for anyone who moved out of Cuba because of political persecution to stay in this country and not get thrown out by the INS, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, they could stay as long as if they returned to the country from which they came they would be politically persecuted. So bunches of them came, and to this day I would say that I'm a very popular guy with these Latins, and I think deservedly so, because not only was there this Cuban thing, but I was also for better trade, better relations with all the countries of Latin America.

Ritchie: You mentioned Pepper's strength in the minority districts; how important was civil rights as an issue in that 1950 campaign?

Smathers: In the 1950 campaign?

Ritchie: Yes.

Smathers: In the 1950 campaign interestingly enough it was not very much of an issue because neither one of us wanted to make it an issue. See, in 1950 the state was very conservative. Pepper had been very liberal, so he did not

want to talk about it. I, being from Miami, was somewhat liberal myself. I didn't particularly want to talk about it. The result was that he and I did not discuss civil

rights. I don't think he ever made a speech in which he referred to me as either strong or soft on civil rights. I know I never made a speech about him and his advocacy of civil rights. He was a strong civil rights guy. I was sort of strong civil rights, coming from Miami. I had the liberal part of the state. But I believed it anyway. And in 1964, when the first big civil rights bill passed, I voted for it.

Now in the 1944 race that Pepper ran against Ollie Edmunds, they used that against Pepper, his civil rights advocacy, very strongly. But it didn't hurt him that badly. They put out pictures of him shaking hands with blacks and that sort of thing. We didn't do that in our campaign, however, in 1950 there was a little of that done, but not by the Smathers campaign. It was done by Mr. Ed Ball, and a guy named Dan Crisp, who's still alive, lives in Jacksonville, will tell you that he's the guy that put out this thing called "The Red Record of Claude Pepper." That was the same thing they used in 1944. In 1944 I wasn't even there, I was overseas. But in my race, neither Claude nor I talked about civil rights very much because we were both civil rights advocates.

Ritchie: You mentioned Ed Ball. Pepper in his memoirs really puts much of the blame for his defeat on Ball.

Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: What was Ball's role in Florida politics at that time?

Smathers: He was the chief executor of the DuPont Estate. Now, the DuPont Estate owned large land holdings. In the far western part of the state the DuPonts still have the St. Joe Paper Company, they still have something like 400,000 acres. They still have that. Ed Ball and the DuPont Estate bought much land, particularly around Duval County in the northern end of the state. They bought the Florida East Coast Railroad, took it out of bankruptcy, and Ed Ball ran that. But Ed Ball was a real hater. He didn't like Pepper. They had previously been friends, but in somewhere back during World War II they fell out over a labor issue that had to do with the Florida East Coast Railroad. Claude went for the railway unions, and it made Mr. Ball mad. He then turned on Claude. Mr. Ball, I think helped finance the race of Ollie Edmunds, who was a circuit court judge down there in Deland, Florida, and had been president of Stetson University. Mr. Ball got him in the race, it was reported--I don't know this, I was overseas at this time and didn't know anything about this, but this was the word that went around. Mr. Ball got Ollie Edmunds to run. Pepper beat him ten to one, easy race. Then when I came along, I didn't know Mr. Ball. I had met Mr. Ball one time and we didn't talk politics, we talked about a business thing.

I was the first owner of the first television station in Florida, along with my public relations man--along with a public relations man--named Bob Vin, who

had talked me into applying for a television license from the FCC in 1945. The month that I got back from the war I saw Bob Vin. I had known him prior to the war very well. He had run the biggest radio station in Miami. He said to me, "George, there's a new thing that we ought to get into. I'm going to take you in, you're a nice guy." And he named two other people that would go in with us. He said, "We each have to put up something like eight thousand dollars and we can get this license for television." Well, I went in with him, and lo and behold we got the license. Well, by golly, I couldn't believe that. I decided shortly after that I wanted to run for Congress, so I wanted to get my money out, that eight thousand dollars I'd put up. I thought: who can I sell my interest in it to?

Somebody said: Mr. Ed Ball is the richest guy, he's the head of the DuPont Estate, and you used to be in the DuPont Building, why don't you see if you can see him? He also owned the Florida National Bank, so I went to the Florida National Bank to ask when Mr. Ball was coming to town. They said yes, he comes once a month. Well, I wonder if I could have fifteen minutes of his time? They said, yes you can. So Bob Vin and I went to see Mr. Ball, who's supposed to be the smartest guy ever. "Mr. Ball, here's this new thing called television. This is the first station south of Atlanta. The only station south of Atlanta. We're going to make a lot of money with this, but I want to do this, and Bob wants to do that, and we want to sell it to you. I will sell it to you for eight thousand (Bob wanted twelve for his share)." Mr. Ball, I remember him saying, said, "Well, gentlemen, you're very nice to come to see me, but we don't fool around with these newfangled ideas. We just don't have time for this kind of speculative thing."

Okay, so I didn't sell it to him. That's my one and only visit with him until after I had won the Senate seat, much later. This was after I had been in Congress and everything. I took that eight thousand dollar interest I had and sold it to a guy name Mitchell Wolfson, who owned all the theaters. He bought it, and Mitch Wolfson got it going, got a CBS affiliation. He sold it now about ten years ago for \$164 million. \$164 million! To this day my name is the first one on that license. It was Bob Vin and me and we owned that station, and I got eight thousand dollars. \$164 million. Anyway, that was my first contact with Mr. Ball, trying to sell him that, and he didn't buy it. I never saw him again until, oh, I venture to say after I won the election, had been sworn in, had been a senator for maybe a year or two. I never saw Mr. Ball.

Slowly, you know, at state Chamber of Commerce meetings I'd be the speaker and he'd be one of the people who were there, along with all the other members of the Chambers of Commerce, and that sort of thing. And there were several people who were good friends of his that became good friends of mine. So I slowly began to know Mr. Ball, and got to liking Mr. Ball better and better as I knew him. But he was a crotchety little old fellow. He hated Claude Pepper. He was the most conservative man I ever knew, Ed Ball. He was against anything that the government was involved in. He didn't like Roosevelt, he didn't like Truman, he was a deep, dyed-in-the-wool Republican. So only in

the late years of my life did I get to know him. Then I don't know how exactly but he introduced me to a lot of interesting people. He introduced me to Armand Hammer, who's ninety-two years old I see and who's just got himself a pardon from George Bush for his having given money to Nixon's campaign. But Mr. Ball introduced me to him, he introduced me to one of the Arab sheiks who came over here and stayed at the Carlton Hotel. Mr. Ball used to keep an apartment at the Carlton Hotel all the time, that is the DuPont Estate did, that was Mr. Ball.

Of course, everything that they had, it wasn't any great brain power actually, he just bought everything up in Florida and as Florida grew it just got enormously valuable. That's what's happened today, the Florida East Coast is now making money for the first time. He took that out of bankruptcy. He went out and bought all the bonds and took it out of bankruptcy and bought it for practically nothing. But he lived with it for twenty years when it was losing money. Now it's really making money. But all that land that it owns, all the way from Jacksonville to Key West, right downtown of everyone of those cities all the way down. That real estate is so valuable you just can't believe it.

Anyway, I didn't know Ball well, but he hated Pepper. He ran his own. . . he did his own thing against Pepper. I hope somebody will get Dan Crisp on record, because he's still alive, and he was the fellow who managed all the things for Mr. Ball. He'll be frank to tell you about it.

Ritchie: So they really ran an independent campaign.

Smathers: Yes, they ran an independent campaign. They weren't for me, they were against Claude. That was their big thing, they were just against Claude. Up in the northern panhandle area they put out a lot of stuff about Claude that undoubtedly hurt Claude.

Ritchie: He was an interesting character. I guess Florida was a much smaller state in terms of population and everything else at that stage, and someone like Ball could be an incredible power in the state.

Smathers: Big power. Particularly in west Florida. He wasn't so big down in Southland, Miami, Palm Beach and those areas, no. He didn't spend any time down there, although his railroad did have some property, but he didn't do much in that area. But he loved west Florida. He had a big personal ranch in Leon County, which is outside of Tallahassee, magnificent farm. As I said, they had about 400,000 acres out there at the St. Joe Paper Company. They had property up in Georgia, way across Georgia, all around up in there. He loved property, and he believed in property. He took the DuPont Estate from I don't know what it was in the beginning but he made it into a billion-dollar operation.

Ritchie: It wasn't very smart of Pepper to cross him, I suppose.

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Smathers: Well, actually, he didn't have that much influence truthfully. He was a guy who sat in his office. He didn't go out, nobody knew him. He didn't like anybody that was halfway even close to middle of the road. He was an extreme rightist.

Ritchie: How would you describe Florida at that stage? Was Florida really a southern state?

Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: Was it comparable say to Georgia and Alabama?

Smathers: Yes, in those days more so than it is today. See, all the people who move into the state, and we're going to be the fourth largest state in the Union in the census of 1990. We have a thousand people a day moving into the state. These people are coming in, most of them from the midwest, as you look at Idaho and Iowa and places that are losing population, we're gaining population. So our state is actually becoming now more of a Republican state. It's more conservative today economically than it was when I ran. It was conservative on civil rights issues, and conservative on communism. The big issue that defeated Pepper was his position with respect to the Soviet Union. That's what actually did him in. I tried to tell him that. I wish you people would someday, if you want to get picture of the campaign, would talk to Pepper's administrative assistant, for five years before I ran against him. That was Bob Fokes who is in Tallahassee who is alive today, and who can really tell you a lot about Claude's transformation and what finally did him in. I went to see Folks, told Fokes this. I said, "Claude's going to lose if he's not careful. He can't go against Churchill. He can't go against Truman. He's fighting a losing battle, and nobody believes that you've got to be soft on communism." And Claude was preaching that. That was his whole thing. That's what did him in. You could have never beaten Claude on any other issue than that, because he voted all the right issues. He was for civil rights, but he never let himself get so far out in front that it would enable somebody to beat him. So he would speak very conservatively when he was in Florida. He would speak very liberally when he was in New York. But I never faulted him on civil rights at all.

Ritchie: I know there were a lot of southern liberals, like [Lister Hill](#) and Fulbright and others, who always felt that was one area they couldn't touch. They couldn't keep a career if they got involved in the issue.

Smathers: That's right. You couldn't win. You couldn't get reelected. That was when they still separated the schools, they separated the restaurants, separated the rest rooms. I remember that very well. I didn't particularly like it. I had grown

up. . . a lot of southerners. . . actually, I think the southerners like the black people better than the northern people do. The southerners have lived with black people, they've grown up with black people. I grew up with a black guy named J.R. Franklin, who, until I was seventeen years old, was my

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very best friend. He lived with us. He lived in our house. He had a room just like I did, and he went to school, and we worked together, and we fought together, played together, and so on. Lot of southern white families looked down to their black families with great pride. They'd work with them, right along side of them day after day. They would go to church with them. Some of the white guys would sleep with some of the black girls, and vice versa, but somehow, they didn't want to be seen on Main Street with their arms around each other or anything like that. It was just bigotry.

There was a day when I'm sure that people back in the old plantation days when the blacks on a plantation outnumbered the whites, and the white guys were always afraid if we didn't keep the blacks beat down, that they were liable to physically come in and throw us out and hurt us. I think that was one of the reasons that it grew up the way it did. But I know this, that today I go to Chicago, and I go to New York, and I go to St. Louis, and I see that they've got segregation that's almost worse than anything we had in the south. While they profess to be equal and all that, they don't practice it, and they are really more fearful of blacks. The southerners aren't fearful of blacks. The southern knows blacks. They associate with them. They always have. As I said, I grew up with them. Wrestled and boxed and played baseball and stuff. It was only till we went to high school that we began to separate. And now they don't do that, they don't separate now at all. That's why you see blacks moving from Chicago back to North Carolina, from New York back to South Carolina, because they are really better understood by the southern people, and the southern people like them, they don't dislike them at all. Anyway, I didn't mean to get off on that.

Ritchie: Part of it is just looking at the state in a different period of time.

Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: In 1950, Florida was almost a completely different state, it seems to me, than it is today.

Smathers: Exactly, a different state. Today, see, the Democrats can't win in Florida. They did not win our most recent senatorial election, the Republican won. They've got a Republican governor. After the next legislature we're probably going to have a Republican-dominated legislature. So a Democrat like me, you know, I'd be in a minority. I would be having a hard time, except that my middle-of-the-road thing would have appealed to them. A lot of those now-Republicans

were Democrats. But the Democrats kind of run on their own, as they're doing throughout the south. You look at [Sam Nunn](#), he'll tell you that the current Democratic party, and current Democratic national leadership is making it very difficult for a southern Democrat in Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina. A well-known southerner would have a hard time, because of the national picture.

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Ritchie: Well, there was a split between the southern Democrats and the national Democrats as early as '48, at the convention, when [Strom Thurmond](#) led the walkout, so there's some roots to the current differences.

Smathers: That's right. It's there, no question about it.

Ritchie: Once you were elected to the Senate, to go back to that comment that Sam Rayburn said you should stay in the House because it was better in the House. Having served in both, what is the difference between being a member of the Senate and the House?

Smathers: Well, naturally, having served eighteen years in the Senate and four years in the House, I think there's substantial difference. The fact that you have from Florida today two United States senators, and you're going to have twenty-three or something, after this next census, Congressmen. The big difference is that in being a Congressman the issues are not different, the issues are the same. When they have a civil rights bill it's got to pass both the House and the Senate, when they have an appropriations bill it's got to pass both houses, and so on, so that everybody gets to vote on it.

The difficulty in running in a state like--or you might say the advantage; to me it was a difficulty--like Florida, where you have one end of the state, the Miami-Ft. Lauderdale area, which is quite liberal, and you go eight hundred miles away and you're still in the same state, and that part of the state is bounded on the west side by Alabama and on the north side by Georgia, you've got a totally different atmosphere in terms of the thinking of the people. In the northern part of the state, the country area we've got there, it's sort of conservative, a lot of them farmers, that sort of thing, very conservative. You come on down to Miami, and you have all the people who have moved in from New York City and who have moved in from Chicago, and they are much more liberal in their thinking. You run statewide and you have to adjust yourselves to the two parts of the state. It used to be that a fellow could make a certain type of a speech (Claude Pepper was very good at this) in the southern part of the state and go to the northern part of the state and you wouldn't think it was the same fellow talking about the state.

That's Florida, now you take Massachusetts, which I used to tease my friend Jack Kennedy about. He could get on one damn television station and he would not

only cover the whole state of Massachusetts, but he would cover into New Hampshire, and Vermont, and Rhode Island, and all the rest of them. And it's eight hundred miles traveling from Key West up to Jacksonville, and then going from Jacksonville over to Pensacola. Jack Kennedy could go from the southern end of his state to the northern border and it was only about I think sixty-eight miles, or something like that. And you go from the coast all the way in as far as you could go, going west, and it was only about a hundred and thirty miles. And he could get on any station in Boston and cover the whole area, not only his Congressional district but the whole state. Now you talk about politicking and the physical demands of politicking in those kinds of states are so different you

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can't believe it. It is a real chore. It's gotten easier because of television, but in 1950 when you had to physically go from Monroe County, which is Key West, and go all the way to Escambia County, which is Pensacola, there was no way you could travel in a car and do that in less than three days. And by the time you stopped and spoke all along the way, it was a real physical drain. So it was tough. I forget what your question was.

Ritchie: It was the comparison between being a senator and a member of the House.

Smathers: Oh, yes. So in Florida, you have these distantly related geographical areas which are as different in their thinking as if you were moving from one state to another. And yet you have to accomplish getting along with both ends of that state. This was the difficulty we've all had, I mean everybody that's ever run in Florida has had the difficulty. As a Congressman, you have a smaller district, and its geographic size is depended upon how heavily populated it is. If it's heavily populated, like Jack Kennedy's district up in Massachusetts, they were pretty much all of the same mind. You know, you get the right level of thinking at that point: they feel this way about religion, they feel this way about civil rights, and its a homogenous type of reaction. You take a big district like Miami when I first had it, this is not too good an illustration, I went from Miami to Key West, and of course they pretty much thought the same, and all the way over to Naples and Fort Myers, which is now very Republican. In that day they had no people over there.

But to try to answer your question, obviously it's much more difficult being a senator. Your area is bigger, your diversity of views is greater, it's more difficult. Being a Congressman, once you get into being a Congressman you can work that district today like they do and you are not defeated. I think the best proof of that is that in the last Congressional races there was only a change of one percent. Hardly ever does an incumbent Congressman get defeated anymore, because they develop this homogenous viewpoint, and theh're hitting it everyday. It's easier to hit because it's a small district, even though its heavily populated. If they can get

the endorsement of one paper, that's enough. When I ran against Claude, I think I told you this before, there were forty-two daily newspapers in the state. Forty-two daily newspapers. I was endorsed by thirty-eight of them. But Claude just helped me get that because I didn't know all thirty-eight of those editors, but they didn't like what he was saying. And it wasn't because his sister was a thespian, or he practiced celibacy, or he was an octogenarian, or whatever.

Ritchie: Well, as a senator, do you have more power of authority than you do as a member of the House?

Smathers: Oh, sure. Infinitely more. You appoint judges. You appoint U.S. marshals. You have a say-so as to who's going to be the immigration officer in Miami. You have some input into all the appointments. Any appointment that has to be confirmed you have infinitely more influence. No,

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being a senator is an infinitely more desirable, and influential, and powerful job than being a Congressman.

Ritchie: Was being a Congressman more restrictive, in the sense that you were limited to the topics that your committees were dealing with?

Smathers: Yes. And you were limited in the sense that everybody's first obligation was to represent their constituency, and your constituency is more homogeneous. It's not that divided, not that cut up. As a matter of fact, the legislatures, when they make a district, they kinda try to get the people of certain beliefs pretty well into one district. So it's much easier, much easier, and much less important. But they still get the same salary, so it's all right financially!

Ritchie: How would you describe the U.S. Senate that you first came to in 1951?

Smathers: Well, it was infinitely more of a club atmosphere than it was when I left it. It was much more respectful of seniority, and because of that you could actually get more done. I think democracy is a great thing, but I also think that you can have too much democracy so that you don't get anything done. And that's what's happened to the Senate today. They have a very difficult time building up a consensus because each of the senators now the minute he gets there they give him some sort of a subcommittee with a staff and he starts out having his own hearings and running things the way he wants to run them, gets a lot of publicity on that, and he becomes quite a factor. And when you have a hundred fellows, each of whom thinks he is--and technically he is--as important or better than anybody else, you've got a problem in trying to get things done. There's nobody who wants to say: Well, now, look, this man is an expert, he's the man who's made the study of this, this is what he found, and I'm going to vote with him. Now, each guy says: Well, no, I've had my own staff study it, and I've had this and

this and this. So everybody has got to speak on everything. Result is you can't build a consensus as well.

It used to be when Lyndon Johnson was there that the word would go out that Johnson wanted everybody to vote a certain way. And unless they were experts in some field they would vote that way. Certainly when Sam Rayburn was Speaker of House, he passed the word along that this was what he wanted the Democrats to do, and they would generally do that. Now, there would be some situations where a Congressman would feel as though he could not do it, it was against the best interest of his district, or he could not survive in his district if he voted a certain way, and he wouldn't, but that would be a rare occasion. So you had leadership that controlled the Congress and you could get more things done more expeditiously than you do today. These interminable speeches and arguments, and everybody's an expert on everything today!

Ritchie: You came in during the period when freshman senators were generally advised to keep quiet.

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Smathers: That's right. You were given a committee, and in time if you behaved yourself and supported the leadership, the leadership made all the appointments. There was no voting as to who was going to be it. They didn't have a Democratic caucus to elect so-and-so to some committee. Lyndon Johnson put you on the committee [raps on desk for emphasis]. Sam Rayburn put you on the committee. He was the fellow, and he'd approve it. Somebody might recommend something to do, but he had always the last word. He'd call a guy and say: "Look, I'm thinking about putting you on the Foreign Relations Committee. What is it you want to do, and how do you want to do it? Well, look, I'm expecting you to support the leadership."

When I was chairman of the senatorial campaign committee, raising money for the senators--Lyndon Johnson made me do that, I didn't particularly want to. We had a lot of speakers, we had Truman come in from Missouri and make a speech one time, and raised money for Senate Democrats. Between Johnson and me we ladled that money out. Johnson picked out most of the guys who were going to get that money. If the guy had not been a good Johnson supporter and there was a chance of knocking him off with another Democrat, Johnson probably would say, "Well, we're not going to help that fellow. Maybe this new guy will be better. But certainly we're going to help him against the Republicans." But that's the way the thing went. And actually you had leadership that was responsible and could lead. They weren't caught up with having to be on the telephone all the time rounding up this guy, rounding up that guy, and listening to him tell about what all of his problems were.

Ritchie: When you first came into the Senate, the majority leader was [Ernest McFarland](#) of Arizona.

Smathers: Yes, he was a sweet fellow. See, Johnson was his whip.

Ritchie: McFarland was never seen as a really strong leader, was he?

Smathers: No, he was just a nice fellow. He was just a sweet guy.

Ritchie: The real power lay more with the chairmen of the committees than the floor leader?

Smathers: Yes, until Johnson. And you know, Johnson never could control Fulbright. There were a lot of people he couldn't control. He couldn't control [Harry Byrd](#). But he did. Johnson was a genius at handling people in the way that they had to be handled. He didn't handle everybody the same way. He didn't rant and rave at the Harry Byrd's of the world, or the [Bob Kerr](#)'s of the world. Oh, no, he was so passive, and so submissive, and so condescending, you couldn't believe it! But that's the way he knew he had to handle that particular fellow. I've seen him kiss Harry Byrd's ass until it was disgusting. You know, "Senator, how about so-and-so; wouldn't you like to do this; can't we do this for you, and so on." He would get Harry Byrd to do what he wanted him to do, but that was the way Johnson operated. We mostly read about Johnson

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being a guy who would run all over you. That's true. If he could, he would. But there were those he couldn't, and on those he knew how to handle them. He was a genius.

Ritchie: I read a little piece that McFarland wrote, that when [Virgil Chapman](#) died, McFarland decided to put [Earle Clements](#) on the Policy Committee in Chapman's place, and he told Johnson. But when he went to tell Clements, he found out that Johnson had already told Clements he was going to get it.

Smathers: That's right, oh, yes.

Ritchie: I thought, Johnson would never have tolerated that if he had been majority leader.

Smathers: No, that's right. He would be mad as hell if you did it. But that's the way he operated.

Ritchie: When you first came in the Senate, were there role models, senators that you patterned yourself after, or who you consulted with to find out how you should operate?

Smathers: Well, not really. Let me say this, I always had a great respect for Senator Holland, my colleague. He was the man who had the most integrity of anybody I ever knew in politics. He was a difficult fellow to get to know because he was not a hale, outgoing, effusive, backslapping guy. He was very much of a student. He was very reserved. A very thoughtful guy, and a thorough gentleman. I liked Holland, very much. He didn't get along with Johnson too well, because he didn't particularly like Johnson's style. Johnson's backslapping style didn't go with him, and Senator Holland wasn't chairman of a committee at that time, so Johnson didn't have to use his other tactics on him. But [Spessard Holland](#) was as fine a public servant as I ever knew.



Senator Spessard Holland
Senate Historical Office

I really admired him, and we voted together on most everything. We made all the appointments together, whether we had an opening for a federal judge, or something. He would take his turn, I would take my turn. We'd always agree. Which had been done by Pepper and the predecessors, that you wouldn't appoint somebody who was distasteful to the other senator, and you'd always clear it with him in that sense. You took turns as to who you appointed. Holland and I never had the slightest disagreement about anybody, or anything. We voted, I think, together on most everything that ever came up. I was a little more liberal than he was in the civil rights field, but not much. We both voted for the 1964 Civil Rights Act of Johnson's, which Lyndon got through. I mean, I had to, because I was one of his assistants at that time. I helped to get Holland to vote, although Holland was for it. He just wanted us to stick together so we wouldn't one of us expose the other in the state. No, I had more admiration for him that just about anybody that I ever served with.

So you say role model, I admired Johnson, although I couldn't stand Johnson half the time. But I admired his absolutely unconquerable spirit, his determination to get things done, his indefatigable nature, I don't know how his body stood it. But you had to admire that. On the other hand, you have a fellow like [Mansfield](#), whom I just adored. He was just totally the opposite. He was a

thoughtful, kind, sweet, nice guy, hardly ever raised his voice. Johnson brought Mansfield along as he did me. As a matter of fact, I'm the guy that recommended to Johnson that he take Mansfield as the assistant leader when I said I wasn't going to do it. He asked me to do, he and Bobby Baker came to me. What year was that? The year that Earle Clements lost.

Ritchie: 1956.

Smathers: '56 was it? Clements was the whip. Nice guy, had been governor of Kentucky, nice fellow and a very good politician. I liked him, understood him. He was second under Johnson. I was third under Johnson. Johnson made me the chairman of the Democratic Conference and a lot of things, and then made me chairman of the senatorial campaign fundraising committee, and stuff. When Earle began to run that year, and he had a pretty serious opponent, he had to be gone down in Kentucky to campaign for reelection. So I automatically stepped up to his position. And Johnson really worked my tail off, just absolutely worked it off. I wasn't used to it, that kind of work, that kind of dictation, but you had to take it from Johnson. With Earle gone it was everyday some crisis, and Johnson was very unsympathetic with things that didn't happen, or certain fellows that you were counting on to vote--[Quentin Burdick](#), who's still over there, didn't vote like Johnson wanted--he'd say, "Why didn't you get on that, goddamn you, so-and-so and so-and-so two weeks ago. This is what he wants."

And that's when Johnson had the heart attack, along about this time. We were down at George Brown's. We discussed that. So I had suddenly come up two spots. I had taken Earle Clements place, Earle was gone, and all of a sudden Johnson was out, so I was really having to run the Senate. And Johnson was calling me every five minutes, after the first two weeks. Thank God he couldn't call on the telephone for the first two weeks and we got a lot of things done. Anyway, I was really running the Senate.

We get up to November, and Clements is defeated. The Congress is in recess. That was on a Tuesday, I'm in Miami. We recessed so that everybody could go back home and vote. A third of them were running, other two-thirds wanted to participate. So we were in recess. I got a call from Johnson saying, "I want to meet you in Washington up here tomorrow at eleven o'clock." I said, "I can't get there by then." "Goddamn it, you can get there." So I make a reservation at the Mayflower Hotel. I said, "I'll see you in the morning, no way I can get there today." So I'm irked. My wife was mad at me. "Why do you keep putting up with Lyndon Johnson? He's just destroyed your life?" So I go up there and check into the Mayflower in the morning, about nine-thirty. Here comes Lyndon Johnson and Bobby Baker. The phone rings and a voice said

"They're on their way up to your room, Senator Johnson and Mr. Baker." There's a knock, and there they are. Johnson's there in a raincoat, it was cold. He had a big cowboy Texas hat on. And Bobby was with him. Bobby usually was.

Johnson started off, and said, "Now, I'll tell you what you've got to do. You've got to pick up the phone, you've got to call [John McClellan](#), here's his number, and get him. He's going to be fine. I've already talked to him, and [Dick Russell](#) is in Spain on a trip, and you've got to call Dick. Dick will be for you, you know that, but you've got to get him, and here's the number over here. And here. . . " he told me somebody else he wanted me to call, I forget who it was, maybe [Symington](#), "call Symington, here's his number. Now you call him right now and it's all over with." Well, I was so irritated and so mad, I said, "Well, Johnson, I don't want to be your assistant." Well, it was just as though you had unleashed an awful smell of something. His nostrils flared, his eyes sort of looked funny. He said, "What are you saying?" I said, "I don't know that I want to be the whip." He said, "Do you really mean that?" He hadn't sat down the whole time, neither did Bobby, we were all standing. I said, "Yeah, Johnson, I don't know that I want to do it." So he said, "Come on, Bobby, let's go."

He got to the door and turned around and said, "Smathers, if you don't want to do it, who do you think we ought to get?" I said, "Lyndon, the only guy that could probably put up with you is that angel, Mansfield. Mansfield's nature is such that he could probably stand it." Okay, he turned around and walked out. The next thing I heard he had called Mansfield. Mansfield had done what he wanted me to do, and that's how Mansfield became the assistant majority leader. He asked me would I nominate Mansfield. He called me before the Senate gathered, and I said yes. I nominated Mansfield. [Frank Lausche](#) came to me and didn't want me to turn it down. He said, "I want you to do it, George." I'll never forget that, I've always thought about Frank asking me. I had several others wanted me to do it. [Russell Long](#) said, "You ought to take it, why don't you take it?" He said, "We all love Mansfield, but Mansfield's too sweet and too nice." I said, "Christ, you need something to offset Johnson." So that's how that happened.

Ritchie: One other person of that period that I wanted to ask you about was Richard Russell. You mentioned him in passing, but what was your relationship with Russell?

Smathers: Richard Russell was everybody's ideal. You asked me about my role models. It would be Holland and Richard Russell. Russell was a very, very able fellow to start with. He was the most polite, thoughtful fellow that you ever saw. He ran his committees that way. He did not run it with a hard, heavy hand. He was very polite, always so courteous you just would hardly believe it. Smart, knew how to get along with everybody. Was it 1952 he decided he wanted to run for president?

Ritchie: Yes.

Smathers: He told me about that, told as he did a lot of others, and because the Florida campaign, the primary, was in May, it was the earliest of any other southern state. He was going to make his kick off in Florida. He asked me would I help him. I told him that I would. He asked me would I introduce him at his first speechmaking, which was at the University of Florida, where I had first heard Claude Pepper. Many years had gone by now. I said, "Yeah, I'll be glad to. I'll go back to the university with you and I'll introduce you. Then we'll go to Ocala, we'll go on down to Orlando. I'll introduce you that whole day."

Dick Russell was such a shy man, and so introverted in a way, the public life really wore on him, but nobody would know it. I recall as we sat on the platform in Gainesville and the mayor of the city was introducing all the dignitaries, and there was a crowd out there of maybe fifteen hundred people, two thousand, a lot of news people, because this was his first speech in running to get the Democratic nomination for president. I was sitting beside Dick Russell, and his pants legs were shaking so, he was so nervous, and he was sweating. He was trembling so that I had to get an umbrella and put it between him and me so that you couldn't see him trembling. I never will forget that. It's funny how a little thing like that will impress you. This guy was so absolutely nervous and trembly that you couldn't believe it. He made a good candidate, and a good speech, and I took him on down to Miami.

The first time I ever saw television, they tried to have a debate on television between [Kefauver](#) and Russell. If ever there was a sort of a funny kind of a thing, that was it, because they would talk a few minutes and the lights would go off and they'd stop, "It's not working! Okay, let's wait a minute. Now, where were we?" The lights would come back on and they'd start again. I don't think they had a hundred sets in Dade County, see, so nobody was looking really. But the cameras were working taking the pictures. But that was some campaign, and of course Dick won, there in Florida, big over Kefauver. He finally didn't get very far, but he was a marvelous man.

I think [Sam Nunn](#) is trying to be in the image and likeness of Dick Russell. I think that's why Sam Nunn is making such a good senator. He knows what he's talking about. First he's a good student of the armed forces and what's happened in the appropriations, he knows what's happening, which is number one. And secondly, having gotten himself well prepared, he knows what he ought to be doing in taking the country the way that it ought to go.

Ritchie: In '52, Russell threw his hat into the ring to run for president, but in '53 he could have been majority leader just by asking for it.

Smathers: Oh, he could have been majority leader any time. He's the only guy that could have beaten Lyndon.

Ritchie: Why do you think he declined the majority leadership?

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Smathers: Well, he didn't want to do it. He'd rather be chairman of the Armed Services Committee, and a senior guy on Appropriations. He didn't want all that aggravation. You have to deal with all the senators, and he didn't want to do it. There are a lot of guys, some people are just not cut out for the job. I didn't think, for example, that McFarland was a particularly good one.

<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=B001210>" Bob Byrd has been a good one, but just because he's the most determined man that ever was. He's just by God going to get it through. Who else has ever worked harder than Bob Byrd? Nobody. He patterned himself after Lyndon completely.

But Dick Russell knew that it was a tiring job. Having to deal with all of them, you know, is like putting on a high school dance. It's a rat race! You get three saxophone players and then you can't get a drummer. Then you get a drummer and you can't get a piano player. Half of them want to come in free, and half of them. . . it's ridiculous.

Ritchie: Russell was chairman of the Southern caucus at that time.

Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: How influential was the Southern caucus in '51 when you came in?

Smathers: Well, I think the Southern Conference of Governors, or whatever it was, was influential. It had no affirmative power, but it had a lot of negative power. They could stop, they could convince people not to do things, and they could convince the convention that they would not take somebody, but they really couldn't get a southerner up there, so their negative value was enormous, but their affirmative value was almost nil.

Ritchie: Of course, the southern caucus in the Senate had most of the committee chairmen in those days.

Smathers: That's right, in those days it was much stronger than it is today.

Ritchie: It was quite an array, and to become a junior member of that by being elected from a southern state was a good entre, I would guess, into the Senate.

Smathers: Oh, yes. Well, [Sam Ervin](#) was good. He came along about the time I did. Willis Robertson was there by the time I got there. He was the North Carolina senator, got elected the same time I did. He had beaten some so-called liberal from his state, and he had been president of the American Bar Association, that was the most impressive thing that I could figure about him--[Willis Smith](#)

was his name, not Robertson. [Willis Robertson](#) was from Virginia. I saw his son Pat on television the night before last. He was saying something about his father, and I thought, you know, he doesn't look like his father,

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doesn't talk like his father, doesn't act like his father. But anyway, that is his father.

Ritchie: One other position that Russell held at that time was chairman of the Steering Committee.

Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: And you had to go before him to get on committees.

Smathers: That's right.

Ritchie: I've heard that the Finance Committee was one of the hardest committees to get on.

Smathers: That's right, that was a hard committee to get on.

Ritchie: And the two requirements, they say, was that you voted right on cloture and you voted right on oil and gas.

Smathers: That's right. I think that's right. You had to do that. See, Johnson protected oil and gas. When I went on it, I don't know who was the majority leader, I've forgotten.

Ritchie: It was in '55 you went on, so Johnson was majority leader.

Smathers: '55 so it would be Johnson, yes. I wanted to get on that committee. Of course he had put Russell Long on about six months before I did. You couldn't put anybody on that Harry Byrd didn't approve of, either. In other words, you had to touch a lot of bases to go on that committee. It was a good committee. I think Bob Kerr was the most influential man on the committee, because he was the only fellow on the Democratic side of the committee who had ever had any business experience whatever, except for Harry Byrd, who had an apple orchard. Paul Douglas had none. Russell Long had none. I had none. It went on down the line and not a damn one of us had ever been in private enterprise and really didn't know what was going on, except Bob Kerr did. He had organized the Kerr-McGee Oil Company, and we used to listen to him.



Senator Robert Kerr
Senate Historical Office

The two really very influential guys on the Finance Committee, taxation committee, when I was on it, and I was on it I think eleven or twelve years, were on the Democratic side [Bob Kerr](#), and on the Republican side [Wallace Bennett](#). Wallace Bennett had been the head of some big business out there in the west, and then been elected president of the United States Chamber of Commerce. Because of his business practices, when he was elected to the Senate happily they put him on the committee right away. He was a very junior member of the Senate, but they put him on the Finance Committee because that's where he belonged. The rest of us had just come out of the war, or had been a professor,

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or something like that who really didn't know what a business was all about. Here we were sitting there voting on all of these terribly important tax questions, and trade questions. We were pretty good on trade, but we sure didn't know much about the business.

Bob Kerr had made millions in the oil business, and now he wanted to get into politics, so he got to be governor of his state. He was a top-quality governor and he was still making a lot of money, and then he comes to the Senate and he's on the Finance Committee. How he got on there so quickly I don't know, but it's again testimony to his genius. He was a hard-nosed cynical-type fellow.

I remember one day especially when something came up that Paul Douglas had warned the committee was a mistake, and the committee had voted for it anyway against Douglas' advice and recommendation. So when the word came, I forget who it was, the Internal Revenue Commission or somebody it was came over and was telling us about this terrible thing that we had done, and Paul Douglas jumped up. I was sitting between. . . Bob Kerr sat here, then Russell Long, and then I, and Paul Douglas was junior to me on that committee. He had been the professor. He jumped up after the Internal Revenue reported, and he said, "This was a bad mistake we've made." And it looked like there might have been a little bit of shenanigans, maybe some little bit of corruption had resulted by virtue of

this loophole we had opened up. And Paul Douglas jumped up and pointed his finger at Bob Kerr and he said, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself! You the senator from Oklahoma, to think that you would be a part of this combine, this conspiracy, this outrageous mechanism to take in the American public and taxpayers. Aren't you ashamed of yourself!" Went on like that, and Bob Kerr finally looked up at him and said, "Senator, I'm ashamed of every combine and every conspiracy that I'm not a part of." And just broke up the whole meeting. Everybody just laughed so hard. That's a better story than that. It actually happened. I didn't use the right words. Russell Long tells that story better than I do, but it really happened. It was just so funny.

But we listened to Bob, because while he was a cynic, and he was obviously for the money interest, he also was smart. He had worked his way up from nothing, from being raised on an Indian reservation, which was his home. He moved off the Indian reservation and began to go to work and elevated himself up to be this great oil man. He was impressive, and he was smart. Anyway, those were interesting days.

Ritchie: I wanted to ask just one more question about Richard Russell. You were on several committees before you went on Finance. You were on Interior, Post Office, and Interstate Commerce.

Smathers: Yes, I was on Interstate and Foreign Commerce.

Ritchie: Did you actually have to go down and sit in with the Steering Committee, or did they just tell you that they had appointed you?

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Smathers: No, the Steering Committee was mostly a Lyndon Johnson-Dick Russell type of a committee. In other words, if somebody that they didn't particularly like but they didn't want to make an enemy out of him, but they didn't want his bill to come up, then they'd call the Steering Committee and have the Steering Committee tell him that his bill wasn't going to be taken up. If it was somebody that they liked, I can bring up, or even Senator Holland probably could, but somebody who was on the inner circle with these fellows, you could get it on the calendar by just calling Lyndon Johnson's office and telling Bobby Baker that you'd like to get this put on, and it would be on. The Steering Committee was a mechanism that was created primarily to act as a buffer, to hold up legislation which the leadership did not want to have brought to the floor, but they didn't want to assume responsibility for stopping it. So they would, by dividing up the responsibility among ten guys, why then the fellow couldn't get mad at the leader. That's all that ever was.

Ritchie: But Johnson really did need Russell's approval on all of this?

Smathers: Johnson would get Russell. Every now and then Johnson and Dick would come to loggerheads about something, and invariably Johnson would back off. The only guy that ever would make Johnson back off was Dick Russell. I don't know of anybody else, even Senator [George](#), as wonderful as he was, he was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee before Fulbright. But see, Johnson could con. Johnson had different approaches. He had a whole arsenal of shots that he would use. One of them was sweet talking, the next one was doing a favor for you, the next one was talking rough to you, the next one was appointing him to a committee or something. But whatever was needed, that's what he would use on that particular fellow. Now, Dick Russell knew all of his tricks. See that picture right there [points to wall] is an interesting picture. Johnson is sitting there. That was in his majority leader office. See there's [Symington](#) over there. There's Skeeter Johnston who was Secretary of the Senate. Then there's Dick Russell, then there's Earle Clements, and then [Albert Gore](#). I don't remember what Albert Gore was doing there, but all these other fellows had some job. There's George Reedy, who was really Johnson's publicity man, but he was a hell of a smart guy, and there was me, who was talking. And they're listening to me. You know, I'm standing up and everybody else is sitting down. That was the kind of meetings that we would have sometime. But Johnson was it.

[End of interview #2]