

# George A. Smathers

United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969

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## **Interview #7: The Senate and the Press**

(Thursday, September 28, 1989)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

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***Smathers:*** I want to develop a little bit more if I can on one of the things that I did which I'm proud of, although it never got anywhere. I was the first fellow to introduce a bill calling for a nationwide primary, rather than have these nominating conventions going the way they were. When I first did that was back in the '50s. I thought I made a lot of sense. What put me on it just now, I read an article that some journalist had written as though this were his idea. Other people have done this, and I don't know that anybody did it before I did, it well could have been, but I'm the first guy that put this in as legislation, which we could never get passed.

Of course, the thought being, when I put mine in, we used to have at an earlier time the convention system with the smoke-filled room, the guys smoking cigars and all these big, fat-bellied politicians and bosses from big cities would sit in a room with two or three senators and two or three congressmen, and they would pick a guy. They called it the "smoke-filled room"--that's where that expression really came from--where they would select the next president of the United States, and that carried all sorts of ugly connotations. Nobody liked that. The truth of the matter is, we probably got better, more qualified guys to run at that time than we have since, for the simple reason that those people who did that picked guys who usually had great experience and had some possibility of getting elected. They certainly wanted a winner, but they wanted the best man they could get who could win.

But that was a bad deal, nobody liked that, so then we started this primary system, where we have a presidential primary in every state. Well, that has gotten to be so that Iowa, in order to get a lot of publicity, bring a lot of money in, Iowa, New Hampshire, and some other states, way early, early in the year before the election was to come would hold a presidential primary. So a guy like [Jimmy Carter](#), who was not really a well-known governor, who might have been a nice enough fellow but had no reputation beyond Georgia, he goes out there almost a year ahead of time, spends the whole winter in Iowa, visiting in these small precincts and these little small towns, and when the primary comes, because it's the first primary for president and he's about the only fellow running--the senators have got to stay here in Washington and can't be spending all their time out there; I mean, they go out, but they shouldn't be going out and spending all that time. They go into states like New Hampshire, which is a small state, they have very few electoral votes, it has less people in it than--I keep coming back to

the state of Florida--than you've got in Miami's county, Dade County has got more people than all of New Hampshire.

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A guy goes and spends his time in the middle of the winter, out there in Iowa and all those people like him, and they have a vote, and pretty soon a guy from Washington will send his name out, but what happens? The guy who sends his name out is fairly well known because he's been getting some press here, but the Iowans vote for the fellow who's been out there with them. So now Jimmy Carter is Number One Candidate. The press picks it up: Number One. He's already got committed delegates for the nomination, nobody else has any. So now you go to New Hampshire; it's the same damn thing. They go and live with these guys, and they get a little money and they work around the little towns. He goes to corn-basting, and chestnut-rolling, and county fair to help judge the cows and look at the pigs and all that kind of stuff, and the first thing you know, hell everybody says, "Isn't he a nice guy." He is a nice guy, but now he's won two primaries so he's obviously way out front. And here are your qualified people back in Washington who can't get out there and do that. They don't want to do it. It gets to be a bad system. You get guys like Dukakis, who began to win the primaries earlier than anybody else, and is better, and in some respects was better known than was Jimmy Carter. But we Democrats keep ending up with candidates who really is not as strong a candidate as we should have.

That's what was happening, so I introduced a bill based on the premise that if a guy's going to run, you have a nationwide primary, not just in Iowa on one day, not just in Kansas on their special day, not in New Hampshire on their special day, you have it on the same day. The Democratic and Republican parties could have different days, but they have one day that the guys all run for the nomination of the Democratic party. That means the guy who runs has got to be well-known throughout the country. He's got to be something of a nationwide figure, have some nationwide following, if you have it on the same day. So you can eliminate the freaks. That's a rough word, and I don't mean to apply that to Jimmy Carter too much, but he was a political freak. He's a nice, nice man, I'll say that. I like Jimmy Carter. But he's a political freak. And Dukakis was somewhat of one. Television has begun to move them up so you get a little better feel of who's running, who's getting the nomination, but it ought to be a nationwide primary.

Well, I didn't get anywhere with those bills. I didn't get anywhere, even though I tried to head it off. Now, somebody has introduced a bill here lately which I see getting some endorsements from some of the big newspapers. The New York Times gave it a reasonably fair review, said this may be the way to go, because at least what it does do is give you a nationally recognized fellow who can get up there and run, that means somebody who's done something, either as an outstanding senator or as an outstanding governor of a big state. I wouldn't say that every little state should not have a governor who is eligible to be president

someday, but he's got to have done something to get recognition nationwide at one time, rather than just singleshot until he finally builds himself into a lead. Because if you leave qualified people, a guy like [Lyndon Johnson](#) actually, he could have never had a shoe in. Had he not come the route he did through vice president, he'd have never been president, because he didn't

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have time to go out and run in the primaries. He was running the Senate. He was an important man, he couldn't do that. The important guys in the federal government can't go out and do this. It's some governor who can. But anyway, it seemed like a good idea to me. I liked it, and it got some support, but I never could get it passed in the Congress. Now I see that two people have picked it up, some senator has now said that he's going to introduce a bill on it. I think that's the way to go.

Okay, that's one thing that I was proud of that never got off the ground, but is still the most sensible, practical way to go, if you're going to eliminate the smoke-filled rooms and the selection on the convention the way it used to be back in the '20s, and '30s, and '40s. The other thing that I did not do but I talked about is this fund raising thing, which has gotten so terrible, the political action committees, the PACs. We desperately need to go back to a system where the only campaign contributions which can be made--and the media won't like this, the newspapers won't like this, the television won't like this particularly--campaign contributions can be made to a candidate only from the state from which he's running. A fellow who's running for the United States Senate has got to have campaign contributions only from his state.

It distorts the theory of senators representing their states, and congressmen representing their districts, when a political action committee from outside the state can finance the senatorial candidates' campaign in a state like Alabama or Louisiana or Oklahoma or wherever it is, or New Mexico, and the money is actually raised in New York. It gives to the large influential organizations, whether they be the National Association of Manufacturers, whether it be the National Bankers Association, whether it's the National Rifle Association, whether it's the United Mine Workers or whatever it is, it gives to those people too much authority the way we do it today, because they send money into all these states and congressional districts to help a guy get elected and the fellow who finally gets elected is always knowledgeable as to where the money is coming from and to whom he has to be grateful. They get influence which is sometimes contrary to what the people in his own district are thinking, or even in his own home state are thinking. It's a distortion which we should get away from.

If a guy who is going to run for the Senate has to start out and get money only from within the state boundaries, his opposition is limited to the same thing, then the people in the state who are supposed to have a senator representing them,

that candidate has to come to them every time he's running and say, "Look, I want you all to help me." And they have a chance to, in effect, police their own senator and their own congressman. He does not have the latitude as we talked about here where Lyndon Johnson and I used to raise money here in Washington and take it to Nebraska, I know we took it to Nevada to help [Howard Cannon](#). We helped them with money that was raised by our committee here in Washington from all these political organizations. So now the money's going to Nevada and you get a distortion as to what's really happening out there, because suddenly one candidate has got a lot of money.

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But it is not from the people in his state. It's not from Nevadans, it's from some organization in Detroit, Michigan, or in New York City, or Washington, D.C.

It defeats the basic concept of what democratic government's all about. If a fellow is going to run in Oklahoma, if he's going to run in Massachusetts, if he's limited to the money that he can raise from people in his home state they have more control. He's got to come to them every time he's going to run again. He's got to make his case to his own people. It would be healthier to have it, and we need to have that. I'm sorry that when I was there I didn't get that done. I thought about it a lot, but I never got anything in. But I want to be on record on that.

**Ritchie:** You mentioned about the nationwide primary that it didn't get anywhere. What was the nature of the opposition to it at the time?

**Smathers:** Indifference. "Well, you know George. . ." And they kept saying "There ought to be a constitutional amendment." That's ridiculous. Why would you need a constitutional amendment for a party? All we've got to do is pass a law that says that there will be a primary on that day, on May 2 of the that year, and everybody votes then. So all the Democrats in all fifty states in the Union go vote that day. You have another day for the Republicans to go vote. But they are voting on candidates who are nationally known. That says to guys like Jimmy Carter--I keep using him as an example--that means he just can't go out to Iowa and spend three months cultivating those people, because he's got to run in every state in the union. He wouldn't have time to spend the whole winter in Iowa, chatting with those people, sewing sweaters and whittling, and doing whatever they do in the middle of the winter out there. A nationwide primary eliminates that. We didn't get too far, but I see some senator put a bill in the other day, and there was a big editorial written that this is a great idea. Well, it is a great idea, but it's certainly not new. Okay, I'll stop with that,

**Ritchie:** I was hoping to ask you some questions about the press today. You mentioned earlier the newspapers and their reaction to things. I wondered what your assessment was of the way the media covered Congress while you were a member of Congress.

**Smathers:** I think that overall it was good. I don't have any complaints. A lot of people complain about the press. I think you have to understand that the press guys have a job. The reporters that come to cover you have to get a story. If they don't get a good story from time to time they don't have a job. The owners of the press know that their paper will be bought if their paper continues to beat some other paper in terms of getting scoops, getting more sensational stories, political or otherwise. So it starts right from the top, the owner right on down. They're all trying to make a living. It's money that really. . . I don't like to say it just like that because there's some people who hate to think that they do things because of money, but they do it because of

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the job that they've got. I'm guessing here, but I guess that the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Miami Herald*, they pay more to their reporters than does some paper like the Valdosta, Georgia, paper or something, and everybody wants to be reporters on the big five newspaper so to speak. Everybody wants to be a reporter for the big networks, because why? They make more money. It's certainly not more fun, they've got to produce more, they've got to be more productive. The competition's greater, they make more money.

They're having to do their job, and their job is trying to get in information. Now, you learn several things about reporters when you're in office. You can never have a secret and tell them about it, because it will be printed. If they don't print it, they'll leak it to one of their buddies so they can say, "I didn't write it." But it's a story, and a story is something that they want to get out because somebody else may print it before they do. They just flat cannot keep a secret. Naturally they could about war, or an atomic bomb explosion where the nation's welfare would be at stake. They're not going to print that. But they're going to print anything that's at all printable, and it doesn't make any difference whether it hurts an individual or whether it doesn't. They're going to print it.

People will say that's healthy, and it probably is healthy, but this is why I think however that there should be a sunshine law--they have it Florida--where you can't have a meeting of five guys in the cabinet secretly because the sunshine law says that you've got to have a reporter there. To me, I think that's ridiculous. I don't like that. I think it makes them just even more secretive. They can't take an official act without it being well-publicized, and it should be well-publicized in advance, but certainly they should be permitted to meet with each other and have coffee in the morning and not to have to have five reporters sitting there listening to everything they say and taking their pictures, because then they can't really converse with each other.

They can't say to each other, "Now, look, Joe, what do you really think? What will work and what won't work?" Because if they think "what I'm going to say is going

to be printed, and all of my constituents will read it tomorrow," they'll keep making speeches to each other. They're really afraid to say anything that might hurt their reelection. So they don't learn, they don't really exchange ideas, and half of this business of legislating is giving and taking. The press make it so that it's very difficult. That's why we have a lot less legislation being passed, any meaningful legislation, because you can't get them together in a room, like old Johnson used to do, and say, "Nobody's going to leave this damn room until we've got some kind of agreement. You Joe, you have to give up what you thought was going to be your biggest point." Now, Joe doesn't want to give up his biggest point if it's going to be publicized back in his state that he had to give it up. He might not get reelection if the newspaper people see it, and he's not going to give it up.

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So what happens is you never do get much legislation through these days. It's compromise, compromise, compromise. I think it slows the process down. It's kind of like a man and a woman being married, in a way. There should not be publicized all the fights between a husband and wife. Now, if they get a divorce, that's publicized. If one kills the other, that's publicized. But all the arguments that go on between them, when it takes a little while for them to adjust and get together--this is not a particularly good illustration, but in the absence of a better one, give me a moment and I'll think of some better ones.

But anyway, I think the newspapers have gone too far in wanting to know everything. Television is terrible. What they do to [Jackie Kennedy](#) is outrageous. She can't walk down the street without these reporters. She had to go to court to finally stop one guy from taking her picture and bothering her all the time. It gets to be an absolute nuisance, and it gets to be an infringement upon her personal rights. Okay, they say, "This is political, this is business of the community, this is business of the city, this is business of the state, this is business of the United States, and we reporters should be right in there writing every word that is discussed." The reason it shouldn't be is because you can't resolve anything like that. You cannot come to a consensus, because no politician wants to look like he's giving up his position in front of the press. They just don't do it.

Johnson would get you in a room and you knew damn well there wasn't going to be nothing written about. He'd say "I want you to do this, and I want you to do this, and I want you to do this." And the guy would say, "I can't do it." "Yes you can do it. Here's what we're going to do for you." And so on. And you'd come out of there with an agreement. That's the reason that Lyndon Johnson was able to pass civil rights legislation. You've got to remember, he was the only guy to pass civil rights legislation. He was the fellow who started the Medicare program, the big one. Johnson did that. We got more good legislation during Lyndon Johnson's administration than we've ever had before, in any four or six year

period. Johnson did it, and he did it by just bringing them in there and knocking heads together.

But if a newspaper guy had been sitting there, no senator could afford to have it said that he gave up on his position in order to compromise something and get it out. He's got to look strong. He's got to look brave. He's got to look as big as Johnson. "Nobody tells me what to do. Only my constituents tell me what to do. I'm not going to let anybody boss me around like that." And he won't. But he'll go into a meeting where nobody's going to report what's going on, and Johnson says, "Fellows, we've got to pass legislation. You're on this side, and you're on this side, and you're here in the middle, and you're here in the middle, but we've got to have fifty votes to get this through, okay? We've only got forty-six now, we've got to pick up five more, and you're the fellows who I think can help us pass the legislation by giving up some one thing you want. But we're going to give you something else over here." And he would put the thing together and we'd pass it.

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What do I think of the press? I think the press is essential. I think they are generally as honorable if not more honorable than anybody else, that they are as honorable as any other group of people, just like I think the members of Congress are as honorable as anybody you can find. Sure we've got some dumb guys, and sure we've got a few crooks that show up, but where are you going to get a hundred men and put them together that you're not going to find one or two bad apples? It's supposed to be representative of the people of the United States, and that's what it is. You've got some pretty bad apples. But the press overall is good. They're doing their job. I just wish they would recognize that they don't have to be in on everything. Obviously when it's finally brought out in the light and voted on, sure, they report that.

**Ritchie:** From what I gather, at least in the 1950s, maybe the early '60s, there was a sense in the press that a man's private life was his private business and wasn't to be reported on.

**Smathers:** That's right. You know, this gossipy stuff, I think the Kennedys probably started that. During his period they began to report more about a man's private life, because the people that Kennedy was allegedly mixed up with were all very prominent movie stars, stage stars, that sort of thing. That lent itself to an interesting story, everybody likes to read about movie stars and big people and all that kind of stuff, having dates or having dinner quietly, everybody likes to read that kind of stuff. I think it pretty much started then. It used to not be that bad, but since then they've reported a lot.

Nixon was very much opposed--that's not the right word--he was very fearful of the press. He went way out of his way, he was distrustful of the press. I thought he went too far the other way in my judgment. Johnson was very distrustful of the

press, but Johnson had enough sense to know that at some point the press was going to have to know what was happening. But I thought when Nixon was dictating these notes and having all these private meetings off the record, it was a little bit silly. He had a great paranoia. It was unfortunate. I think it exacerbated his problem. The more he was secretive, the more they pursued him. I don't ever remember his calling in the reporters and relaxing and sitting behind the desk and saying "Okay, fellows, what is it you want to know?" He had press conferences, but they were pretty well staged.

[Reagan](#) was pretty good at it. Johnson was pretty good at it. Kennedy was super at it. That's why they all loved him. Kennedy was admired and loved by the press. He had better press than anybody because the press liked him. He could turn off the questions that he didn't want to answer with a joke, with something humorous. Some of these people took themselves so seriously that they could never relax and joke about it. Say, "Okay, so what? I stumbled." I thought next to Kennedy, Reagan was the best at handling the press.

**Ritchie:** I got the sense that Johnson as a senator tried to cultivate reporters like William S. White and others.

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**Smathers:** He spent half his time cultivating the press. He would have them in and he would give one a little inside information, and then he would give another one a little inside information. He played them just like he did the senators, in a way.

**Ritchie:** Was he as successful with the press as he was with the senators?

**Smathers:** Well, he was pretty successful. He never did think he got a good press. He was always bitching about the fact that he didn't think the press was treating him quite right. I thought that the press treated him rather well. There were some individuals who would write columns that would give Johnson fits, give him trouble. The problem with Johnson was he would--I'll give you a good illustration, typical Johnson. The campaign of 1960, he's running for vice president of the United States, I'm in charge of the southern eleven states. We get a train. We were going to have a train go from Washington all the way to New Orleans. Johnson would stop the train and go off. And we'd get a plane, like we'd swing through Jacksonville and Tallahassee and we'd get some private planes to fly us to Miami and Tampa, and then we'd pick the train back up. We would make a few whistle-stops. Johnson would get out on the back. It would be advertised. And every state we'd go through we'd pick up the two state senators and the local congressmen. [Harry Byrd](#) rode with us through Virginia, and then we'd get to North Carolina and [Sam Ervin](#) would ride with us, and then South Carolina and so on.



Anyway, to make my point about Johnson being paranoid about the press--Nixon was very much the same way, but a little different type--we got to New Orleans at the end, and I thought it had been a very successful trip. We had big crowds and Johnson made pretty good speeches. Each time the two senators from the state would be on the back of the train with Johnson and have their picture taken. And he'd go off maybe for one little speech, maybe fifteen, twenty miles away, and so on and would come back to the train. Then we'd pick up the next couple of senators, the next congressmen. Now we're coming into New Orleans. The train stopped outside of the train station and we were backing the train into New Orleans where there was a fairly big crowd. The reason we wanted to back in was because it had a big porch on the back of the train, and Johnson and [Lady Bird](#) were going to come out there, and all the other people, me, and Russell Long and [Allen Ellender](#), and we were all going to have our picture made on the back of the train.

Okay, so here we are backing into the station, and I'm sitting there with Lyndon and I'm trying to keep him up. He's a guy you had to build up everyday. "You're doing great," "you're wonderful," and so on, because he would get down. "They didn't have a big enough crowd," "didn't have a big enough crowd," always complaining. Well, I thought we were doing great. We were backing in, and there had to be at least a thousand signs, "Kennedy/Johnson," "Kennedy/Johnson," all over the place. I'm saying, "Look at that. Now look at that wonderful sign there Lyndon. Look at that great big banner back there.

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Isn't that great." Johnson said, "Look at that son of a bitch! Look at that sign there!" "Johnson: Traitor to the South." There was one sign! I give you my word, it wasn't a foot high. It wasn't eight feet long. There were thousands of signs, and that's the one he picked out. "Goddamn it! Why can't you can't do something right?" I thought, this is the damndest fellow I had ever seen in my life, here we had all this, and all he could see was "Johnson: Traitor to the South." He jumped like he was shot. But that was typical Johnson, he could always find something that wasn't quite right. It had to be unanimous as far as he was concerned. But anyway, he produced. Okay, now what else did you want to ask me about the press?

**Ritchie:** As a senator, what was more useful to you: a story on the front page of the *New York Times* or in a Miami paper or Tampa paper?

**Smathers:** Oh, the Miami paper or Tampa paper much more so than the *New York Times*. There's a group of people in Florida, there's a group of people in every state who read the *New York Times*, but as far as numbers who read those respective papers, why it's ninety to one. The local papers are much more valuable to you than the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. They love to think they're that powerful. They write an editorial and they love to think that

somehow it influences the state of South Carolina. Well, they're crazy, it doesn't. [Fritz Hollings](#) would ten times rather have an editorial in the Greenville paper, or the Aiken, South Carolina, paper, or any other big city in South Carolina than he would in the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*.

**Ritchie:** Did you find that you had better relations with the Florida reporters than with the national reporters?

**Smathers:** Well, no. I had pretty good relations with most of them. The guy who used to cut me up terribly when I first got here was Drew Pearson. Of course, he was succeeded by Jack Anderson. Now, Jack Anderson and I got along great. Jack Anderson became one of my very close friends, and good friends. That's not to say he didn't write some things that were uncomplimentary about me from time to time, when he felt it. But if somebody called my office and said, "I'm Bill Safire from the *New York Times*," and another person called and said, "I'm Dave Craswell from the *Miami Herald*," I'd forget Bill Safire in a second and go to see Dave Craswell, because he wrote in the *Miami Herald*, and Bill Safire wrote in the *New York Times* and some other papers that weren't big in my state. There is some intellectual snobbery among people who like to say, "I read something in the *New York Times*," or some people would say in the *Christian Science Monitor*, some people would say in the *Wall Street Journal*. Those are very important papers, to a certain element of people, but politically they don't amount to anything, in my judgment. Now, in New York, sure. [Mario] Cuomo and the senators from New York, they damn sure got to worry about the *New York Times*, because that's what everybody in New York reads--not everybody, but a lot of them. They've got to worry about the New York papers. No, you worry about the papers in your own state.

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**Ritchie:** If you had a particularly good story, were there certain reporters that you would let it go to first?

**Smathers:** Sure. Yes. The *Miami Herald* group, the Jacksonville *Times-Union*, the Tampa *Tribune*, sure. Yes, if I had a particularly good story, if I knew we were going to have an appropriation that was going to bring in \$150 million to the McNeil Field over in Tampa, I would let the guys know from Tampa, I would call them and say, "I want to tell you something, but you don't print this till it's passed, but I think the votes are there. It should pass at ten o'clock tomorrow." The guy would say, "Well, can't you hold it up so that I can make it for my morning newspaper?" Well, that always presented a little problem, as to when you were going to release that information, so that which newspaper in a community would get it first. It would depend upon which one you liked the best, which one you thought was helping you the most.

**Ritchie:** Was there any difference between dealing with newspaper reporters and dealing with television and radio reporters?

**Smathers:** I never noticed any particular difference. See, television just came along when I was in the Senate. It had not developed as much. I had only one really tough race and that was way back in 1950, so I stayed there eighteen years after that, and television had not come along that much. I didn't have a hard race. But I'll say this, when I'd go to any town and had the opportunity to be interviewed by the television, I was very anxious for them to interview me, to give me that exposure. Sure, I liked that. All politicians do.

**Ritchie:** Did you always have a press secretary when you were a senator?

**Smathers:** Yes. I had some good ones and some sorry ones. But I had a couple of real good ones.

**Ritchie:** You mentioned some of the things that you promoted, like the national primary and things like that, did you have a sense of frustration that the press wouldn't focus on the things that you thought were worthy enough?

**Smathers:** Yes, right. And every now and then your press secretary and you--he was the fellow who you talked to mostly in your office. You had your administrative assistant who sort of headed up answering all the mail. You had your legislative assistant who helped you follow the specifics of a piece of legislation, particularly legislation which you were interested in promoting, and you had your press secretary who helped you deal with the press to get a favorable press for you as much as it was possible to get. You would talk with him about, "Now when are we going to release this story? We're going to vote so-and-so on this bill. Do we want to say anything about it before the vote?" You'd discuss it with him and make a decision and he would go over to the press gallery,

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sometimes with a press release that was printed up, send it around to the various papers.

Or you could get on television. The last four or five years you'd go downstairs, and one of the big things that all the guys do today is they have a television program that goes back into their districts and to their state. I started one, I was one of the first guys that did that. I got a weekly program in my state, starting let's say about the early '60s and ran one every week. I interviewed, and frequently I'd have people up from Florida. The governor of Florida would come here and I'd get him on my television program. We'd talk about what was doing in the state legislature, what we were doing up here in Washington, and what were the things that the people of Florida were interested in, and all that. I'd have the head Catholic priest on, and I'd have a strong Jewish representative on. I had Rabbi

Lehrman, whom I love, from Miami. I used to call him "my rabbi," got him in trouble saying that at the time. But he's a wonderful speaker and a wonderful guy. Every time he'd come to Washington I'd put him on my television program. I'd get a lot of compliments from the Miami area particularly, where there is a big Jewish population. But he was so good, he was so smart, everybody loved him.

That's the kind of thing that you constantly did in order to keep your contact with the people back home. You had your weekly broadcasts, and then on top of that you'd send out all your newsletters, which were a very good thing. I see they're going to stop some of it, this junk mail. You'd also write a weekly column, which some weekly papers would print: weekly column from your senator. You'd write what happened in Congress this week, and how it affected the school program, and how it affected the health program, and all this. Being a senator was a full-time job, just one big job.

**Ritchie:** Is it harder for a senator, being in Washington, to get press coverage back in the home state, than say the governor and the local political figures?

**Smathers:** No, it depends on the story. I think the story determines whether or not you get a good press. The press is looking for the best story. The governor can say something pretty stupid sometime, and they're not going to carry that. Or the governor can say something that's very impressive, the same way the senator can. He hands out a press release and you don't see anything. What happened? Well, they didn't think that was much of a story, that's why they just didn't print it.

**Ritchie:** Did you ever get political advice from reporters in your state? Reporters who might advise you on what was happening there?

**Smathers:** Oh, yes. My experience with reporters was that I learned about as much from them as they learned from me, especially those who were back in the state. They'd come in and ask you a couple of questions, and then you'd start asking them: who's going to get elected mayor? Is the waterways

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bill going to pass? Does Nelson Poynter of the *St. Petersburg Times* still got his nose out of joint? Those kinds of things. The answer is yes. I had wonderful relations with a large number of reporters. Some of them you felt were out to get you all the time, and so you didn't open up too much around them. Happily for me there were only a few guys that I felt didn't like me, and I didn't like them. That's always mutual. If you like a reporter it's because you like him because he likes you. It's a mutually advantageous thing. And if you've got a good story that sometimes you can let him have before somebody else, why you'll do it. It's a game that everybody plays. Johnson was a master of that.

**Ritchie:** You mentioned earlier, Drew Pearson, who gave you a pretty rough time in a lot of columns.

**Smathers:** A whole lot of columns. He was for [Claude Pepper](#) very strongly. He wrote column after column. I venture to say that over the course of a year and half he wrote fifty columns that were just as damaging to me--or he thought they were, and he wanted them to be as damaging to me as was possible. Anything that I had ever done that he felt was wrong, why he emphasized it. Jack Knight, who owned the *Miami Herald*, later to form Knight-Ridder newspapers, the *Detroit Free Press*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and so on, he was my good friend. He endorsed me. I used to say, "Jack, why do you carry that guy every day and he cuts me up?" He said, "George, don't worry about it. I'm going to endorse you when the time comes." "Yeah, I know that," I said, "but he's out there every day and you give me that endorsement once a year at most, and he's chewing me to death." He said, "Oh, you're too sensitive." And that's somewhat the truth.

I think the general public is really pretty good about sifting out in their own minds who is really leveling, who they want to believe and who they don't want to believe. Generally speaking, I think the public is pretty much on to who's really genuine and who isn't; who's reaching hard for a story, and who isn't. After they read the paper for a number of months or years, they come to their own conclusions about who they want to believe. And apparently, Drew Pearson wasn't hurting me as bad as I thought he was. It's tough, though, when you see your name in the paper and it's been circulated throughout the state, and a lot of people are reading it. Jack Knight used to say, "Now, George, in the first place not half the people read it that you think read it. Half of them that read it are on your side, and they don't believe it. And the other half, there's nothing you could do in your life that would make them be for you anyway. So forget it." I said, "Jack, wait till you get a little criticism." Every now and then somebody would write about him as head of the paper, and oh my God, he was so sensitive. He couldn't believe it. "By God! That's about me!"

My brother used to say that about me. I recall one time that I had been complaining about Drew Pearson, and Lyndon Johnson was at my house when this happened. I was living in Chevy Chase, this was about the time I believe that Lyndon first became majority leader. But my brother was in Miami, and he called me up and told me about a story that was in the paper that morning.

Drew Pearson's column was unfriendly to me, very unfriendly, very distorted I used to think. He would take a few little facts and twist them around so that it would come out incorrectly and very uncomplimentary to me. But it so happened that I had picked up a story in the other paper, the *Miami Daily News*. The *Miami Herald* carried Pearson, and the *Miami Daily News* carried an article on the financial page. My brother was a banker, and they had written this story that

was very uncomplimentary to bankers. It said that Frank Smathers, who is president of the Florida State Bankers has done something--I forget what it was--but it was very hurtful and he did it only for the betterment of his own stock in the bank or something like that. So he was telling me about this sad story by Drew Pearson, and I was saying, "Oh, my God." And I said, "By the way, did you see the story about you in the *Miami Daily News*?" He said no. I said, "Let me read it to you." So I got the paper and brought it back to read to him. "God almighty, can you believe that?" I said. He said, "Yeah, but that's about me!" That's just the way it is. If it's you, it's entirely different. It's always easy for a guy to be brave if it's about somebody else, even though it's about his friend.

**Ritchie:** Drew Pearson had a reputation of getting inside information from certain senators, [Wayne Morse](#) was one. People said that he was always providing things to him.

**Smathers:** Who was that?

**Ritchie:** Wayne Morse.

**Smathers:** Oh, sure, Wayne Morse and Drew Pearson were just like that.

**Ritchie:** Did that create a problem in the Senate, as to whom you could divulge information?

**Smathers:** Sure. You couldn't tell Wayne Morse anything. As I said earlier, Wayne Morse wanted to be, he would have voted to be in the minority. The worse thing that could ever have happened to Wayne Morse was for him to say that he was on the side of the majority. He didn't ever want to be there. He wanted to be an absolute iconoclast. He wanted to be different. He wanted to stand out because of his difference. [Proxmire](#) was somewhat like that, but not like Wayne. Proxmire was to my way of thinking a much more sensible, rational guy than was Wayne Morse. Wayne Morse was a big buddy of Drew Pearson's and they would just, you know, collaborate together. I think that Drew Pearson was the one that got Wayne to change from a Republican to a Democrat.

**Ritchie:** Another reporter who gave you a pretty rough time was Clark Mollenhoff.

**Smathers:** Yeah. Clark was a great big old fellow, about two inches taller than me, and I'm six foot two. He didn't like me for some reason, and I don't know exactly what it was. But he always gave me a hard time. I mean, whatever it was that he could find that was wrong, or he felt was wrong, he wanted to write it. Now, I don't remember exactly anything, but whatever it was that he could make me look bad, he made me look bad. And yet I got along with him. I'd laugh at

him, and he would laugh at me. I'd say, "Well, Clark you really cut me up today." He'd laugh and say, "Well, you wait till next week, I've really got something I'm going to cut you up with." He was also a great liberal, see. All the guys that opposed me were great liberal writers. I was a middle of the road guy and they didn't like that because I had a lot of influence with Jack Kennedy, and with Lyndon Johnson, and with the leadership, and was always up in the leadership myself. They didn't like that. If I had just been a raggedyass regular senator, why maybe I wouldn't have had any bad things written about me. It wouldn't have been worthwhile.

**Ritchie:** When you were a senator, was it still fairly common for senators to practice law on the outside and to carry on outside business?

**Smathers:** I didn't know anybody who did.

**Ritchie:** You didn't? It wasn't against the rules then.

**Smathers:** No, I don't know anybody who did. I still had my name in the office, but I didn't take any money from it, and I didn't practice law. I don't really know of any senator who did. I know a lot of them who kept their names there, even today. Claude Pepper had his name. [Danny Fascell](#) today has got his name in an office in Miami. I don't think Danny practices law at all, but he's in a big firm down there. I don't think we should do that. Today, I would say we ought to get out. There shouldn't even be that suggestion.

**Ritchie:** I was going to ask, is it possible if you're an officeholder like a senator, to do almost anything else on the outside without their being some question as to conflict of interest?

**Smathers:** I don't think that a senator or a congressman today should have any connection with any type of law firm, or be in anything that has government connections or government connotations. I think that you just have to be clean as Caesar's wife. You have to be above criticism. You have to be above reproach. I think that it's unwise for a congressman even to let his name be in a law firm, even though he doesn't do anything. I left my name in it, and looking back I wouldn't do that again. I didn't practice law, I didn't get any money, but what you keep thinking is that someday I might be defeated and I'll want to go back to that office. That's why you do it, mainly. You want to keep your name there so that if all of a sudden you're out of a job, which you could be at any election, that you've got a place to go. I think that's why they do it. I don't think it's because of the money, or the influence. As a matter of fact, I don't think there's any money in it for them. I think the other fellows make

the money, I don't think the senators do. Claude Pepper had a little outside business, he was on the board of directors of the Jefferson Savings and Loan Association. They may have given him a little something, but it didn't amount to anything. But I don't think it's a good idea. I'm opposed to people doing it. They should not do that.

I think it's very bad for a fellow to build up campaign contributions and keep them after he retires from the Senate. I think that's very dangerous. I think it should not be done because fellows who don't even have opposition, they go out and raise money--there's a story in today's paper in North Carolina when I left this morning, about a fellow who maybe secretary of agriculture or something, but he's built up a campaign fund over the years. They asked him: what are you going to do with it? He said, "I'm going to use it in my next campaign." But he's never had any opposition. He's not going to have any opposition this time, but he's out raising money. So he's got a hundred and fifty thousand dollars saved up, and then they point out that the law of North Carolina says that he can keep that. Well, that's not right, because people give it to him not to provide a sinecure for him after he's gone, they don't give him a retirement. That's not his pension program, he's got a pension program from the government when he gets out. That's wrong, he should be required to give that money back to the people.

Oh, I'm glad you brought this up. I'm the first fellow in Florida who ever sent back campaign contributions. I was the first guy ever to do that. I got more good publicity out of that than just about anything I ever did. See, I never had any tough race after 1950, so I was there eighteen years and it was easy to collect money because everybody thought I was going to win. But I'd send it all back. I'd show them what money had been spent, where it went, to establish a headquarters, that sort of thing, make a few television appearances, but it was a nothing deal. Here's where it went. Here's what you get back. I got more good publicity and more compliments on that than probably anything I ever did, which is interesting. I'm glad you brought that up.

**Ritchie:** I raised the question about outside interests because that always seems to raise implications.

**Smathers:** That's right.

**Ritchie:** Even if there's no evidence, there's a sense that if a person supports something they must somehow have some interest in it.

**Smathers:** It's the appearance. It's the appearance more than the fact. If it appears that you are a member of a big law firm, and then you see the law firm is now representing somebody who wants to build a cross-state canal or something, and you think, "Well, the congressman's name is in that firm, so obviously he's for it, and obviously they're going to get some big money because they represent it." It looks bad. Even if it doesn't happen that way it still looks bad. It's the appearance. You have to be as good in your life, and you must



appear totally honorable and above any sort of campaign bribery or payoffs or anything like that. You just cannot have anything to do with that, or look like you are.

**Ritchie:** Some of the press attacks on you dealt with the Dominican Republic, early in the '60s, and your support of the government there.

**Smathers:** Well, the reason they did was because I went down and visited Trujillo a couple of times. I know that they jumped on me for that because he was a well-known dictator. First, there was never any money involved, okay. The interesting thing about that was that compared to Haiti, compared to all the other Central American countries, believe it or not, Trujillo as dictatorial as he was, had more schools per thousand students than any other country in Central America. More paved roads per square mile of land than any other country in South America. More hospitals than any other country in Central or South America in point of numbers of people. So while he was a tough dictator, ran everything with an iron hand, still the people were better off, had better schools, better health care, better roads, than any other country. Now, they'd say to me, because he doesn't have elections you shouldn't go down there. Well, I'd go down there and talk to him about: when are you going to have elections? Just like I did with Fidel Castro. That was my bag--I don't like that word--that was the thing that I liked to do, to go to Central and South America. I was chairman of the committee for Central and South America, so I went there most every year. I got criticized because I went to see Trujillo, because a lot of the liberal press did not think I ought to go to see him. Well, I went to see him just like I did--who was the guy who came in after him?

**Ritchie:** Juan Bosch?

**Smathers:** Bosch, he's running this time again. Eighty years old. I knew Bosch.

**Ritchie:** And Balaguer.

**Smathers:** And Balaguer is today the president. Balaguer is blind. He was Trujillo's secretary. When I went to see Trujillo, Balaguer was there in the room. But look at them as compared to Haiti. Gee, what a disaster Haiti has been. Always. I went over there a couple of times to see Poppa what was his name?

**Ritchie:** Poppa Doc Duvalier.

**Smathers:** Duvalier. But I didn't go back because he was so disgusting. He didn't make any sense. He had no sense. Now, Trujillo was a smart son of a bitch. But like the old joke, he was our son of a bitch. He was on our side. He had been

in the United States Marine Corps. I mean, he had helped train the United States Marines. He was tough on his enemies, no question, but he

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did more for the country than has ever been done before or since. But I don't want to be remembered as the guy who tried to defend Trujillo.

I went to see Poppa Doc, I went on down and saw the Somoza's in Nicaragua in those days, I went on into Panama. I've got medals from Panama, helped them bring out democratic institutions. I went on into Venezuela. I visited them all.

**Ritchie:** But anyone who had any dealings with the Dominican Republic was always suspected of being in the pay of the Dominican Republic.

**Smathers:** Well, I wouldn't be surprised. He had a lot of people on his payroll, he had Rubirossa and people like that. But just because I went there, nobody ever accused me of ever being on his payroll. That's one thing that never happened. I never got accused of being dishonest. I got accused of making bad judgments, like they thought it was a bad judgment to visit Trujillo. Claude Pepper went to visit Joe Stalin. Now, you take dictator versus dictator, I don't know. He never got criticized because that was the liberal press. Who are you going to criticize? Is Trujillo in any way comparable to Joe Stalin? Gosh, Stalin killed millions. If Trujillo did, I don't know about it. He killed some, I have no doubt, I couldn't prove it, I don't know that, but I'm sure when he came into power he was a pretty tough guy.

**Ritchie:** About Latin America, you mentioned earlier about the senators and how hard it was to get them to pay attention. Did you find that the press paid much attention to Latin America?

**Smathers:** No, nobody. The press didn't pay any attention to Latin America either. Nobody did. It was a very uphill battle and a very discouraging battle. You get terribly discouraged about it. You know, you could go to Argentina and see the value of that country, a rich, marvelous country with really good people. When Peron was in, I visited him, spent a night in his palace and all this stuff, and talked to him on three or four different occasions. That was a wonderful country, but they had a very difficult time handling their own finances.

As I used to preach then, and I preach even today, we're going to find when the European Community comes into realization in 1990 and 1991, that there's going to be a wall around them where they trade with each other. They're not going to be trading with us if they can trade with each other. We're not going to be selling automobiles over there. We're not going to be selling tractors over there. We're not going to be selling the things we're selling over there today. Why? Because they'll be one big community and they're going to have one tariff wall and it will

be around those fourteen countries of Europe. Where are we going to trade? We're going to have to trade south. We should have started doing it a long time ago, building up the South American economy. They're rich countries, they're beautiful countries. They can produce certainly a lot of things

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that we can't produce. That's where we should have been looking all these years.

**Ritchie:** It seems like the press can only focus on Latin America if there's a crisis or a revolution. Why is that? Why is that on a regular basis it's a blank spot on the map?

**Smathers:** I don't know. I guess you did if you went to school at Oxford, like [Bill Fulbright](#), or Cambridge, or you went to the University of Paris, if you went into Heidelberg, to pick out some of the intellectual places, but when you went to high school, who ever took Latin American history? Nobody. You were required to take certain history, and what did everybody take? European history. Mid-European history between certain ages and so on. Everybody who comes out of school knows about France, they know about Germany, they know about Italy, they know about Russia, they know about Poland. They had all of that. But you asked these kids today, half of them, can they name four countries in South America, and they can't name them. The educational system has never been aimed at all to South America.

Our culture, most of it, has come from Europe, our families come from Europe. Your family, way back, came from Europe. My family, way back, came from Europe. We all came from Europe. Very few people in the United States--there are more and more of them--come from South America. So its natural to know a lot about your heritage, your genealogy takes you back to Germany, takes you back to Italy, takes you back to Poland, takes you back to France, takes you back to England, wherever. Damn little genealogy takes anybody back to Peru, or to Argentina, or Chile. So what do you do? When you go through school you study about what is interesting to your mother and daddy, what was interesting to their mother and daddy, it's Europe. But, economically speaking, we're going to find that our salvation is going to be with South America.

**Ritchie:** Was the Florida press more attuned to Latin America?

**Smathers:** Yes. We're closer to Cuba. It's more attuned. The answer to that is simply yes.

**Ritchie:** Probably more so now than when you were in office.

**Smathers:** More so now even then when I was there, that's right. We've got a congresswoman elected now from Claude Pepper's old district, actually my

congresswoman, who was born in Cuba. That's the first time we've had a Cuban-born person to be in the United States Congress. So more and more in the communities around Dade County there are five little separate communities and the mayor of each one of those is a Latin. So, all right, are you running out of things now to ask me?

**Ritchie:** Yes, I would like to come back one more time, if I could.

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**Smathers:** All right, but let's postpone it for maybe two weeks. That will give you time to think of something, and I may think of something else. I was glad--I wanted to get on the record today about the primary and about the campaign funds.

**Ritchie:** Well, at the end of the interview I'd like to wrap up by asking if there aren't any additional things that we haven't covered. So if there's anything I've left out, please let me know.

**Smathers:** I think that's good. I like it, and I appreciate your time.

[End of Interview #7]

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