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Interview #3: The Senate was a Club

(April 5, 1994)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

Ritchie: I had a question about the last interview, when you mentioned that Senator [Millikin](#) got the chairmanship of the Finance Committee over Senator [Butler](#). Did you mean Butler or [Robert Taft](#)?

Nichols: Butler. Taft didn't want it, so that meant that the next person after Taft was Hugh Butler, and Millikin was on the left of Butler [in seniority].

Ritchie: I wasn't sure, because I knew that Senator Taft also had seniority over Senator Millikin.

Nichols: Taft was in the same status as [Bob Dole](#). What I mean was nobody had to guess who was the majority leader. They knew who he was. At that particular time, Senator Taft had a brother. I don't remember who.

Ritchie: Was that Charles Taft, from Cincinnati?

Nichols: They were from Cincinnati. It could have been Charles. But something came up and they were going to have a confrontation between Taft and his brother. But they were smart enough, the senator didn't show at all and let his brother come on and give the testimony.

But Taft was a dry type of a person, very, very dry. They had one black fellow who worked on the labor force whose name was Mays. Mays' father had some kind of connections down at the White House. I don't know whether he was the doorkeeper or something. But as far as I know, Mays was the only person that Taft would stop in the hall and chat with. Everybody else he would just go on about his business.

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Ritchie: He must have remembered him from the days when his father was president.

Nichols: I think that's what it was.

Ritchie: All that sounds like what I've heard from other people, that Taft wouldn't say good morning to you in the halls.

Nichols: Uh-uh. See, I whispered in all of the members' ear. If they got a message I didn't go and blab out something. If I didn't write it on the pad I'd go in there and whisper it to him. That's all, he wouldn't say anything back. [Bobby Kennedy](#) was in that same category, even though he had been a staff person, before his brother became president. But most all the other senators were very jovial types, especially when we were in executive sessions. Different parts of the country had different produce and gimmicks and that type of thing. I think I mentioned that Georgia furnished peanuts and that kind of thing. And then when Senator [Byrd](#) became chairman, he always supplied each member of the Senate at Christmas time with a crate of apples. He also included me with a crate of apples. I received them up until he passed and his son was appointed [chuckles]. The son cut those apples off.

Ritchie: When you mentioned that about Bobby Kennedy, did you mean that he was very aloof when he was on the committee?

Nichols: He wasn't on the committee.

Ritchie: But as a senator?

Nichols: Yes, different committees used our committee room. When they did so, I was responsible for that room. So if it was interesting I'd stay and listen. If it wasn't, I'd just go about my business. But at this particular time I did receive an invitation -- I mentioned it the other day -- about a party. He was living in Georgetown. You went over to his house, and he was gone to another party. He never did get back before the party was over with!

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Ritchie: Was he a senator then?

Nichols: Yes, he was a senator. He never was flamboyant with automobiles. He had an old beat-up Cadillac, I believe it was a touring car. He had the big dogs in it.

Ritchie: Well, today I wanted to ask you about two Secretaries of the Senate, Les Biffle and Felton Johnston. We've talked about them, but I'd like to focus a little more on them, about who they were, and about your relations with the Secretary's office when they were Secretaries of the Senate. How about Leslie Biffle -- could you tell me a little about him?

Nichols: Leslie Biffle was from Arkansas and he was with Senator [Robinson](#). He campaigned for the senator, and he worked diligently when they had conventions. A very, very quiet man who had the highest respect of all of the senators, on both sides of the aisle. He was a very close friend to Skeeter, and I think that inspired Skeeter to pursue that office. You know that Skeeter Johnston went into the service, and when he came back he went downtown. I think he went to the State Department.

Ritchie: I think it was the State Department.

Nichols: One of the departments, and then he came back to accept the job as Secretary for the Majority.

Ritchie: He ran for that. Because Biffle became Secretary of the Senate and the job was open.

Nichols: That's right.

Ritchie: And he actually campaigned for the job, there were two or three other candidates who ran against him.

Nichols: Okay, Skeeter won out then, let's put it that way. I thought he did a pretty good job, because you have got to know the senators and know

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something about their personalities, because you could rub them the wrong way and you'd be in for a lot of trouble. When Senator [Harrison](#) died, they -- when I said they: Mrs. Blanton, and Skeeter and someone else, I don't know whether Mrs. Harrison or not -- but they wanted me to sit with the family [on the Senate floor during the funeral] and they wouldn't allow that in the Senate. They had a service in the Senate for Senator Harrison, and I sat in the balcony.

In the Secretary of the Senate's office, they had at least four, maybe five or six black fellows who worked there. You've probably heard the story on Vernon Talbert. Vernon had been with the Senate for some fifty years before he passed. When you went over to the Secretary's office, you had to clear yourself with Vernon. If you got past Vernon then you might be able to get into the room where Miss [Dorothea] Scott was.

Ritchie: Now, what kind of a person was Vernon Talbert?

Nichols: Vernon was a very deep person, and he should have been because he had experiences in meeting a lot of statesmen all down through the years. He

knew how to apply himself and impress people. They would go directly -- it was a club. The senators would come off of the floor and go on into the Secretary's office to relax and have a drink. My first run-in with Vernon was when I was with Senator Harrison, but before I knew him. I was on the staff and the senator had gone over to the Capitol, and he was lollygagging with Vice President [Garner](#), and then he went to the Secretary's office and called the office and told them to have Jesse bring his hat and coat over there. At that time, I hadn't met the senator. So they called me and I got his hat and coat and carried them over there. And Vernon stopped me at the door. I was sitting out there for quite some time. The senator called back to the office and said, "Where is Jesse?" They said, "He should have been there, senator." Then he said something to Mr. Biffle, and they opened the door, and I'm sitting out there. He told Vernon, "When I call for that man there, don't you ever stop him anymore!" [laughs]

Then when Skeeter became Secretary, Skeeter would call and I would go in. Vernon learned his lesson, he didn't stop me either. I'd go on in there and

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spend several hours, lollygagging around, talking about what was happening. Between the two, I would think that Mr. Biffle had more experience with the type of work that he was doing. As I said, he smoothed things out. Even during the conventions, if a senator was having problems, he knew how to step in and pick up the reins and smooth things out. He was very quiet, very quiet. When he came over to the Finance Committee, that was the first and only time I ever saw him over there, and his purpose was to tell me, "Take it easy, be quiet and cool," because if Senator George didn't keep me, that I would always have something to do with him.

Another little interesting story, Mr. Ritchie, that actually happened, was that when Skeeter moved up to be Secretary of the Senate then Bobby Baker came on the scene. Bobby had a little pull in with Senator [Kerr](#). He didn't have much trouble in getting the job -- what was he?

Ritchie: He was Secretary of the Majority.

Nichols: Secretary of the Majority. Anyway, Bobby was sitting across the desk from the two of us one Saturday morning. We both were drinking, and Skeeter said, "Bobby, you see that man sitting across there." Bobby had never met me. He said, "Yes." Skeeter said, "The only reason that you've got your job is because he is black and you are white," or something of that sort. So I had a good thing going with Bobby. That's where I met Joe [Stewart], when he was in that particular office. But out of the two Secretaries, I would think that Mr. Biffle had more clout than Skeeter did. Skeeter was hard working -- both of them were hard working -- but in my estimation, Mr. Biffle was a natural for that position.

Ritchie: Skeeter would call you up on Saturday mornings to come over to his office?

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Nichols: Not every Saturday, but when he felt like he wanted to talk. I'd say, "Man, you know my position." He'd say, "To hell with that! You come on over. You've got nothing to worry about" with that particular person -- I don't think I should be calling them by name. I'd go over sometimes around 9:30 and stay there until 12 or 1 o'clock.

Ritchie: So you liked to swap stories about the old days or what?

Nichols: I don't know what we would talk about. He knew my family personally and he would ask a whole lot of questions about my son and the family. Or he heard something from his mother down in Clarksdale, and he'd tell me about what had happened to his brother. I met his brother only here, I didn't know him in Clarksdale.

Ritchie: The Secretary of the Senate traditionally kept the well, the bar for the senators to come and have a drink. So would he invite you to come and have a drink with him?

Nichols: That's right. I went in and he would say, "all right, yo know where the bourbon is." On either side the bookcases were stacked high with scotch and bourbon. As a matter of fact, Skeeter starting drinking a little bit too much, and President Johnson, who was majority leader then, threatened to fire him if he didn't pull himself up and straighten out. I only remember one time that Senator Harrison offered me a drink. They had something going on, I don't know what it was. What's that club that the newspaper fellows have?

Ritchie: Oh, the Gridiron?

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Nichols: The Gridiron, yes. They had that down, I think it was at the Washington Hotel. I dropped the senator off and he said "pick me up about twelve o'clock." So I went on home and watched the clock. It started snowing. I mean, it really came down. At that particular time, the automobiles didn't have defrosters on them. From time to time when I picked the senator up, I would have to get out and clean that windshield. Sometimes I'd have to stand on the running board. Once I got out of the heavy traffic -- see, he had moved from Connecticut and Cathedral Avenue out beyond American University, out around 46th or 47th Street, out beyond Ward Circle -- there weren't any cars traveling

out there that particular morning. So when I got him to the house, he said, "You come on in and have a drink," and he gave me a bottle of Old Granddad, and that was my favorite bourbon for a long time!

Ritchie: Do you know whether Skeeter Johnston was very close to [Lyndon Johnson](#), when he was majority leader?

Nichols: I think he was. President Johnson was a member of the Finance Committee, but he had a light heart attack a little after he was first appointed, and after that he pulled off of the Finance Committee.

Ritchie: Did you see much of him in the halls?

Nichols: Lyndon Johnson?

Ritchie: Yeah.

Nichols: Most of the time I saw him was over in the Capitol. See, we'd have those conferences, and sometimes we'd have hearings over there. The

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'54 [tax] code, most of that code was written over there. It was under the Republican [Millikin](#) as chairperson.

Ritchie: What was your impression of Lyndon Johnson when you did see him?

Nichols: I thought he was shrewd, an awfully shrewd man. I noticed how he had worked over on the House side before he came over to the Senate side. I didn't know Vice President Garner, but Speaker [Rayburn](#) would stop and talk to us. There were several of us, he had his chauffeur, and we'd be standing around in the hall there past his office, and he's stop and talk to us. Especially he did one time I remember when [Adam Clayton Powell](#) was having that trouble up in New York. He had told Powell what he could do to straighten himself out and everything would be smooth. But Powell couldn't see it that way. He was awfully haughty. It got to the place where Powell had to sneak back to New York every Sunday, he couldn't go back on the weekdays or Saturday, because they had an outstanding warrant to arrest him. But you know, in my estimate Powell and Congressman [\[William\] Dawson](#) placed on the statute books more legislation than any blacks I have seen. Powell did wonders when he was on the Labor Committee.

Rayburn was a down-to-earth type of person. [Wilbur Mills](#) was the same way. I could talk to Congressman Mills just like I'm talking to you. As a matter of fact,

the last time I saw him, or talked to him, was when Wilbur Cohen was there as Secretary of HEW. The senators paid tribute to Wilbur Cohen the same day that they spoke on me in the Senate [in 1967], if you look in the *Congressional Record* you'll see that somebody was paying tribute to him. But he had always worked with the Committee in the capacity of pushing legislation through, before he worked up to being secretary.

Ritchie: So you saw Wilbur Mills at what, a ceremony for Wilbur Cohen?

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Nichols: No, we were working on a conference, and a vote came up and all the senators had to leave. And while they were gone, Wilbur Mills was there, and Wilbur Cohen, and I was there, because I had to put out the papers for my members. We sat there almost half an hour chewing the rag. But he was down to earth. Cooper, I don't know whether Mr. Cooper was related to the Congressman [\[Jim\] Cooper](#) that we have now. They were both from Tennessee.

Ritchie: [John Sherman Cooper](#).

Nichols: No, he was from Kentucky.

Ritchie: Oh, Congressman [\[Jere\] Cooper](#) [chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and the Joint Committee on Internal Revenue Taxation].

Nichols: Congressman Cooper, he followed Mr. [\[Robert\] Doughton](#) as head of the Ways and Means Committee, then Mr. Mills. In my estimation, that man [Wilbur Mills] was the most brilliant tax lawyer in town. He didn't require any of the experts to prompt him.

I'd like to mention another thing, Mr. Ritchie, we were talking about Senator Harrison. He was a brilliant manipulator, in this regard: we'd have these long, drawn-out hearings, and you would be testifying, and if you lost your page, or you stopped for a few minutes, he'd say, "Thank you, Mr. Ritchie." And you wouldn't have the heart to say "Well, I wasn't through yet." [laughs] You'd gather up your papers and go on about your business. He was a master in that type of thing. Also in maneuvering in the conference. See, the average person in the public has the idea that you presented your views before the Congress and they would have a whole lot of weight. It has no more weight than filling up the wastebasket when they go to decide, especially in the conference -- that's where the law is really written, in the conference. Kerr was good in switching votes in conference, but Harrison was a master at it.

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Ritchie: Did you ever sit in on the conferences?

Nichols: Every one of them! I sat in on every conference from the Revenue Code of '39 -- see I came in November '37, and they only had a short session and quit before Christmas and went home. Then the big session started in January. That's where I go back to Skeeter, he saw that I knew what was required and what was expected of me, and he had all of his documents to take over. But I had the weight of it, because I was providing for the whole committee. I sat in every conference.

Ritchie: Did those conferences get pretty heated?

Nichols: Yes, very heated. The House side would move out and go into a closet or something, and the Senate would do the same thing.

Ritchie: They would caucus and then come back to negotiate?

Nichols: Yes. You see, before the '39 code, all your revenue bills were separate. Then they codified all the tax bills. That was in effect up until the '54 code. I don't know what the situation is now.

Ritchie: One famous story was in 1944, when President Roosevelt vetoed a revenue bill, the first time a president ever did. Senator [Barkley](#) got so upset that he resigned as majority leader.

Nichols: And was reelected, yes. I remember that. Barkley and Senator [\[Henry\] Cabot Lodge](#) were the only two senators to serve on that

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committee twice. Lodge did it because he went into the service. Barkley did it after he had served his term as vice president.

Ritchie: He was pretty old by then.

Nichols: Yes, but they put him at the foot of the seniority list.

Ritchie: Barkley had been the nemesis of Senator Harrison in that campaign back in 1937 to become majority leader.

Nichols: Yes, Harrison lost by one vote. That's where Roosevelt and Senator Harrison parted ways. The president let it be known that he preferred Barkley.

Ritchie: Well, what was your impression on the committee.

Nichols: I think [laughs] of all the storytellers on the committee, Barkley was outstanding. He could tell some weird stories! One I remember, he said that he went back home and said "I've done this for this constituent and that for that family" in some little town in Kentucky, and somebody got the word to him, they said: "Senator, you'd better go down and see that family, because things don't look good for you." He said, "No, no, you must have the wrong information because I got this one a job, and I got that one a job." The man said, "I'm telling you, you'd better go back down there." So he went back down and asked this person, "Didn't I get you a job?" Yes." "Didn't I get your brother a job?" "Yes." Well, he said, "What's this I hear about you people going to vote for the other side?" He said, "Well, senator you haven't done anything for us lately." [laughs] He used to tell that to the other senators and they'd sit up there and laugh. It was, in my estimation, a real club.

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Ritchie: I get the impression from the way you've described various senators that you liked a lot of the southern senators maybe better than the others. Was it the fact that you came from Mississippi and you liked the old boy storytellers better?

Nichols: Mr. Ritchie, this is what I found out: when I was going to Howard and people leaving, going back home to the South because they knew that they could find something to do, or some way to live, everybody that I would run into was headed back home. They said, "What you found out, friend, was if a southern man told you 'I'm going to do so and so for you,' you can go home and go to sleep on it, because he didn't have to lie to you." I think that applied in the Senate, too. If you go back and look at the history of the Finance Committee, you'll find that most of the chairmen were southerners. If they said, "I'm going to do something," that was it. I might have had that in mind. That's the kind of treatment that I got from Senator Harrison's staff, and the senator himself, and Senator George and Mrs. George, and the senator's son.

Senator George had two sons. Hood he made his administrative assistant, and Hood took after his mother. In other words, he didn't pursue any higher education goals or that type of thing. He was just a plain old Georgia farmer. Mrs. George, who was in my estimation every bit a lady, she could tell some powerful stories. Both of them would talk with me. The son assured me that I would have no trouble, when a certain party or the staff was trying to get after me. He said, "Jesse, you don't have to worry, Poppa's going to take care of you." And he did.

I didn't find that warmth in Senator [\[Harry\] Byrd](#). I could understand that, because the senator had a thing about colored people. But he did tell his staff -- some woman wanted a job to teach school in Virginia. She had high credentials and a degree, and I mentioned that to Mr. Menefee, who was his A.A., and he told

the senator that I had manifested interest in this person. A couple of days after the senator said, "Menefee" -- Peaches, they called him -- he said, "Peaches, you look into that matter that Jesse is interested in, and

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whatever it is, do it." Then I found out that man [Senator Byrd] had the whole state of Virginia in the palm of his hands, right down to ordinary school teachers. But he had this thing about colored people. He was the one that offered to put up \$50,000 for bail for the governor of Mississippi when the president and [Bobby Kennedy](#) were going to put him in jail. Ross Barnett was the governor. Byrd put in a call from the committee's conference room to Ross Barnett to let him know that he would put up whatever the bail was. Then he told them one day that his operation down in Virginia was so huge that they could back a full freight car in his factory and in a half an hour fill it to the top with nothing but products that he manufactured. And yet he had an eighth-grade education.

Ritchie: Did you find him a difficult person to talk to, in comparison to the other chairmen?

Nichols: Mmm-hmm. I could talk with [George](#), and of course I talked with Senator [Harrison](#), and Senator [Long](#) I could talk with him. But I found, when I wanted to talk to Byrd, I would get someone to talk to him for me.

Ritchie: In the 1950s, when Byrd became chairman, it was also the time when there was a lot of civil rights legislation on the floor.

Nichols: That's right.

Ritchie: Did that spill over into the committee. Did you get a sense of his involvement there?

Nichols: No.

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Ritchie: He kept his Finance Committee work pretty separate from that?

Nichols: Separate, yes. It was only Millikin, when Millikin became chairperson he moved his suite of offices closer to the Finance Committee. George didn't. George was on the third floor but he was all the way around the other side, facing Union Station. Byrd's suite of offices were down next to Pat Harrison's. Pat Harrison's was the first suite on the first floor. You made me think of a story. You know after Reconstruction, the Republicans still had patronage in the South. In

Mississippi, there was a black fellow named Perry Howard. He was the Republican National Committeeman, I believe, in Mississippi. He and Senator Harrison were just like that [holds two fingers together]. When the Republicans were in power, the senator could work through and talk to Perry Howard. When the Democrats were in, Perry Howard could do the same thing with Pat Harrison. As a matter of fact, I think Perry got into some trouble selling jobs. I think he sold some post office jobs, and the senator got him out of it.

One particular thing, something happened, and I knew about it. I was talking to a classmate up at Howard who was taking law, and I mentioned this thing about Pat Harrison and Perry Howard. Usually this fellow would sit around the house and talk for two or three hours in the evening, but in less than five minutes he was out of there. The minute that I had mentioned it, I knew I had done the wrong thing. I told him, "Davidson, don't you go and mention that to Perry Howard, because I could lose my job." He couldn't get out of there fast enough [laughs]. He got on the phone and called and relayed what had happened to Perry Howard.

The first thing the next morning, when I brought the senator down, I looked down the corridor and I saw Perry walking. When he looked around and saw us -- I was walking about ten feet behind the senator with his hat and coat -- and he had a little hideaway (that's why I said I knew about these hideaways). Perry turned his face and was walking, and when he looked back he didn't see anybody walking but me. There he was struck. The senator went on into his

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hideaway, and I went on down to the office. When I walked in, Mrs. Blanton knew that the senator was in his hideaway. I hung his hat and coat up.

So Perry was caught in the middle. There wasn't anything he could do but go into the main office. He went in, and he prepared himself. He figured if he couldn't get a chance to see the senator, he wrote this letter saying that he had made this speech down in Mississippi, and the secretary or somebody who had typed the thing instead of saying "Senator Bilbo," they said "Senator Harrison" when he meant to say [Bilbo](#). All right, he wrote this letter and left it with Mrs. Blanton. Mrs. Blanton called me in my office and said -- there was a Negro paper in Washington called the *Afro* -- she said, "Go out and buy a copy of the *Afro* for such and such a day, or week." I went out and bought the *Afro*, and the whole speech was printed in the *Afro*.

What had happened was that Mrs. Harrison had a maid that was very limited in education, but not so much that she looked in the *Afro* and saw this story, and she was working for Mrs. Harrison, so she mentioned something about Perry Howard. The minute that she mentioned Perry Howard, Mrs. Harrison's ears

flopped up, and in a few minutes she called down and told Mrs. Blanton what was happening. So Mrs. Blanton called me to get the paper.

We were riding home that evening, and the senator said, "I just wonder how old Perry got that knowledge." That shows you how shrewd the man was. What he was doing he was telling me that he knew that came from me, see. Perry Howard told this friend of mine, "Don't worry about no job, I can get him a job in the post office." But when the senator said that to me, the next day I went in the files and I got this letter from Perry Howard addressed to the senator, in which he was explaining all this. He actually had a whole lot to lose, because he had pulled a boo-boo. I put the letter in my pocket and went home, and sure enough this fellow came by that night, as usual. I said, "Davidson, do you remember the other night I was telling you about Perry Howard and the senator." He said, "Yeah." "And I asked you not to mention that to him." He said, "Yeah." I pulled the letter out of my pocket, and I said, "Well, how do you explain this?" He said, "Why that son of a bitch," he promised me to do this, and to do that for you." I said, "But he didn't tell you that he's got two sons that

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he's been trying to get jobs for each one of them, and hasn't been successful in doing that." When the whole things came up, I said, "You lost a very valuable friend in me by doing that." Don't you know, Senator Harrison never mentioned it again. That was all he ever said about that. I learned then to keep my nose out of other people's business.

Another interesting little story that happened, and then I'll let it go, Senator Harrison had this big old Chrysler Imperial, and that was the one he had the accident with. Then he bought a smaller Chrysler. There was only one person that I knew of that he would let ride in his car, and that was this Commissioner George Allen that I mentioned earlier. Sometimes he and George Allen would ride together when we headed out to Burning Tree. But there was a caddy out at Burning Tree that the senator thought the world of. And that caddy hadn't had a bath in two years, at the most -- I know it! I would be driving on River Road, and we were flying. About two miles out from Burning Tree, we saw this old fellow. I don't know what that fellow's name was. The senator was chewing on his cigar and he said, "Jesse, wasn't that so and so?" I said, "Yes, senator, that was him." He said, "Well, back up and get him." I had to stop and then back that car way back up. The caddy got in the front seat and turned around and the senator said, "Well how are you?" He said, "Senator, I'm all right. How are you, you old S.O.B." [laughs] He called the senator that! They would laugh at each other and talk. He made me do that three times, every time I would pass him. Nobody else. He'd say, "You take the car and go on home, I'll hitch a ride home myself." But when he saw that fellow out of the corner of his eye, he'd make me stop and get him." But that's just the type of character that man was.

Ritchie: He had a big personality.

Nichols: Yes, a real big personality.

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Ritchie: You mentioned about the *Afro* and that raised a question about newspaper reporters. You mentioned that the newspaper reporter used to come to the Finance Committee, and I wondered if you got to meet any of the black newspaper reporters in those days?

Nichols: No, I didn't. That was one thing that amused me. We had a Cabinet member, a black Cabinet member. He was Housing Secretary.

Ritchie: Oh, yes, I know who you mean.

Nichols: He was Secretary of Housing, and he appeared before a committee -- not the Finance Committee -- that was holding hearings on him. Weaver was his name, Robert Weaver. That was the first time that I knew how sharp and penetrating Bobby Kennedy's mind was. All of the rest of the members of the committee asked questions, and Weaver had a whole series of fifteen staff people with him. They'd ask the question and then he'd turn to this one and that one, if that one didn't know he'd ask the next and go on down. Bobby Kennedy came on and asked his questions, and he just picked Weaver clean as a goose. He wasn't trying to embarrass him, but he was letting Weaver know that when you come before the Senate you ought to be prepared so that you can answer their questions.

That's where you found out what a person was thinking. For instance, you had [Ralph Flanders](#). Senator Flanders was an outstanding engineer before he became a senator, he had a brilliant mind. You could listen to the type of questions he asked and you could get some inkling of how the person who was asking the questions thought. I would think this, Mr. Ritchie, that between myself and the stenographer who was taking down the report on the hearings and the meetings, I got a chance to hear more than Skeeter did or any other clerk, because Skeeter and the rest of them could leave and go about their business. But I stayed there from the time that the hearings opened until they were concluded. I would hear so much of that stuff that it would go in one ear

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and right out the other. Other times there would be something interesting going on that you could learn a whole lot by just listening.

Ritchie: You mentioned that a lot of reporters used to come down to the committee. Did they ever ask you about what was going on, sort of pump you for information?

Nichols: Yes. But they soon stopped doing that. We had a couple of outstanding reporters. They weren't of the caliber of Walter Cronkite, but they were brilliant tacticians. One or two of them would walk down the hall -- have you been over to that committee room? -- that back room next to the senator's office was the entrance where the senators came in. Sometimes I'd walk from there down toward the front of the office, my office was the first room to the north of the committee room. Some of the younger or newer reporters would rush up to ask me a question, but they soon wouldn't have dared to ask me anything. And they knew that I knew what was going o

When we moved over to the new building, and Senator Long became chairman, the reporters got to Long, especially the fellows who were over in the Senate Press Gallery. They wanted to make some new arrangements in the press tables. I told them, "No, leave the press tables just like I've got them" So they went to Senator Long, and he told them okay. As a matter of fact, just before the hearing was supposed to start, he got down himself and helped them arrange the press tables like they wanted. [chuckles] It created so much confusion that after that he told them, "Hell, don't bother with those press tables. If Jesse wants to stack them on top of each other, leave them like that! He knows what's going on."

Ritchie: Well, how would you arrange the press tables?

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Nichols: Sometimes I'd have a "T." It depended on how large the hearings were going to be. I mean, the interest was always great for big tax bills and that kind of thing, and some tariffs, especially if it had something to do with the Japanese trades. The Japanese, I don't know how they would get the message so fast, but they'd fill that room up.

Ritchie: Would you have a lot of problems between the newspaper people and the magazine people and the broadcast people?

Nichols: Mmm-hmm.

Ritchie: You'd have to set aside so much space for each?

Nichols: Yes. Usually, if we were going to have a big hearing, the day before the statements and reports would be delivered to the committee and then they would be delivered to my office. I would take out enough for the various newspaper services. They had this one fellow who would come over, and he would receive

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what I'd put out, and it would be his job to distribute the documents to the press people. But you'd have a tax bill, and they'd come over for the committee print, because they couldn't get a copy of it other than through us. I'd do a lot of favors, there were people that I'd take care of.

Ritchie: So you had favorite reporters?

Nichols: Mmm-hmm.

Ritchie: Because they came around regularly?

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Nichols: Mmm-hmm.

Ritchie: Did you get others who would complain because they'd get there too late and couldn't get the papers?

Nichols: No, that was their problem. I didn't have anything to do with the seating of anybody, other than the members of the committee -- and they had their seats assigned by seniority. If you really want to hear some sour grapes, you let somebody sit in another one's place. They highly regarded their seniority and they would sit according to their seniority.

Ritchie: So it was wise for a junior senator to leave some empty seats and not to move up to sit in a senior senator's seat if he was absent.

Nichols: That's right. [\[John\] Williams](#) did that once. He was bumped and they put him off, and he got back on the committee. I used to make sure that he got a lot of information, and I guess that's one reason why he thought so much of me.

Ritchie: But among the reporters you didn't get to meet people like Louis Lautier, and Alice Dunnigan, and Ethel Payne, who were the first black reporters who covered Capitol Hill back in the '40s and the '50s?

Nichols: No.

Ritchie: I guess they didn't cover tax issues.

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Nichols: No, they wouldn't cover tax issues. Mr. Ritchie, we had conference during the Washington riots in 1968. This thing lasted until 12:30 or a quarter to one. Most all of the conferences were over on the House side. When Harrison was

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chairman of Finance, they had to go fifty-fifty: half would be over on the Senate side, and half on the House side.

You know, Mr. Ritchie, another interesting thing occurred, for what it is worth. Senator Harrison, when he didn't get to be majority leader, he became President Pro Tempore. He would ask me, "What's up on the floor?" And that started me to reading the *Congressional Record*. I'd read that *Record* the first thing in the morning, when I'd come in. I'd glance through it hurriedly to see if there was anything that I had to have on Finance, because if there was, I'd order it.

I read this story in the *Record* one day about this black preacher down in Alabama, and his name was Martin Luther King. At that particular time, they had put him in jail. The white clergymen tried to persuade him not to go through with his demonstrations, but he went ahead with the rest of the people that they arrested. Senator [Paul Douglas](#) put this story in the *Congressional Record*, and I saw it and I sent a copy of the *Record* to my brother-in-law, who had his Masters' and Doctorate from Harvard University. He's a minister. But that was the type of person Douglas was. He would step into something like that. He did the same thing when Senator [Inouye](#) appeared before the committee and nobody knew who he was. Then when it came Douglas' turn to question, he beautifully told the story of the contributions that the senator had made, losing an arm in the service. Douglas would do those kind of things.

Ritchie: Well, you had some real giants on the committee at that time. I was just looking at the list in the 1950s and '60s. In addition to Kerr and Long, you had [Clinton Anderson](#), Paul Douglas, [Albert Gore](#), [Eugene McCarthy](#), and [George Smathers](#), and the Republicans had [Wallace Bennett](#), [Norris Cotton](#), and [Frank Carlson](#), so it was an eminent committee.

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Nichols: Carlson was across the hall from the committee in the old Russell Building. I thought he was a brilliant man too.

Ritchie: I assume there must have been some tensions inside the committee, between people like Douglas and Gore, the liberals on the committee, and some of the conservatives on the committee. Did that develop at all?

Nichols: You might catch a little smattering of it when they would be pursuing a line of questioning that would irritate the liberals or the conservatives. They'd break in on each other. That's where you would get that kind of tension.

Ritchie: Since your committee dealt with taxes, and oil and gas issues and things like that, did you get a lot of lobbyists coming around your office, looking for documents and information?

Nichols: Oh, yes.

Ritchie: Were there some who came regularly?

Nichols: Yes. And we'd get some of those defeated Congressmen who would come over as lobbyists. One in particular [chuckles] came over to gather up documents, statements, and what not. He'd come regularly when the hearings began and I'd hand him copies of the statements. Then he wanted a franked envelope large enough to put five or six statements into. Then he would seal it and address it and throw it down the chute. He didn't pay any postage. One morning he came in, and Miss Springer came around for something, and he said to me, "Now, George, I notice that you smoke a pipe. Here's something to get yourself some tobacco." And she jumped on him with hands and feet. She

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told him, "His name is not George, his name is Jesse Nichols, and if you can't call him that, don't call him anything at all." And she said, "Don't insult him by offering him a dollar to buy tobacco." I just looked at him, and I said, "Well, Congressman so and so, if I get to the place where I can't buy my own tobacco, I'll stop smoking altogether."

But we had all types of people lobbying, coming in and asking for this or that. Once person in particular was Alvoid of the law firm of Alvoid and Alvoid. In my estimation he had the most brilliant mind of anyone I knew besides Wilbur Mills on taxes. He would come up with his statement, and I'd put them around. Then he would stand -- he never would sit down while he was testifying. He would stand before the committee and you could just read that statement and he was going right down it word for word. He had a beautiful memory.

They would all take care of you during Christmas time [chuckles]. It got to the place that you soon learned that people aren't going to give you something for nothing. They expected something in return. That got out of hand and you had to cut it out.

Ritchie: They were always looking for favors in return, in other words?

Nichols: That's right.

Ritchie: You mentioned former Congressmen as lobbyists. Did you get any former senators coming around as lobbyists?

Nichols: I don't remember a single senator coming back -- oh, yes I do, [Scott Lucas](#). He used to come around. Smathers didn't. He never came back around.

Ritchie: What was your impression of [George Smathers](#)? He was on the committee for a long time.

Nichols: I loved Senator Smathers. He was sincere, a real handsome man. He was a playboy and he'd watch the ladies. He'd come into the hearings and say, "Jesse, who's that sitting down there in the third row?" He'd have me go down and find out who this particular woman was and report back to him. But it was a delight to see him preside over the committee. In the evening when we'd only have one senator, we could only get one senator to come in for a few minutes to preside, and somebody else would come in, could pick it up and go on. You could tell the people who were

Ritchie: Did you see much of [John Kennedy](#) when he was a U.S. senator?

Nichols: No, he was on a different committee. I saw him after he had been nominated, you know that period between being nominated and winning the election. He stopped over the House side where we had a conference going on. I got a chance to shake his hand. I saw more of his brother than I did him.

Ritchie: Senator Kerr became a problem for the Kennedy administration when he took after Medicare and beat them. That was a big issue in your committee at that time.

Nichols: Mmm-hmm. Oh, I'd like to tell you a little story about Senator [Kerr](#). His methods could be aggravating, the way he would pursue his point. We were over in the old building, that's the Russell building, and we had somebody appear before the committee who decided that he would present his testimony in the form of a religious sermon. I don't know whether it was Moses

that he was talking about, but he started out quoting the Bible, and Kerr stopped him. Kerr wasn't presiding, but Kerr stopped him and said, "Mr. Chairman, let him hold that point right there." And just as if he was talking to the full room, he said, "Jesse, get me a Bible." We had one young lady who was a Christian Scientist, and she had a Bible, so I brought that out there. He said, "Wait just a minute," and he made that man wait until he had read the verses in the Bible on that particular issue, because this guy had been giving them quotes. Several times he did that, and a newspaper reporter got out a story about Kerr requesting Jesse get this Bible. Another time, Senator Gore came in and he liked to use a lot of big words. He used one word, and Kerr said, "Wait a minute, Albert, what did you say?" [laughs] Gore repeated it, and Kerr said, "Jesse, get me a dictionary!" He

made Gore stop and wait right there until he looked up that word and satisfied himself about it.

Out of all the members we had on that committee, the two of them, Gore and Kerr, were after each other. Kerr at that particular time had the best breed of Black angus cattle in the country and Gore developed an interest in cattle. He'd be sitting up there in a hearing while somebody else was busy with the committee work and he'd be reading this catalog on these cattle. He bought one bull from Kerr for \$50,000, just one bull. I think he bought Senator Kerr's cattle after the senator passed.

I got a call from Senator Kerr two days before he died. I didn't realize his condition at that time. He wanted to speak to Serge Benson. I answered the phone, and he said, "I'd like to speak to Serge Benson." I tried to make an excuse, because Benson wasn't there. He said, "Jesse, this is Senator Kerr." I said, "Yes, senator, I recognized your voice." He said, "Well, all right." But he was demanding, you didn't pussyfoot around with him.

Ritchie: He wasn't the chairman of the committee, but he really was a big power on it?

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Nichols: He was a big power. [Byrd](#) had told him that he was going to retire, and then Byrd went back on his word. Kerr told me that.

Ritchie: And Byrd wasn't in very good health during his last term, was he?

Nichols: I don't know. Byrd lived in the Wardman Park Apartments, and he used to take his constitution early in the morning. He'd dress like a tramp. In fact the Park Police picked him up one morning. They had to get somebody to come and identify him [laughs]. They thought he was a tramp. Even when he was in Virginia, there was some mountain called "Old Rag," and that's where he spent his weekends, tramping around that mountain. He'd have outstanding statesmen like [Winston] Churchill spend the night at his plantation. And he had this little old dog, the same breed as Roosevelt's dog, Fala, you remember that story? And that dog would follow the senator in when he came in the morning and stay in that office all day long. They'd put out food for him, till the senator got ready to go home. The other person who had a dog was Kerr. He had one of that great big dogs, tall as that table.

Ritchie: The other day when you talked about Kerr, you said you thought he was essentially a very lonely man. I was wondering about that. He was gregarious when he was around the Senate, wasn't he? Didn't he have friends in the Senate?

Nichols: Yes, of course, most of his life was spent in the Senate. He would do things like this: he'd find out that some staff person, or some woman on the Senate payroll, needed something, and he would take care of it. He would do it in a hushed manner. He taught Sunday School back in Oklahoma every Sunday morning. He had his own airplane and staff standing by to take him home on the weekends and bring him back on Monday mornings.

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Ritchie: But you think he was lonely outside of the Senate?

Nichols: I thought he was. A lot of the senators would go to these receptions and dinners, and he didn't participate in that kind of thing. Even a bunch of the staff could go to these things. His wife just didn't like Washington. He didn't have a big huge mansion back in Oklahoma City. As a matter of fact, he bought a motel adjoining his property. Whenever his friends would go to visit him in Oklahoma, they each had their own motel room. [chuckles]

He told a story about when they were driving through some small town, and his daughter was making eyes at the gas station attendant. Kerr thought that she was giving him a whole lot of attention. So when he got the chance, he called up the attendant and asked him about himself. He asked him about his education, and he said, "It looks like my daughter is interested in you." He said, "If you want to go to school, I'll see that you go to school, but if you think you're going to marry my daughter, you've got another thought coming!" [laughs]

Ritchie: You said you thought Kerr was particularly close to Bobby Baker in those days?

Nichols: Yes, he was close to Bobby. See, Bobby was handling the money that came in as contributions to the Democratic campaign committee. I think that's what he went to prison for, misappropriating funds. But he was real close to Kerr.

Ritchie: Would you see him often around the committee?

Nichols: Bobby? No, sir.

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Ritchie: But over in the Capitol?

Nichols: In the Capitol, yes.

Ritchie: He was another southerner. He was from South Carolina. Quite a few of Senate staff were southerners.

Nichols: Mmm-hmm. Senator [Byrnes](#), I mentioned earlier that had been close to Senator Harrison. He was appointed to the Supreme Court, I think by [Truman](#).

Ritchie: By [Roosevelt](#); Truman made him Secretary of State.

Nichols: Yes, because when Roosevelt died, Byrnes was at home, and he came flying up from South Carolina. Truman told him. "Go on back and take your rest, if I have need for you I'll call and tell you when to come back." I knew President Truman when he chaired that Truman Committee [Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program]. He had come up kind of a hard way. At that time, the Democratic party had those machines. Truman was a member of the machine in Missouri. Tennessee had an awfully strong machine, in that the mayor of Memphis [Ed Crump] was the big shot who ran the whole state of Tennessee. You had a machine in New Jersey. And the other was the Byrd Machine in Virginia.

Ritchie: But Truman had to live down that reputation.

Nichols: He did have to live that down.

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Ritchie: His committee met right around the corner from yours.

Nichols: Yes, in the Caucus Room.

Ritchie: During the Second World War.

Nichols: I saw [Charles] Lindbergh testify in there. There was an American flying ace....

Ritchie: Jimmy Doolittle?

Nichols: No, not Doolittle, this was a World War I ace. He organized an airline.

Ritchie: Oh, Eddie Rickenbacker.

Nichols: Eddie Rickenbacker. He went somewhere and his plane went into the ocean. He was in the ocean for several days. I have a copy of the *Life* magazine where he's on the cover. Eddie Rickenbacker was from Georgia, and this Christie Bell Kennedy, this young lady that I was telling you about who was with Senator

George, she knew Mrs. Rickenbacker. As a matter of fact, Christie Bell Kennedy, myself, and Mrs. Rickenbacker met the plane after the rescue, the first time that her husband came back to the country.

Ritchie: Well, it's a real parade of prominent people that you've had a chance to meet.

End of Interview #3

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