

Howard Henry Baker, Jr.

(born 1925)

Howard Henry Baker, Jr., was the first popularly elected Republican senator from Tennessee, serving in the U.S. Senate from 1967 to 1985. Born in Huntsville, Tennessee, Baker joined the U.S. Navy during World War II and later practiced law in his home state. For most of his life he was surrounded by politicians—both his father and his stepmother served in the U.S. House of Representatives. His father-in-law, Everett McKinley Dirksen, was a member of both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, where he served as Senate minority leader from 1959 to 1969.

Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1966, Baker quickly rose through the ranks. His calm and witty style gained him public recognition when he served as vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities, also known as the Senate Watergate Committee. He is remembered for having pointedly asked, “What did the president know and when did he know it?”¹ In 1977 Baker was elected Senate minority leader. The following year his persuasive demeanor was instrumental in the passage of the Panama Canal Treaty, which called for the gradual transfer of the canal to Panama.

Baker was a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 1980 but lost to Ronald Reagan. He became majority leader in the new Republican-controlled Senate, but he did not seek reelection in 1984. Instead, he returned to Tennessee to practice law. Although Baker considered a second run for the presidency, he put aside those personal ambitions in 1987 to serve the Reagan administration as White House chief of staff. He then returned to private law practice in Tennessee and Washington, D.C. In 1996, after the death of his first wife, Joy Dirksen, he married Nancy Landon Kassebaum, then a senator from Kansas. In 2001 he was appointed U.S. ambassador to Japan. Senator Baker is an avid photographer, and has published two books illustrating his work.

On Howard Baker’s retirement from the Senate in 1985, the principal entrance to the Republican leader’s suite in the Capitol (S–230) was designated the *Howard H. Baker, Jr., Room* by Senate resolution. One year later The Dirksen Congressional Center in Pekin, Illinois, lent this portrait of Baker by Herbert Abrams for display in the suite. Abrams had completed the portrait in 1984, although he later modified it on several occasions. In the painting Baker is shown seated in the Old Senate Chamber, the historic meeting place of the Senate from 1810 to 1859.

In 1999 the Senate Commission on Art created the Senate Leadership Portrait Collection to honor presidents pro tempore and majority and minority leaders. Interest in memorializing Senate leaders had been sparked by the Leader’s Lecture Series, in which former leaders share their insights with current and past members of the Senate. Senator Baker was the honored guest at the leader’s lecture in 1998 when he spoke about his years as majority leader. Although the Senate already owned several paintings of former leaders, Abrams’s likeness of Baker was the first piece acquired after the Senate Leadership Portrait Collection was officially established; The Dirksen Congressional Center donated it to the Senate in 2000.

Abrams is a noted portraitist who has been awarded numerous commissions in the Washington, D.C., area. He is represented in the White House collection with paintings of Presidents Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush, as well as First Lady Barbara Bush. Other portraits by the artist include Congressman John Rhodes of Arizona in the U.S. House of Representatives, Secretary of the Treasury Donald Regan at the Treasury Department, and Generals William C. Westmoreland and Bruce Palmer, Jr., at the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. Abrams’s portrait of Senator James Eastland (p. 106) is also in the Senate Collection.



Promising an “objective and even-handed” investigation, Senator Howard Baker, left, casts his vote with Senator Sam Ervin, right, during the 1973 Senate Watergate hearings.

(U.S. Senate Historical Office)

Howard Baker, Jr.

Herbert Elmer Abrams (born 1921)

Oil on canvas, 1984

49½ x 39½ (125.7 x 100.3 cm)

Signed and dated (lower right corner): Herbert E / Abrams • / '84

Gift of The Dirksen Congressional Center, 2000

Accepted by the U.S. Senate Commission on Art, 2000

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