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Interview #2: Chairmen Harrison, George, Millikin, and Byrd

(March 31, 1994)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

Nichols: I forgot the other day to mention my appointment at the RFC [Reconstruction Finance Corporation].

Ritchie: Yes, I was going to ask you about that.

Nichols: That was my first government job. That was after my talk with those kids [fraternity brothers] that I was telling you about. I got the job in January of '34, and they cut the force down the next election year. I was a messenger. They took one person off of each floor, and there were eleven floors. So then, when I called Mr. Johnston, he said, "Just play it cool," because they were reducing a whole lot of departments. At that particular time the Senate used to meet three times [sessions], instead of twice. They'd take a recess when the weather got hot and they'd come back in the fall and stay a month, a month and a half, and then adjourn. So I went to the Senate that fall.

Ritchie: One other question I didn't ask you was when were you born?

Nichols: I was born on June 14, 1909. There's an interesting story there, because I have two sisters, and all three of us have the same birthday, two years apart.

Ritchie: And also, we never mentioned your mother in the first interview. I noticed that one of the tributes to you in the Congressional Record said that she was a teacher.

Nichols: No, she was a housewife. I had aunts that were teachers, on both sides, on my mother's side and on my father's side. But my father's income was enough that she didn't have to work at all, only at home.

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Ritchie: One other question I wanted to ask was: when you were in school were there any particular teachers who influenced you more than any others? Anybody who may have shaped what you decided to do later on?

Nichols: I had two. One was at Alcorn. The other was at Howard, he taught chemistry at Howard. He had taught chemistry at Southern University in Baton

Rouge. When I decided that I wanted to come to Howard, and I knew that I had to go and get those sciences, he was good. As a matter of fact, I made the highest mark on the exam in his class. Other grades were ten, and fifteen, and twenty, and he waited until the last and said, "One person did real well," and then he called my name. They had a bunch of women in there who were pursuing a degree in home economics, and they had to have chemistry. They all wanted to sit by me then, they thought that something would rub off on them.

Ritchie: Considering that you did so well in chemistry and were thinking about a career in medicine, did you ever regret later on that you hadn't had the chance to finish up in that?

Nichols: No. After I started out, as I said, Mr Johnston didn't spare anything that he thought I should know about committee work. He actually took me under his wing, see. And I became really interested in the job.

I got married in '34. No, I actually got married when I went home to ask my father about getting a recommendation. I married her in September of '33. But my wife and I didn't live together as husband and wife until '34. She went back to school. My two sisters were going to Tennessee State, and she went back with my eldest sister. And she stayed until January or February and then she came up [to Washington].

Ritchie: Was she from Clarksdale also?

Nichols: She was originally from Meridian, Mississippi. Her mother -- they had what they called home demonstrators in the counties, and he was the home demonstrator for Coahoma County. She became the assistant for the

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whole state, and then she became the chief agent over the whole state. My wife had a sister and a brother. Her brother played in "Amos and Andy," the television series, do you remember that?

Ritchie: Oh, yeah, I used to watch that when I was a kid.

Nichols: Her brother was Amos. Well, anything else?

Ritchie: You mentioned the other day that when you first came to the Finance Committee there were only three staff members on the committee. What did they do, those three people?

Nichols: Skeeter was the clerk, and Miss Pauline Smith was the secretary. When it was required to write certain letters, most of that was her particular job. Once Skeeter broke me in, we'd have a session, and hearings, and I had to receive all the mimeographed copies of statements and that kind of thing and put them in such an orderly fashion that I could distribute them to the members. Then when I would finish with the members, I would give so many to the press, then I would distribute the rest of them to the audience. I had a real nice thing going on with the press, because I would pull out a number of copies that I could afford to let them have in advance. I followed the members of the committee in everything, I mean in executive sessions the clerk and I were the only staff permitted in that executive room.

Ritchie: Could you describe what an executive session was like in those days?

Nichols: Yes, take for example we would have a tax bill that came over from the House of Representatives. When the hearings were concluded, the Finance Committee met in executive session with the staff of the Joint Committee on Internal Revenue and Taxation and the Treasury people, which I guess that was one reason why they could have functioned with the three of us as easily we did, because they did the technical work. They would present the views, and say if a senator had an amendment, all of the amendments were printed. You didn't come in and take an envelope out of your pocket and say

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I've got an amendment to so and so. He'd have those amendments, and he'd call for those amendments, and it was my job to see that that amendment was placed in front of the committee. Then a vote was called for, the clerk was the one who called the roll. "Mr. So and So," and so forth. In calling the roll, the clerk called the ranking member first, proceeding according to seniority, which was strictly followed at all times. Then he called the minority members and the chairman last. After tallying the votes -- he then would pass the slip to me, and I would give it to the chairman. Records were kept, but never read, unless a vote was questioned.

We had two phone booths in the room where the executive sessions were held. When the phone rang, I always answered the phone and took the message for whoever it was for, and then I'd alert the senator. Then I'd get back to the session. You had to follow it, and it would change pretty swiftly. I guess in reading the *Congressional Record*, you noticed that it was Senator [John Williams](#) who initiated it. He was a Republican. They had put him once off of the committee, and then he came back on, and I befriended Senator Williams. In fact, his suite was right next to the back end of the Finance Committee.

It was an interesting thing, Mr. Ritchie, you had two senators whose son later came into the picture. One I want to mention is [Al Gore's](#) Daddy. Senator [Gore](#)

was on the committee, and he and Senator [Kerr](#) had a thing going. I mentioned the other day about the closeness I had working with Senator Kerr. Especially during executive sessions I would serve them coffee when they came in. I knew what this one wanted and that one wanted. Senator Gore used to come in and out of the clear sky he would say, "Jesse, bring me a Coca Cola." Different members would put some money in what they called the kitty so that I could buy all that stuff. I served this White Rock water and sparkling water and that kind of thing. Senator Gore would ask time after time for a Coca Cola. So one time, Senator Kerr and I were in the room together, and I told him, "Senator, he asks for a Coca Cola as if I'm a daggumbed servant, and he hasn't put nothing in the kitty!" The senator reached into his pocket and he pulled out a roll of bills that would choke a horse. He pulled out forty dollars and handed it to me, and said, "Put that in your kitty, and don't you *ever* ask him for

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nothing." So I learned one strong lesson: you do not go to one senator and talk about another one.

Over in that room where we were the other day, the [Mansfield](#) Room, on the second floor, they had some paintings on the walls. I don't know which one it was, but Senator Kerr and Gore would shoot backwards and forwards at each other. We had an executive session going on in one of the Capitol rooms. I think it was down on the first floor below the Secretary's office. Senator Gore was late getting in there and he said, "Bob, I passed the statue of [Benjamin Franklin](#), and even he was smiling at you, and I wanted to tell you that I noticed he was smiling at you." Senator Kerr thought a while and he said, "Albert, you go back and take another look at that statue and you will see that he wasn't smiling at me, he was laughing at you." [laughs] They would carry on like that.

I remember before we moved to the new building, Senator [Millikin](#) was the chairperson. He had a very brilliant mind. We were working on the trade agreements and GATT and that kind of thing. And if you ever wanted to go to sleep, that subject will really put you to sleep! At that particular time, Elizabeth Springer was the clerk. Senator Millikin called a meeting and asked Mrs. Springer to leave the room. I knew that whenever he did that he had a joke to tell. I'd look off, because that would infuriate her, you know, that she couldn't stay in there. And he'd tell that joke, and somebody else would tell a joke, and even Senator Taft, [Bob Taft](#), he never laughed at a joke, but he would smile. Then after it was over with, then she would come back and they would get right down to business again.

In other words, I had something going that I didn't regret going on back [to medical school]. Sometimes I thought that I should have gone and pursued a degree in law. But I still have no regret that I didn't do that.

Ritchie: Well, you got to meet a lot of interesting people.

Nichols: Oh, yes. The other person I wanted to talk about was [President Bush's Daddy](#).

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Ritchie: [Prescott Bush](#).

Nichols: Prescott Bush. He was on that committee. He was a banker I think. He made a remark that the only man that he ever did hate lay buried in Hyde Park. And that story got out, and he didn't come back. I don't know whether that had something to do with that or not.

But I had a friend whose brother worked in the White House. His job was to turn the beds down and take the president and first lady up on the elevator. His name was Woodrow Willoughby -- everybody called him Woody. He died almost at the end of President Bush's term. They had this funeral, and he belonged to this big Baptist Church. At the last minute the president sent word that he wanted to pay his respects to Woody. He came. The family was sitting on one side, and I sat near the front but we were on the right side. I happened to look up before the services started and I saw these guys, I knew they were Secret Service, come in. They came in the back entrance. Right behind them, the president came in. He bowed, and he came and walked up to the casket and spent a moment or two, and then he turned around to say something to some of the people gathered. He came up, and he said, "Did you know Woody?" I said, "I knew the whole family, Mr. President." I said, "As a matter of fact, I knew your father." He looked at me like [widens eyes], and I said, "Senator Prescott Bush." He went all around to these other people and then when he got ready to go, don't you know he came back to us, and he said, "You knew my Daddy?" I told him I was connected with the Finance Committee, and he shook my hand real vigorously, and away he went.

Ritchie: Well, when you were talking about those executive sessions where they would tell jokes, was the atmosphere more relaxed in an executive session?

Nichols: Yes, that was the whole purpose of doing that. See, Senator Millikin jumped over the Senator from Nebraska.

Ritchie: Butler?

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Nichols: [Hugh Butler](#). Butler was in line of seniority and he should have had the chairmanship. Senator Butler came up with some disease that he had to get around in a wheelchair. He told me one morning, when I got him in there and got him to his seat, he said, "Jesse, I only made one mistake. I agreed to let Millikin pass over me for chairman." Those kind of things happened.

But, Mr. Ritchie, I have found it true when I was here that you have a politician and then you have a statesman. Most of them that I handled were statesmen. Bob Taft and [Lyndon Johnson](#) were on the committee -- but he had a heart attack and I didn't get to know him personally like I knew the rest of them. But that's what I found, you had statesmen and then you had politicians.

Ritchie: Well, did you think that they acted differently in an executive session than they did in a public session?

Nichols: Yes.

Ritchie: Let their hair down?

Nichols: Yes. They would tell stories and get you laughing, that kind of thing. [Pat Harrison](#) was famous for that, and I mentioned this commissioner, George Allen, he made a fortune off of being able to tell a good joke.

Ritchie: Well, would they, for instance, take their jackets off when they came into an executive session?

Nichols: They did when they were working on a bill. There were only two staff people in an executive session. Like Bob Best, if they needed him for a particular session, then they would call him in. Bob Best would come in and explain this kind of thing and then he went back out again.

But I never, even during the summertime before they retreated because of the weather, when they were installing the air conditioning, I always worked in a coat. The only time I ever put my coat off was when I had to get some

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hearings mailed out or something and I really had to get down to it. But I was always in a coat.

Ritchie: How about cigars, did they smoke in the executive sessions?

Nichols: Oh, yes. **Ritchie:** I have an image of a hazy room full of smoke.

Nichols: Yes. Senator Harrison always smoked his cigar. I think Senator [George](#) smoked a cigarette. That was another thing I had going for me, Mr. Ritchie, Senator George's wife -- all the people called her Miss Lucy -- a very highly polished woman, she liked to tell a smutty joke. In '41 when he took over the committee, I had picked up a taxicab for transportation. The Georges lived in the Mayflower [Hotel], and I would go and get the senator, or I'd take him home, rather, he'd usually get a cab in the morning coming to the office. He had a secretary that started out under Senator George. She was the postmistress in that little post office right outside the Foreign Relations Committee. I don't know if it's still here.

Ritchie: Not anymore, but I've heard of it.

Nichols: It was almost as big as this room here [10 by 15 feet]. Her name was Christie Bell Kennedy. When the senator became chairman, the first thing that she wanted was to become clerk of the Finance Committee. He brought Kennedy from this little post office and overnight she became in charge of his whole office, which created quite a stir. Anyway, that's when I found out exactly what Skeeter's salary was, it was \$3600. And of course the chairperson's, all the senators', was \$10,000. And members of the House was \$10,000. She tried to get her salary boosted up to what Mr. Johnston was getting, and she couldn't do it, because the Senate had voted that increase for Mr. Johnston itself.

Every once in a while I would have a run-in with Christie Bell. I decided one time I just would quit. I'm ahead of myself, but Mrs. George got in that cab,

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she had called for me to take her somewhere, because I had a pretty good knowledge of the buildings all up and down Constitution Avenue. She would have these ladies come in from Georgia, and rather than have a limo -- they didn't have a limo -- she would call and I would take her. She would have me rolling with her stories and then I would tell her a funny joke. I'd be sure it would be suitable to tell her, but her's would be smutty sometimes [laughs].

This particular time when I decided to quit, she got in the cab and I didn't say anything. She said, "What's the matter with you?" I said, "Nothing, Miss Lucy." She said, "Yes there is, something is wrong." I said, "I'm getting to the place where I'm getting ready to hand the senator my resignation." She said "What?" And right out of the clear blue sky she said, "Are you having problems with Christie Bell?" She said, "Don't you ever worry. You make me a promise, if you ever decide to leave, you call and talk to me, because Mr. George" -- she always called him Mr. George, and that was a habit true of Southern belles, or Southern women, to call their husbands Mr. Something. She said, "He thinks the world of

you." And she told me what the senator himself had told me, that he promised Senator Harrison that I would keep that job.

That night she must have given the senator holy hell, because the next day I could tell something was wrong with this other woman. A couple of days later Christie Bell called me because she wanted to talk to me. I went around and she said, "Let's go into the senator's office." Things were so bad, Mr. Ritchie, that when she'd go into the senator's room to make a phone call, somebody would buzz the staff people next to that room and they'd eavesdrop on what she was saying. Anyway, she went into this room and she called me in and she said, "Senator George wants to give you a raise." I said, "What?" "yes, he's going to give you a raise." I looked at her, and she looked at me, and I said, "What's the strings attached to it?" She said, "Oh, yeah, there's some string." I said, "I knew that." She wouldn't come out and say "You're to refrain from talking to Mrs. George," [laughs] but I told her, "It's the principle of the thing, Miss Kennedy." She wanted me to drive her in her car -- see, the senator didn't have a car -- at her whim, whenever she wanted to go somewhere. She'd just call and say "Come on." I told her, "I'm a clerk on the committee and my time's on that committee." She said, "Well, we'll work it out."

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But I did get the raise, and Mrs. George made me promise, "Don't you ever leave that committee without first talking to me." I could tell you a whole lot of stories, Mr. Ritchie, about these little rooms that are unmarked all up and down the Capitol, but that wasn't my business. At one time I started to try to write a book myself. My wife was a very good secretary. She was secretary to three deans up at Howard. And then an opening came in Senator [\[Hubert\] Humphrey's](#) office, and she accepted it. She was one of the few secretaries that he had that if she typed papers for the senator he accepted it as typed. She said, "No, don't write a book." And I noticed that quite a few books have been written, one by a cook or something.

Ritchie: There was Robert Parker's book [*Capitol Hill in Black and White*]. Have you seen that one?

Nichols: No, I didn't read it. But I knew the maitre d' of the Senate was Paul Johnson. Every body and his brother, all the senators, thought the world of Paul Johnson. I happen to know his grandson, who is a member of my church. Paul the third, I think he's called, is going to take charge of the mayor of the District's campaign for reelection.

Ritchie: Paul Johnson was maitre d' for years in the Senate restaurant.

Nichols: That's right.

Ritchie: Did you know him well? What kind of a person was he?

Nichols: He was a very dignified fellow. He was immaculate at all times. He always wore a red rose in his lapel. This woman senator from Maine.

Ritchie: [Margaret Chase Smith](#).

Nichols: Margaret Chase Smith, she did also, she wore a red rose. Every once in a while those senators who were on different committees would borrow the Finance Committee's room for something, and my office was right

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at the entrance. So if I wasn't doing something, and I was interested in the subject that was going on, I would walk in there and listen. That's where I really learned to love [Bob Kennedy](#). He wasn't on the [Finance] committee, but they used the committee room. I just liked his style, the way he went about handling things. He'd invite you to a party at his house over in Georgetown. He knew when he invited you that he wasn't going to be there. He'd be off somewhere to another party. That was his type.

Ritchie: That was back when he was with the Rackets Committee, I guess?

Nichols: Yes. And as I said the other day, I heard most of the MacArthur hearings. Even when they moved into the Caucus Room, if I wanted to hear something in there, I'd go into the Caucus Room.

Ritchie: What was your impression of [McCarthy](#)?

Nichols: MacArthur? I liked him. I thought he was smart. At that particular time I didn't realize that he was trying to usurp the president. And he just happened to have the right type of president to let him know what the story was. But I liked the man.

Ritchie: What was it about him that you liked?

Nichols: I just liked his mannerism, the way he went about things. He knew what he was doing, from a military standpoint. And that interested me.

Ritchie: Douglas MacArthur, you said, or Joe McCarthy?

Nichols: General MacArthur.

Ritchie: I was confusing MacArthur and McCarthy.

Nichols: I was talking about General MacArthur, and you're talking about Joe McCarthy.

Ritchie: Because they were both the subject of big hearings about that time.

Nichols: Yes. I didn't particular like Joe McCarthy at all, to be frank with you, because he would beat the witnesses, and they were scared to death of him. I didn't care too much for him.

Ritchie: You must have gotten to see quite a bit of him, when they were holding the McCarthy hearings next door.

Nichols: That's right. I have on my wall at home -- we had a Secretary of the Treasury Humphrey, I think.

Ritchie: George Humphrey, right.

Nichols: And we had another character from the west, a senator who was on the committee. He came from Nevada.

Ritchie: [Molly Malone?](#)

Nichols: Malone, yes. Malone always carried a big stack of heavy silver dollars. This was when we were in the Russell Building. It was in a hearing, we were just beginning a tax bill, and the Secretary was appearing. Then it came Malone's time to question the Secretary. He went through this tirade of being from the west where they believed in solid money, and blah, blah, blah. He pulled out a silver dollar and said, "I always carry a big armful of these things." And the Secretary said, "I always carry a wagon wheel myself, senator. As a matter of fact, it's got my birth date, the year I was born." Malone said, "I'll match you," and he flipped his dollar across the table. He was doing it to get a big rise out of the audience, you know. When he flipped his dollar, the Secretary flipped his dollar. Malone won the toss. So he got down and got both of them and handed them up to the senator.

Now, Senator Malone always wore these cowboy boots and big hats and things. He started out the room -- they all had to come through my office -- and he turned around and said, "Jesse, here, keep this so you will always have money in your pocket." And he gave me the dollar that he won from the Secretary. So I went home for lunch, and when the Secretary got back to the Treasury he reached

into his pocket and he missed that dollar, and it dawned on him that he had given away his prize dollar. So he called Malone's office, and finally got to the senator and told him what had happened. Malone's office called me, and I had the dollar. So I listened. They said, "We'll exchange it, and we'll give you a brand-new dollar." I said, "No, I don't want that. I'll tell you what," I said I knew by law that there was only one person who was supposed to write on a dollar bill, and that was the Secretary of the Treasury. I said, "If you have the Secretary autograph a dollar bill to Jesse Nichols, he can have his dollar back." I have that home right on my wall.

Ritchie: [Laughs] That's great! That raises another question. You said that you went home for lunch. Did you live near the Capitol at that time?

Nichols: I lived where I'm living now. I'm been there since '46.

Ritchie: Is that near the Capitol?

Nichols: Do you know where Soldiers' Home is?

Ritchie: Oh, sure.

Nichols: I live right across from Soldiers' Home, where they have gardens along there.

Ritchie: Is that Brookland?

Nichols: No, it would be on this side [of North Capitol Street]. Brookland would be on the Northeast side, and this is on Northwest. Park Place is actually 5th Street. It starts near the entrance to the main building of Soldiers' Home and it follows that wrought-iron fence all the way around to near

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Howard University, where they have that reservoir. Then it becomes 5th Street again.

Ritchie: So, would you go home regularly for lunch in those days?

Nichols: Yes. I had an hour off, and it was a break just to get off.

Ritchie: I wanted to ask about that, because I wondered about the restaurants in those days. Were the restaurants segregated in the Capitol?

Nichols: They were. I had that problem. They had one restaurant in the Russell Office Building. Up until the time when they built the new building, which is the Dirksen Building, they had restaurants there. They were breaking down the segregation. When they had something for the staff -- I remember when [Russell Long](#) came in [as chairman in 1965], the whole staff we went anywhere over the Capitol, to the restaurant.

And they had a barbershop in the Russell Building. There used to be a lot of restrictions on going in there, even though you had a black barber. I remember an incident when a Supreme Court justice would go on Saturdays to get his hair trimmed. At one time, he had been the head of the Securities and Exchange Commission, Douglas was his name, William Douglas. I went in there and there was a lot of noise and he was sitting in the corner quietly. I walked over to the head barber, and I said, "Do you know who that is you've got sitting over there waiting?" He said, "No, I thought it was Congressman or something." I said, "You've got Associate Justice Douglas." Then you could drop pins and needles all over the place. I stayed around. I got my hair cut and he got into the chair, and he noticed that things got so quiet, nobody was saying nothing. So, when I left, he said, "Who is that young man?" And they told him who I was, and the next time I went in there, I ran into him. He spoke to me, and I told him, "You appeared before our committee on certain things at some time." I have a pretty good memory. Once something like that happened, I always remembered it.

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For instance, the first billionaire that I ever met was from South Carolina, Bernie Baruch. It was on a Sunday. He had visited with Senator Harrison. I drove Mr. Baruch back to Union Station, and he tipped me five dollars. I didn't know who he was. When I got back and was putting the car up for the senator, he said, "Jesse, do you know who that was that you carried back?" "No." He said, "That's Mr. Bernie Baruch." It didn't ring no bell for me. I didn't know who he was. But Bernard Baruch was a very good friend of [Jimmy Byrnes](#)'s of South Carolina. He had to be a smart man to get that kind of money. Right down through my life I have met some outstanding men.

Ritchie: Sometime or another, they all come to the Capitol.

Nichols: Yes, they sure do.

Ritchie: I wanted to follow up on one thing. You mentioned the restaurant in the Russell Building that was segregated. Was there any place where you could eat in the Capitol or the Russell Building?

Nichols: No. Well, in the Capitol itself they had one of those little snackbars down in the basement. But in the Supreme Court Building they had a beautiful

restaurant there, and the Methodist Building [next to the Supreme Court and across 1st Street from the Capitol], I ate there.

Ritchie: And Union Station had an integrated restaurant in those days?

Nichols: Oh, they had something down there, but it's nothing like what they have now.

Ritchie: You mentioned Paul Johnson before. Did you get to know many of the other black staff members in the Capitol?

Nichols: Well, most of what you had, especially on the Senate side, I knew most of the chauffeurs. They drove the [Secretary of the Senate](#), he had a car. The [President Pro Tempore](#) had a car, and somebody else.

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Ritchie: The Vice President?

Nichols: The Vice President had a car.

Ritchie: I've heard of Norman Edwards.

Nichols: Yes. Norman was driving the Vice President. I knew Norman real well. As a matter of fact, when President [Kennedy](#) was assassinated, Norman drove the car to the airport [Andrews Air Force Base] to meet the President. President [Johnson](#) said, "All right, Norman, let's go on home." The Secret Service said, "Uh-uh, Mr. President, he can't drive you." He said, "What are you talking about he can't drive me? This man's been driving me for years!" "No, sir." I understand that the only way that he could drive was to be Secret Service, so they made Norman temporarily a Secret Service agent. After that, he drove Mrs. Johnson, not the President. But I knew the chauffeur who drove Mr. Biffle. And then do you know Birtie?

Ritchie: Oh, Birtie Bowman.

Nichols: Yes. Birtie worked in the restaurant or something over there, and then he became connected with the Foreign Relations Committee. The Banking and Currency Committee had a black fellow who was there, but he didn't perform the type of work that I did.

Ritchie: Birtie is retired now, and he has a limousine service that he runs.

Nichols: I understand that. They used to have a get-together every once in a while, former members of the staff of the Senate. He would have them in his place.

Ritchie: I was thinking about some of the people over in the Capitol also. Herman Scott worked in the Senate Library, did you have any dealings with him?

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Nichols: Yes, Herman was real good. I had a lot to do with Herman because he played golf and I played golf. In fact, I used to play in a tournament down in East Potomac Park. I had a good rapport going on with the Senate Document Room. Mr. [Theron W.] Marshall, I think, was in charge of that. I did all the ordering for the committee's publications. I knew what bill we would have a big request for copies of, and I so ordered it. Mr. Marshall, all I had to do was pick up the phone and say, "Mr. Marshall, I need so and so," and he knew what I wanted. When I would go over to Mr. [Guy E.] Ives, who was on the staff in the printing office, he did all of the ordering of what you needed, and I got what I wanted.

Ritchie: So you found that most of the staff were helpful. Or did you have any problems with any of the staff?

Nichols: The members of my staff?

Ritchie: The Senate staff in general.

Nichols: No, no. I had no problems. I remember President [Nixon](#), I remember when he was a Congressman, and I remember when he was the Vice President. The Vice President had an office right around the corner from my office -- my office was 310 in the Russell Office Building. One particular morning, you meet all types of people, and this lady was going down the steps, close to the noon hour. She was wringing her hands, and she had just come out of the Vice President's office. She said that she had a message from the Lord. He told her don't give it to nobody but the Vice President. I looked at her, [chuckles] and I said, "Well, if the Lord gave you a message to give to the Vice President, I want you to be sure to give it to him." I said, "If you stand there, at the end of this corridor here by the steps, sooner or later he's going to open that door and come right out past here, going over to open the Senate." She said, "Thank you, young man, thank you." Sure enough, the door opened, out stepped the Secret Service and in the middle of them was Mr. Nixon. She went hollering and screaming and going up toward him, and they pinned that woman to the wall! And Nixon never stopped, he kept walking with the other Secret Service agents.

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Did you ever wonder why they have the subway cars in the basement go on a curve? Going from the Russell Building over to the Capitol. Because somebody took a shot at one of the senators. I don't know if that was Taft.

Ritchie: Senator [\[John\] Bricker](#) of Ohio, wasn't it?

Nichols: Bricker of Ohio, yes. So they decided when they built the new subway, they were going to make them crooked so there would be no chance of hitting none of them. They have some real strict security here. I had some keys in my pocket and had to take those keys out.

Ritchie: Coming in today?

Nichols: The other day.

Ritchie: I'd like to go back and talk about some of the senators. We mentioned Senator George from time to time, because he took over the committee after Senator Harrison died, and he was chairman for many years off and on. Was it different working for Walter George than it had been working for Pat Harrison.

Nichols: In this regard, Mr. Ritchie. When I worked for Senator Harrison it got to be a thing between Jesse and Senator Harrison. Nobody, I mean nobody got in between us. If I said I'm going to do so and so, they left it because I rode with him at night and I rode with him in the morning. If he wanted to discuss anything, I left it up to him to do that. A lot of time he would tell me about this kind of thing that happened, and that kind of thing. We had something going between us.

Now, George was different. He was a little bit cooler. There wasn't any comparison between George and Harrison when it came to warmth. But I would put Senator George up with any of them. He gets in that class I called statesmen. But I had more fun telling jokes with Mrs. George! I couldn't tell them to Senator George. But that was strange and funny because he gave me that opportunity to go with him to Foreign Relations [when he became chairman

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in 1955]. I said, "Well, my roots are here. I know the work, and I don't want no part of Foreign Relations."

Ritchie: And he wasn't there for very long, just two years as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, and then he retired.

Nichols: Didn't [\[Tom\] Connally](#) follow him?

Ritchie: Connally had been before him. Connally retired and then George moved over, but George only stayed two years as chair of Foreign Relations. Now, in 1946, the Republicans won the majority for the first time in years, and that's when Senator Millikin became chairman.

Nichols: In the 80th Congress.

Ritchie: Did you worry a little bit when the Republicans came in that it would jeopardize your position?

Nichols: No, because as I said, Mr. Biffle came up and told me, "Don't ever worry about your job. If they don't keep you, I'll always see that you have something." As a matter of fact, the first meeting that they had when they skipped over Senator Taft and Millikin became the chairman, that's the only meeting from 1937 through 1971 that I didn't sit in the executive session. I purposely stayed out -- after I set it up, you know. The first order of business, Millikin said, "We want to keep our librarian and document clerk, Jesse Nichols. All in favor?" They said aye. He came out himself and told me, "The first order of business was electing you to be here." See, I was under Millikin twice, because the Republicans lost [in 1948] and the Democrats came right back, and I went back under George. I was under George twice and Millikin twice. And then there was Senator [\[Harry\] Byrd](#).

I had some awfully good friends in Senator Byrd's office. [M.J.] Menefee -- Peaches Menefee -- the senator's secretary, he was an awfully good friend of Skeeter Johnston.

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Ritchie: That was another question I was going to ask you, what is the relationship between the staff of a committee and the personal staff of the chairman of the committee? Did you see much of the personal staff of Senator Harrison, Senator George, Senator Millikin?

Nichols: Yes. I'll hit on Senator Millikin. Senator Millikin had an A.A. [Administrative Assistant] who was Dorothy McRae, a very brilliant woman. When Millikin became chairman, she let it be known that everything that has to come through Senator Millikin had to come through her. And she did, she would throw her rank around with Elizabeth [Springer]. We had a clerk, they didn't have executive directors and that type of thing, you became the clerk of the committee and everybody else was under the clerk. She had the power of placing and appointing people. They always let the minority side of the committee appoint a staff member, and then the rest of it was appointed by the party that was in power. Millikin had a staff member called Serge Benson, he was from Utah. His field was tariffs. As I said, we had the Joint Committee that took care of the revenue bills.

While Senator George was chairman of the committee he put on a place on the staff Ralph Frederick. Ralph Frederick was in charge of Coca Cola in Brussels, and he got out ahead of Hitler, when Hitler took over Brussels. He got out of the country and came home. His sister married a physician who was Senator George's personal doctor, and that's how Frederick got that job. Frederick became a staff member of the committee, placed on there by Christie Bell Kennedy. They were playing politics. Somebody down in Georgia wanted that job, and they appointed Frederick in order to keep that person from Georgia from coming up and getting it [chuckles]. But Frederick knew as much about running that committee as he did laying brick. The funny thing about that, when I got a greetings from Uncle Sam to come and serve in the army, I brought the notice and gave it to Mr. Frederick. As I said, his first two or three sessions before the committee, he'd be perspiring just like somebody threw a bucket of water on him, and he knew that he was just out of place, he just didn't know what it was.

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Under Millikin you didn't have that kind of thing. Millikin appointed a clerk to that committee by the name of Sherwood Stanley. Stanley had served in a big position in W.R. Grace. He had the training. He decided -- I imagine everybody will do that when they get that position -- he wanted to make certain changes. We had our first executive session, and I had placed the stuff out for the members. He watched that, and the next day when they had an executive session he went and changed it, and put it like he wanted. And they frowned, and there were a lot of things that they were looking for that they didn't find. And on the third day that we had an executive session, he decided that instead of calling a representative from the joint committee to come up, he let them sit back in the room on the press table, while he explained things. He went all out of his way to explain that, and when he got through, Senator Taft said, "That's just as clear as mud." [laughs] So after that, he never would do anything like that again. He learned how to manipulate. But all the people that Millikin brought over there, they were well-trained to handle the job. But I had no conflict whatsoever with the people that the chairpersons put on the staff.

Ritchie: You say that you got a draft notice during the Second World War? And you took it to the chairman?

Nichols: No, I took it to Mr. Frederick, who was the clerk. He went around to the senator's office to talk to the senator about it, and as he would he ran into Christie Bell [Senator George's personal secretary], and she said, "What you want to see the senator about, Ralph?" He told her. She said, "Well, Jesse ain't no better than nobody else. He should serve his country just like the rest." In other words, she took it upon herself to get rid of him. She mentioned it to the chairman, and the chairman and several others had this idea that they would not ask for no deferment for anybody on the Hill, because it would be expected. So

when I got this second greetings, I gave it to Mr. Frederick, and he jumped up and flew right over there and got to Senator George. Senator George said, "I'd better call a meeting of the committee and let them decide." And he told the chairman, he said, "I don't know what's going on on this committee, Mr. Chairman, that's the man that's running this committee, Jesse." Senator George said, "Let's talk to the members of the committee."

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The person who would meet me in the halls -- the only one that was ever on that committee that would meet me in the halls and never say nothing to me, just walk on by, that was Bob Taft. He told them, "Mr. Chairman, why don't you have the clerk write a letter to General [Lewis] Hershey" -- General Hershey was over all this drafting -- "and tell him that Jesse's more important to us on the Finance Committee, to help raise the money to pay for this war, than being in a damn foxhole." Anyway, they wrote the letter, and the committee got a call from General Hershey. He said, "Let Jesse go and take the physical exam." What he didn't know, and none of them knew that I had had a stricture for years. The doctor on the examining board over at Fort Myer had been my personal doctor. He said, "No, no, we can't have this man." He told this naval officer what my problem was. So I got off 4-F. But I didn't tell Senator George's staff what it was. I just left it that way. But it just went to show that people don't have to say nothing to you in order to be a good friend of yours, or a spokesman, that's what happened with Bob Taft. I think Senator [\[Bob\] Dole](#) is in the pattern of Bob Taft, because Taft was "Mr. Republican."

Ritchie: A tough partisan.

Nichols: Yes. I had been promised -- I mentioned about Senator Kerr -- I had been promised by Senator Kerr when he got to be chairperson that as far as Jesse Nichols was concerned he was going to see that moneywise I got everything that I deserved to have. I have no regrets moneywise. I've traveled widely. I went to Europe for twenty days. I've been to Hawaii. I've been to those provinces off of Maine, Halifax and those places. I've been all around there.

What I have done, Mr. Ritchie, I bought a saxophone. I've been taking music lessons. When the rain and snow comes around and people are crawling the walls, I have no problem. My instructor has really thrown the book at me and I've really learned what it's all about, musicwise. I have played about twelve times solos at my church, and they're very critical of that kind of thing.

Ritchie: You mentioned that while you were in school you used to play in the orchestra.

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Nichols: I did.

b>**Ritchie:** What did you play then?

Nichols: Saxophone. But I played alto, and I bought a Selma. I always wanted one, but I couldn't afford it. But I bought a Selma, that's the type of tenor saxophone someone gave [President Clinton](#) when he first played on the night of his inaugural.

Ritchie: So you've come back to your first love of music.

Nichols: I've come back. My wife was an excellent concert pianist. On Sunday evenings, after you came back from church, we used to have an old fellow who used to have about fifteen people, a kind of a symphony orchestra. But when I was playing all up and down from Natchez and Vicksburg, I played for a lot of dances. I had the ability to hear a piece and I could play it. That's fine, if you can read the music. You have got to know how to read music, then you can play. But I had my fun all over that state I played for dances.

Ritchie: That's great, maybe this would be a good place for us to take a break today. I'd like to do another interview, perhaps sometime next week. We'll get you a parking pass.

Nichols: I used to have a parking place in the Dirksen Building. I had one of those cones in the back of your car that you leave to save your place. I parked there one day, and went home or went downtown, and came back and someone had moved the cone and put another car there. It turned out to be one of the policemen [laughs]. I called over there to Inspector [Leonard] Ballard and talked to him, and he said, "Don't touch it, don't bother." But he jumped in the car and went over there and put a ticket on this guy's car. He said, "No, indeed, don't you ever take that man's place." Because I had a good thing going with the police. They said, "No, that's his place." So after that I had no more trouble.

End of Interview #2