

The Watershed Election of 1980

Interview #2

Thursday, June 3, 2010

Scott: Thank you for being here for our second interview. I found this *New York Times* article that was published just one month after you started here at the Senate Historical Office, with the title of “Senate office to publish declassified documents.” Can you say something about the story behind this article?

Baker: When I opened the *New York Times* on Sunday, October 19, 1975, I nearly had heart failure. First of all, I did do an interview with somebody who purported to be a reporter for the *New York Times*. I think she was a stringer. But it didn't matter. Her questions weren't terribly sharp, and my answers certainly weren't terribly sharp because, as you say, I had just started on the job. We were kind of groping along together. We spoke on the phone for maybe 45 minutes and then she came up and interviewed me in our little office up in the attic of the Capitol. We had an agreement when she left that I would dig up some more information and she would sharpen her questions a bit more and we'd have a second interview. That was probably two days before this article appeared in the *Sunday Times*. It's clear that either they had space to fill or she's being paid by the word and not by the quality of these words. So there it was.

The first thing I did was to go hat-in-hand to the office of Majority Leader Mike Mansfield. I went in there to apologize because he was very instrumental in setting the office up and what did he know? They hired me and he opens the *New York Times* and there is this bit of fiction in there about what the office is going to be doing. So, I went in and explained what I just mentioned to you and he and his staff couldn't have been nicer. “No problem, these things happen. Welcome to Capitol Hill.” But then, several days later, I received a phone call from the National Archives and they thought it would be really great if I could come down there and meet with some of their staff to talk about the work of our office, which they were very “excited” about. We set up an appointment and that occurred maybe mid-November.

Scott: And that was prompted by this article?

Baker: Very definitely. I sort of walked into the conference room and I looked around the table and there are all the senior division chiefs of the National Archives, including the deputy archivist of the United States. What I saw was a

very somber group of senior managers—the second tier down from the archivist of the United States. They basically wanted to know, and I haven't looked at this article recently, but there were some reflections in the article about the National Archives maybe not doing its job entirely and that's why the Senate had decided to set up this office to make sure it did.

Scott: Right, related to declassifying documents.

Baker: That's right.

Scott: So, it lit a fire under the National Archives. They felt they needed to respond.

Baker: They did. They seemed ready to light a fire under me. And they wanted to find out who this new character is, who's giving all these interviews as if he knew what he was talking about.

That really began a long and ultimately happy relationship with the National Archives. At the time that this article was published, the Senate curator, Jim Ketchum, had a very good friend named Al Leisinger, who had worked for the Archives for many years. I think he had just retired. And he was a bit, I think, disaffected with management at the Archives. That's in the blood stream of the Archives, to have senior responsible people who are disaffected. You know, it's that kind of a complex institution. So, Jim Ketchum was getting a lot of back-channel information from Al Leisinger about the problems of the Archives. We realized that the Archives was going to be a major component of any projects we did here at the Senate Historical Office. It was a heck of a way to begin the relationship. We parted from that meeting with an understanding that we would be in touch.

As I looked around at the structure of the National Archives, knowing that the records of the Senate and the House go down there for permanent preservation and access, I wondered where were these records being housed? There was no separate legislative division. Chronically, over the next fifteen years, the records were sort of orphan records. They were being moved from one division for the administrative convenience of the Archives. That became very clear to me that the driving force behind the meeting was that these issues could be explosive in terms of political misunderstandings with the Senate. So the Archives' folks apparently thought, "We need to keep a lid on as much as possible. But on the other hand, we don't want to spend a whole lot of resources that we don't have to make them

more prominent.” So when this character from the Senate Historical Office says we are going to start publishing all these classified documents, they want to know: who’s going to declassify these documents? So that was a real interesting beginning for sure.

Scott: What was the nature of the meeting? Were they trying to explain to you what their role was? Were they trying to understand what you were planning to do?

Baker: A little of both, but without setting up a major new declassification program. Of course, all of this is coming in the context of the Watergate committee and the public documents commission which existed to open up and determine questions of ownership. So they were sensitized, for sure, to the problem. That’s how it started.

Scott: In the wake of Watergate, Congress is seriously studying this question of ownership of papers, congressional, judicial, presidential. You mentioned last time the National Study Commission on the Records and Documents of Federal Officials which was created by Congress in 1974 to explore this issue. What were senators doing with their papers when you opened the office in 1975?

Baker: Not much. It’s like any other group of fifty people, or one hundred, if you are looking at all the incumbents. Most of the one hundred senators in 1975 had no plans whatsoever for their papers. That’s akin to making arrangements for your burial. If word got out that you had selected a repository for your papers, of course, the logical next step was, when are you retiring? Why are you leaving Congress now? We tried to come back with the response that this is only prudent management practice. This is all in the interest of public access. If you plan for it over a long period of time, as opposed to dumping everything on the hapless repository as you are walking out the door, the result would be a richer record, a better organized record, and it will be less expensive for the repository to manage and make it available to the public. Most senators in 1975 had given little thought to their papers.

One of the first staff members I met here was Eugene Jenkins who worked for Senator Roman Hruska. Jenkins’ job was to take care of Hruska’s papers and those of Carl Curtis, the other senator from Nebraska. I think he had had some association with Everett Dirksen a few years earlier, but he was sort of the go-to guy around the Senate if a member was contemplating leaving, another member

would say, “Go talk to Gene Jenkins or have your staff talk to him.” He had an enormous body of received wisdom about what to do and what not to do. I also met John Sobotka, who worked for Senator James Eastland. Poor John Sobotka! The Eastland papers were then housed up in the attic of the Russell Building. Unfortunately, there was a lot of storage space in the Russell Building attic. It’s where people sent their stuff that they didn’t know what to do with. Poor John Sobotka laboring up there. He was a staff member of the law school at the University of Mississippi. He was designated to respond and be helpful to Senator Eastland in organizing his papers. John was a real long-suffering, hardworking guy, who gave 200 percent for every job. He would drive up here in the summertime when the law school was not in session and help organize Senator Eastland’s papers. So, there he was, working up in the attic of the Russell Building in the broiling summer heat. The ceiling was not insulated, it was stifling. At one point he had to cut a hole in a wall just to get the circulation of air up there. So it was combat archiving for sure.

Scott: Archive boot camp.

Baker: Right. Slowly but surely, there was a small group of people who responded to a natural need to do something to get these papers boxed and organized and out of here. A few years earlier, when Senator Richard Russell of Georgia died in 1971, his papers going back to 1933 were dumped literally, just dumped in the big tubs. The staff would go through, pull out the file cabinet drawers and dump everything into a tub. No organization, no order whatsoever. And off they went to the University of Georgia where it took them more than a decade to begin to figure out. And it was only because of a very dedicated staff member named Barboura Raesly, who went with the papers back to Georgia. Without her, without knowing what the various names of staff members and internal office administrative quirks, that collection would have been impossible to reorganize. She was there to help interpret that. Otherwise they would have been in big trouble.

Scott: She was able to help them understand what was important versus the records that were less important.

Baker: I recall that there was some discussion of the “blue file.” The blue file was basically crank obscene letters to the senator. They didn’t want them in the regular files. But they stuck them in the blue file. Who would know what the blue file is? In those pre-automated days there were all kinds of little gimmicks to

make the files work and make them understandable. It really took the maximum of human intervention to do that. It placed a premium on human ingenuity.

Scott: Did you find that some senators were more historically minded than others? That some senators took less convincing, for example, to understand the value of their papers and archiving them with some institution after their retirement?

Baker: Absolutely! That continues right down to today and it will apply one hundred years from now, as well. It's sort of a basic part of human nature. It is so maddening to run across senators, particularly now in the electronic age, it's so easy to destroy the data with the push of a button or with the discard of a tape or disc whereas back then you had to do something with these mountains of boxes. One of the panaceas introduced at the time was microfilm and the Senate had a micrographics division under the sergeant at arms and they were good at bulk processing. You could literally put these papers on a conveyor belt and just photograph them and then that way you can throw away all the papers and then you have microfilm. Nice and tidy and efficient!

Scott: They did that in-house?

Baker: Yes, both for committee records and members' papers. In more recent times, we in the historical office have confronted the question of what happened to the secretary of the Senate's records from the 1970s. We remember there was a microfilming project, and of course, the papers, many of them were long gone because they had been filmed. They were mostly administrative, financial papers. Finally, Diane Boyle, our archival assistant, discovered these films and most of them were quite unstable after thirty, thirty-five years. She managed to get them copied back onto paper. So the irony is that you go from paper to film to paper. [Laughs] I guess that's somebody's idea of progress.

Scott: Where did she find them?

Baker: She really knew the nooks and crannies of the Senate campus very well. She knew many of the custodians. I don't know where she found them, but she unearthed them in a storeroom. In the 1970s there were some high-salaried people whose job it was to figure out how to microfilm better and faster. Then you come back a generation or two later and that "efficiency" turned out to be a sure step toward oblivion in terms of the integrity and the existence of the record.

Scott: When you first opened the office in 1975, not much of the institution's history was available to scholars. Even the Conference minutes of the Democratic and Republican caucuses weren't available to scholars but available for members only. How did you eventually convince the leadership of both parties to allow you access to those records and to edit them and make them part of the public record?

Baker: One of the best arguments was that, in earlier times, the access to those minutes was not evenhanded. Indeed, some favored individuals were able to take a peek, or even more than a peek at the records. But other people were not allowed that opportunity. Our argument was that—fairness. The other was control, because if you publish these you'll know what you're publishing. If there is anything in there that might embarrass a current or former senator, the time to deal with that is in the publication process. You know, get it cleared and if it's necessary, using the model of the Foreign Relations Committee's executive session transcripts, we either take it out with some footnotes that indicate material has been deleted, with the possibility of release at some future date, or perhaps never. But that was the price we had to pay and it was a small price because, when you get right down to it, the fears of the custodians of these records, the Republican and Democratic Party secretaries tended to be understandably a little exaggerated. They don't need these to be published, it's not going to help them at all. It took us a very long time to convince both parties to do this.

The bicentennial of the Senate, in 1989, was a wonderful target to plan against. The Senate did establish a planning committee, maybe we can go into that later. So when you have a planning committee saying, this frames the enterprise as a good idea, it's not just a bunch of historians sitting around the historical office looking for something to do. But it took us longer to convince the Republicans. It wasn't going to happen, as it turned out looking back on it, until the Republicans took control of the Senate. And all of a sudden, the secretary of the Senate—my boss—is a Republican. And one day he and I went in to meet with Conference Chairman Senator Thad Cochran. Clearly the skids had been greased ahead of time. It was a lovely meeting. "Of course we want to do this in the interest of history" and so that was it. We said, you know, the Democrats are going to do it. And so, maybe you ought to be at the table as well. So that was it. But it took a long while to get the door opened to such a meeting and it underscores, I think, one of the most valuable things about a government history office. That is, you don't have to get it done tomorrow. It may take five years, ten years, or even longer. But you have the collective memory of the project and you

sense, within the institution, when is the time to move. When is the time to get it done?

Scott: And you just remained persistent.

Baker: And we realized that around here, persistence can backfire. So we kept our persistence covert. You know, I wouldn't badger the secretary of the Senate. In recent times, we had an excellent administrative arrangement where the assistant secretary of the Senate would sit down with all the department heads on a monthly basis to find out what's going on in the respective offices. That really didn't develop until the later 1990s. But it was a great way to keep the secretary involved and it was a great therapy device for the department heads because first of all, somebody with authority is listening to what you think the problems are and also has the opportunity to help solve those problems. I learned very quickly that there are times when you might as well just put it in a box and set the box on the shelf and forget about it for a while because they don't want to hear about it for whatever reason.

Scott: Did this have something to do with the political cycle?

Baker: I think so. Also, it's the difference between the first and second session of a two-year Congress. First sessions are always more forward looking, the second sessions are kind of wrapping things up. It also has to do with having worked for twelve secretaries of the Senate. Every one of them was, as far as I'm concerned, a good person to work for. But they all had different agendas and were a good mix, half Republicans, half Democrats. You could kind of eventually get to it. Having some bicentennial anniversaries in there also helped.

Scott: I'd like to talk about Frank Valeo because he's the first secretary of the Senate that you worked for. You worked with him for two years, he left in 1977 when Majority Leader Mike Mansfield left. I'd like to know how you worked together, how he supported the office. He was a very historically minded person.

Baker: Very much so. He correctly thought of himself as a scholar and a writer. He had previously worked in the foreign affairs division at the Congressional Research Service, the old Legislative Reference Service at the Library of Congress. I think people saw him that way. I had worked for him a little bit when I was acting curator of the Senate in 1969-1970. I think our relationship was a bit distant. He was sort of the grey eminence. You would be

ushered into his presence. I must say, Jim Ketchum, when he was curator of the Senate, one of his great talents was to be able to break through that. Before you knew it, Jim was inviting Frank to his house for barbeques and picnics, you know, he knew Frank's son very well. That's not my strength. Frank was a little bit distant but very supportive.

Then, sadly, when he died in 2006, there was no one to do a eulogy at his funeral. It was a memorial service at a church in Chevy Chase. Don Ritchie had done his oral history interview and that had built a type of therapeutic relationship. Don did a magnificent eulogy for Frank Valeo. In Frank's later years, he would call me occasionally and, at his request, I had given a very careful—and perhaps overly critical—reading of his book manuscript on Mike Mansfield. His son had died at a very early age and he was very emotional on the phone. But I didn't think it was appropriate for me to be doing the eulogy at his service. I mention that only to give you the sense of the distance of my relationship with him. But he was there to support us, but as you point out, it was only two years. He was, for better or worse, tagged as Mike Mansfield's agent, and so when it came time for him to stand for reelection as secretary in 1976 with Mike Mansfield leaving, he lost to Stan Kimmitt.

Scott: What about your relationship with Mike Mansfield? Did you speak with him regularly?

Baker: Not regularly. But with him being the majority leader and being very busy, that was understandable for me. I did go in and speak with him several times. When I retired the first time from my job as acting curator he invited me in and we had a nice chat. When I came back, I had a couple of occasions to speak with him. He was also somewhat of a remote individual who you don't make small talk with, for sure. He thought what we were doing was terrific and I think he was proud of having inspired it. Years later, he came back to the Senate and we had our picture taken together in the Mansfield room and the thing I remember about that picture was that I was so interested in talking with him, you know you had the grip for the hand shake, and I'm talking to him and he commands, "Look at the camera!" [Laughs] So, I learned a lot from him right down through the end of it. He was a towering figure in the Senate's history and in the history of this office. This office would not exist in its current form, it might be some other form, but not without his active interest and intervention.

Scott: Some scholars and close observers have criticized Mansfield when they compare him with his predecessor Lyndon Johnson. They've said that

Mansfield wasn't as political, he didn't require the members to toe the party line. He let them be a little more independent. What do you think about that assessment as a historian? Do you think that's an accurate, or fair, critique?

Baker: I think he was the antithesis of Lyndon Johnson. There could not have been another Lyndon Johnson-style leader. The Democratic caucus would not have stood for it. Mansfield was the deputy leader when Johnson was in office and so he was the logical successor but he was the deputy leader with good reason. They wanted somebody who had a more "small d" democratic view of how the Senate should be run. There is a wonderful story about a speech that Mike Mansfield prepared, with some help from Frank Valeo, in November 1963 in response to the pushback that he was getting from some Democratic senators like Thomas Dodd who said "you should be more like Lyndon Johnson." Mansfield in this great speech said, "I am who I am and you have to take me or leave me. I'm fully prepared to step aside." That speech he planned to give on Friday afternoon November 22, 1963. News of Kennedy's shooting reached the Senate Chamber so he dropped it in the *Record* and he never actually spoke it on the floor. So then in 1998 when the then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott set up a program, a so-called leader's lecture series, to bring back former leaders, he was the kick-off speaker. He called me one day, out of the blue. He said, "I'm not sure what I should be saying to this group. You're close to the planning, what do you think?" The last thing I wanted to do was write a speech for him. I said, "Well, the one thing we do know about is that undelivered speech of yours from November 1963. We would be happy to go through it and take out a lot of the references that no one would focus on today that were just for that moment and turn it into a speech for you." He said, "That sounds like a great idea." And so we did and he did. He gave it and it really kicked off that series very, very well. It also became sort of a foundational document, or at least a major document in trying to understand the limits of the majority leadership in the United States Senate.

Scott: It's striking when you think about how much Mike Mansfield was able to accomplish while he was leader that perhaps he was persuasive by not using the "treatment" like Lyndon Johnson did. He was actually able to be more effective as a leader in terms of getting his policies through the Senate.

Baker: Sixteen years as leader is a lot of time to do a lot. But also, having it coincide with the Great Society, for which he deserves credit. And Watergate, he was instrumental in making sure that Sam Ervin was the chairman of the committee and not Edward Kennedy. Of course, we now have Don Oberdorfer's

and Frank Valeo's books about Mike Mansfield and Don Ritchie's oral history with Frank Valeo is a rich source of information about Mansfield.

Scott: I wonder about your impressions of Senator Byrd, who becomes leader following Mike Mansfield's departure. This is the first transition where you, having worked under one majority leader, are now working under another. Did anything change in the office? Senator Byrd is himself very historically minded. Did you meet with him?

Baker: No, I really didn't. Not in 1977 when he became leader. Whom I did meet with was the new secretary of the Senate, one Joseph Stanley Kimmitt who had been the Democratic Party secretary previously. So, Stan Kimmitt was my closest connection to Robert Byrd. We were able to get Senator Byrd along with Senator Baker to open the 1978 conference on senators' papers. I gave a speech at the 1977 meeting of the Organization of American Historians, and Senator Byrd put that in the *Congressional Record*, called the "Senate Historical Office: Why, What and for Whom?" So, that was nice. But I had no personal contact with him until March of 1980.

Scott: When you got together with him to discuss the creation of the United States Senate Bicentenary Study Group?

Baker: Even there, not very much. That was pretty much handled through staff. My introduction to Senator Byrd came courtesy of former Senate Parliamentarian Floyd Riddick, who one day in March 1980 called me up and said, "I want you to come over. The time has come—you've been here for five years—for you to meet Senator Byrd." So, I wasn't quite sure what was up. I met Doc Riddick, as he was known, over in Senator Byrd's majority leader office in the Capitol and I was so nervous. I barely knew what my name was at that point. I was sweating. Oh, it was terrible. But once we walked in and sat down and had the introductions and so forth, Senator Byrd is a natural politician. He knows how to put people at their ease. Clearly what he wanted was some help from us. Only years later did I learn from Bob Dove, who later became Senate parliamentarian, that Senator Byrd was moving toward a series of historical speeches about the internal operation of the Senate, starting with the sergeant at arms' office. And Bob Dove, and Floyd Riddick his former boss, were certainly wise enough to realize that was going to mean a lot of work for them and why should they be writing historical speeches when there's a historical office. So, summon the historian, center stage.

Scott: Here you just thought it was a pleasant meeting.

Baker: That's right. I should have known better. Majority leaders don't have time for casual chit-chat. This followed an event on March 21, 1980, when Senator Byrd's granddaughter and her fifth grade class came to visit the Senate Chamber and, as it was a quiet Friday afternoon with no pressing business before the Senate, he gave a history speech. And then his other granddaughter came the following week with the same teacher and he wanted it to be different. But also, at that time, he had in mind a question about the role and authority of the majority leader to arrest senators to force them to come to vote to provide cloture and to move ahead. By 1980, he didn't realize it at the time but he was finishing up his first four years as majority leader. Floor people who have been interviewed about Senator Byrd say that was his prime, those four years, that he really was the master of the floor. Well, the one thing he wanted to know was the history of arresting senators. How many times had it been done, what were the circumstances? So, could we help him? The sergeant at arms' office had put together a few pages, but it wasn't satisfactory. He wanted the real history. So that was my first assignment, to go and see if I could put together a speech for him on the history of arresting senators, and more broadly, the role of the sergeant at arms in enforcing discipline in the Senate.

Scott: So that's how it starts, with that one essay?

Baker: Right, exactly.

Scott: Little did you know that it would become such a huge project.

Baker: Then it became sort of a "while you're at it" syndrome. "What about the rest of the Senate's history?"

Scott: So this is March of 1980. Nineteen-eighty is important for several reasons in the history of the historical office, but Majority Leader Byrd and Minority Leader Howard Baker establish a study group on the Commemoration of the United States Senate Bicentenary in 1980. What was your role in that process?

Baker: I would like to say that it was a very active role. We saw that, as we were discussing earlier about getting the caucus minutes published, we knew we needed some sort of hands-on from higher-ups, whether they be senior senators or distinguished historians and others from around the country. So our motive was to get that going. And keep in mind that not only the bicentennial in

1976, but the opening of the Capitol's restored Old Supreme Court Chamber in 1975. And the Old Senate Chamber in 1976. All of the sudden there it is, this magnificent room beautifully restored. Not without its problems in terms of restoration and understanding what the room really looked like in the 1850s, but that room opened in 1976.

In 1975 the Senate was going through a whole process of institutional self-examination. It set up a Commission on the Operation of the Senate to figure out how the Senate could be managed more efficiently. Senator Byrd realized that quite likely he was going to be the majority leader in 1977. The Senate also created the Select Committee to Study the Senate Committee System. These were two fundamental investigative bodies with very tight deadlines to report and to have any recommended changes in place in January 1977. And when the Senate convened in 1977 they delayed organizing the committees for several months until they could resolve sensitive issues associated with realigning Senate committee jurisdictions, multiple jurisdictions, who handles the foreign economic finance, for instance.

But this whole sense of tradition pervaded discussions of change. If we are going to make changes we want to make sure that they are consistent with what's been done in the past. And the creation of the historical office in 1975 certainly was a part of that wave. As we moved from 1975 on up through 1980, it was a matter of all of that beginning to bear fruit. By 1980, I think we had the stature in our office to be able to recommend to the majority leader and the minority leader, "This is what you should do." If there was to be such a study group, here's what they might consider. So it's not a matter of just going in and sitting around a table and saying, "Has anybody got any ideas?" But again, they had as recent examples of format and substance these two study committees that existed in 1975 and 1976.

Scott: As models.

Baker: As models.

Scott: The study group on the Commemoration of the United States Senate Bicentenary issues its report in 1982. In those two years, how often does the study group meet and how do things work?

Baker: They didn't meet that often. There's a transcript, or summary of maybe three meetings, four meetings. And of course, we did prepare a final report

based on those meetings. But it involved bringing people from around the country to Washington. This raised a few headaches, how are you going to pay for this? Fortunately, we were able to find some funds to do that. That also established legitimacy of this operation. If the Senate is willing to spend good money to bring people here, then it must be a serious purpose. The main unanticipated development was the change in party control as a result of the 1980 election. And so the chairman of this committee, by the time it got organized, was a Republican, former floor leader Hugh Scott. And Howard Baker was the majority leader at that time and Howard Baker has a real strong sense of the institution. After all, his father-in-law, Everett Dirksen, had been a senator and he'd been in the Senate for a while. Again, all the planets aligned and it was a wonderful opportunity.

The change in party control absolutely helped things. The one thing we recognized from the Republicans was that they wanted to start clean. They wanted to not run the Senate the way the Democrats had done for the past 26 years. But on the other hand the Senate is such a profoundly traditional body that you can't do that. You don't have that license to institute stark change. So you have to go back and pick and choose from the historical models. Well, who better than the staff of a historical office to help you determine what those models were. But it was, in many respects, a clean slate. Certainly it was in terms of the people that we dealt with. No more obstreperous committee clerks who wouldn't let us look at their records. You know, all of a sudden those people were replaced by Republican committee clerks. Some of them may have been just as obstreperous by nature as their predecessors, but at least they were new and we now were the old people on the block. We had been around for five whole years!

Scott: One more thing before we move to this watershed moment with the 1980 election. I wanted to ask you about the office's role in creating Resolution 474. Senator Byrd proposes Resolution 474 which would establish new rules to govern the accessibility of Senate committee papers. The Senate had never had such a rule. What was going on behind the scenes? How did the office help him create that resolution? Did you draft it?

Baker: We drafted it. We had some good help from Michael Davidson who was the brand-new Senate legal counsel. That resolution was passed in 19...

Scott: It passed in 1980, but it goes into effect in March of 1981. It passed while Senator Byrd was majority leader.

Baker: Right. The Senate established an office of legal counsel, as opposed to legislative counsel, in 1979 and Michael Davidson was the first director of it. Prior to that time the Senate used private law firms to help with any legal issues. That approach proved to be kind of self defeating and very expensive.

Scott: And Watergate had made it such an issue.

Baker: That's right. So I got to work with Mike Davidson, a terrific fellow who also was fundamentally interested in historical records. But it also grew out of our developing relationship with the National Archives. The Archives would say to a researcher, and did say famously on one occasion when Merrill Peterson called the Archives and wanted to look at some Senate Finance Committee records from the 1850s. The first thing the custodians did there was to call the Senate Finance Committee and say, "Some scholar is trying to get into your records. Do you want that to happen?" So we realized that we needed to come up with a number. The Archives was sort of operating on a fifty-year rule basis. Everything is closed for fifty years if it hadn't been opened at the time it was created. Well, that was absurd. And again, with the public documents commission focusing on these issues, these were hot issues. There was a little one-upmanship because the House had a fifty-year rule. Our feeling was, the Senate ought to be able to do better than the House. We just came up with twenty years. That seemed reasonable. That's the definition of a generation, twenty to twenty-five years. If we had to negotiate to thirty we would have done it. But let's start with twenty. The records had to be at the National Archives in order to come under this twenty-year opening policy. So if a committee decided not to send records, like the Intelligence Committee, then it was moot. So, with some really good legal draftsmanship by Mike Davidson, we got this resolution put together and it was something that really appealed to Stan Kimmitt and he cleared it with [Robert Byrd] and we got it adopted. And it was a very happy day in the office for sure.

Scott: I can imagine. That is a huge coup!

Baker: It is! It really is. And of course it only applies to the official records of the Senate at the National Archives. Years later when Karen Paul succeeded in getting a comparable resolution adopted, an advisory resolution, saying that members should take care of their personal papers and send them to repositories, the day that it was adopted finally—it was a House and Senate

concurrent resolution—Karen and I did a major dance down the hall. When you see Karen Paul and me dancing—

Scott: It's a special occasion.

Baker: It is a special occasion, yes.

Scott: That brings us up to the November election of 1980 which is a watershed moment in American political history, particularly in the Senate where twelve incumbents were defeated and six senators retired. So you have a huge turnover. Twelve of those individuals didn't realize that they wouldn't be coming back. So it seems to me that this could be a real moment of crisis for the office. How are we going to get in touch with these folks? What did you do?

Baker: There weren't a lot of us here to go meet with those senators. We didn't have any archivists on the staff at the time. [Associate Historian] Don [Ritchie] and I were pretending to be archivists. I remember that he went and had a famous meeting with George McGovern, who had been defeated, to convince him that his papers ought to go back to South Dakota. Needless to say, the worst possible time to talk with any senator about sending papers back to their home state is when that home state has just defeated a reelection bid. So he went off to Princeton and only years later did he come to appreciate that South Dakota was the place and made amends in that direction. We were very busy going and talking not only to senators but mostly to their senior staff. It is the great truism of the 1980 election that "no one saw it coming." No one saw the Republican victory coming at all. Those who were defeated, some may have had a sense that they were in trouble. The Panama Canal treaty debates two years earlier certainly softened the ground for defeat in some cases. We tried to put together guidelines that we could hand out and we had the printed copies of our 1978 conference proceedings. The least receptive audience for something like that is going to be someone who is wondering where the packing boxes are coming from. "How do we pay to ship them without wiping out our office expense account, which we'd like to convert to pay supplements for departing staff?" Or, "How can we incinerate all our records?" That is when the seed was planted in 1980 to get a professional archivist on staff.

Scott: Because it just overwhelmed the office.

Baker: Absolutely! First of all, we needed more people. We started off with four, and then five, and we were under some limitations in terms of space

and money to expand much beyond that. But 1980 was the definitive argument for having strong archival support staff. Ever since then, you know, I've said to anyone who'll listen that the archival services of our office are the bread and butter work of the office. This is something that if our office ceased to exist, it would have to happen. It would grow up again in some other form, but it's absolutely fundamental to members. That's a story for another time.

Scott: How long did you wait after the election returns came in before you contacted them? What did you say? It must have been a very sensitive time.

Baker: And it always is. First of all, the day following the election nobody is answering the telephones. A week or so later, staff begin to slowly come back to the office, coming to grips with what they have to face. So, we would try to put something in writing because it was very difficult to track down the defeated senator. There were cases like Paula Hawkins, of Florida. She was a product of that 1980 election. When she was defeated six years later, she just didn't show up at the office anymore. She simply abandoned the office, walked away from it, as I've heard the story from her staff, and I think that's close to being accurate.

Scott: Did you rely on contacts that you had established within the office of some of these senators if they had people who were more historically minded?

Baker: The impression I'd like to leave with you about all this was that we were not at all in control of that situation. It was sort of like fighting a conflagration with a garden hose. We felt every once in a while we were doing something good. We summoned up people like Gene Jenkins and John Sobotka and a couple of others who had emerged by that time as people who really had the street "cred," who were knowledgeable. But the potential audience, the actual audience was just not receptive. They wanted to throw things in boxes. Undoubtedly a lot of records were destroyed. The perennial question about constituent correspondence, you know, which had a lot of social security numbers back in those days. Should that be saved? And a lot of it by nature was tossed at that point. It was a chaotic time.

Scott: How did the historical office manage the transition from Democratic leadership under which it had been created to Republican leadership? Was there a moment when the returns were coming in on that November day when you worried about the office and whether it would survive the transition?

Baker: I remember that day as if it were yesterday. I remember going out for a run in the morning thinking, “this is interesting, another election,” and so forth. And then sitting at home at night watching the results come in and realizing that we had to start all over again in terms of our political connections with the Senate. Because there was no guarantee. We, like anyone else on Capitol Hill who doesn’t hold an election certificate, are so-called employees at will. It might be the will of the incoming Republicans who had not tasted power in the Senate since 1954. Nineteen-fifty-four. We didn’t really want to be a victim of that. We wanted to say, “No, you need history more than ever to have this continuity.”

The big question mark was the new Secretary of the Senate William Hildenbrand, a close aide to Howard Baker and former aide to Delaware senator J. Caleb Boggs. Bill was a very shrewd Republican Party secretary. I remember watching him from the gallery of the Senate Chamber. It was really interesting to see his balletic movements around the floor and what he was doing. So I had a lot of respect for him as a political operator. Again, I was very much intimidated by him. You know, I didn’t have anything in common with him other than that we both worked for the Senate. We knew he, at least, was going to continue working for the Senate. [Laughs]

Then there is the story about the *Washington Evening Star* newspaper right after the election coming out with a banner headline. I think there is a copy in our files. “Help Wanted.” They did a two-part issue where they listed the names of senior staff and their salaries, pulled out of the records that the Senate publishes. There are all these great jobs: “Do you want to be the Librarian of the Senate? The Historian of the Senate? The Financial Clerk? Here you go, here’s what these people make!”

And there was Bill Hildenbrand putting up a sign on the door of the secretary of the Senate’s office saying, “Open under New Management.” He covers this very nicely in his oral history interview. Fortunately, Howard Baker was going to be the new majority leader and had a real balanced view of the institution. He said to Hildenbrand, “If people are doing their jobs effectively, they should be allowed to stay in those jobs.” Which was a monumental—in terms of the institution—a monumental turning point, because it was the first test since the 1950s of continuity in the face of party change. In 1953 when the Republicans took over, and in 1955 when the Democrats took over again, a number of the offices under the secretary of the Senate switched their supervisors. So the librarian would become the assistant librarian. And the assistant librarian would become the librarian. Or they’d bring in somebody altogether different.

The Senate, I think, in terms of moving away from a patronage-based administrative, legislative, and financial staff owes an awful lot to Howard Baker and to Bill Hildenbrand.

About 25 years later, I gave a talk at the University of Tennessee Summer Institute for Teachers—it was sponsored by the Howard Baker Center—about the difference between the Senate and the House. And I said, “Well, here’s a classic example: in 1995 when the House changed control the first thing they did was fire the historian. In 1981 when control changed in the Senate, Senator Howard Baker said, ‘If they are doing a good job, let them stay.’” And he just beamed. He was sitting there in the aisle.

Scott: Oh, he was there?

Baker: He was there. He beamed, he loved that. It was like closure. I just wanted to thank him, not only from the perspective of our office, but for what he did to support the institutional continuity of the Senate.

Scott: Had you made one of the priorities of the office to be nonpartisan?

Baker: Absolutely. We didn’t have a moment’s thought about anything other than a nonpartisan office, which is the beauty of the office being under the secretary of the Senate. I think that all the time Frank Valeo was secretary, from 1966 through 1977, he prided himself in following the Congressional Research Service model of nonpartisanship and fair and balanced service. That’s what he brought from the Library of Congress. Even though he was the Democratic Party secretary for several years, when he became the secretary of the whole Senate, he realized he had one hundred bosses and everyone was equal in terms of what they deserved. He instilled in his department heads, for sure, that attitude. The quickest way to lose your job is to show any partisan preference in the administering of your services to the Senate community.

Scott: And making it through this transition must have been evidence that you made it, that you were a nonpartisan office.

Baker: That’s right, it really did. That’s a very shrewd observation, I think. It put the seal of approval. And again, in an institution where staff turns over quite rapidly, and particularly in the late seventies—the Senate reached its peak in terms of the number of staff in 1979 and it has sort of gone down a little bit since then. Anybody that had been around for six years, you know, really was

an old timer. The office had been around for six years. So, yes, the years of preparation were pretty much over. Phase one was over. And starting in 1981 we moved into phase two.

Scott: I'd like to close with one last question. I'd like your impressions of the institution after this watershed election. When the Congress convened in 1981 under new leadership, after having been under Democratic leadership for twenty-six years, did you observe any changes? Did things feel different? What was it like to be in the Senate under Mike Mansfield in 1975 versus the Senate of Howard Baker in 1981?

Baker: The word "openness" comes to mind, very much so. Not that the Democrats were closed, but the Democrats had been doing what they had been doing for several decades. All of a sudden it's, "Let's look for new ways to proceed." "Let's invite more people to sit at the table." That didn't last too long. That's typical of any new relationship and so forth. Then you get comfortable and you get into the second session of that Congress and all of a sudden the same old problems appear. But 1981 brought lots of hope and optimism. It was tempered, however, by the incoming class of freshman senators who were—

Scott: A big class.

Baker: They were a big class. And frankly, there were a lot of people in that class who were elected not so much because of who they were, but because the voters were angry at the incumbent senator. The test of that came six years later when many of them lost their seat.

Scott: Are there members in particular who you feel fit in that category?

Baker: Well, I mentioned Paula Hawkins earlier. I'd have to look at the list of the senators. It is astounding, and this is a fact above all other facts to shed some light on the Senate of that transitional period. The previous three elections, 1976, 1978, and 1980 brought in fifty-five new senators. Now some of them were short termers, but it fundamentally lowered the experience level, the seniority level of senators. And sure, the Senate always has its senior members who have been around a long time and then you'll always have one-termers who just kind of get here because they weren't the incumbent, but the average level of experience went down. The attitude was, "Well, that's not so bad. We need to be thinking in fresh new ways."

Scott: There was an anti-incumbent sentiment in 1980, much as I think there is today, that helped usher in that sea change.

Baker: The one big change was Senator Byrd who was absolutely devastated by this. First of all, he had lost his job as majority leader.

Scott: After only four years.

Baker: That's right. And then about that time in late 1981, his sixteen-year-old grandson, Jon Michael Moore, was killed in an automobile accident. He fell asleep one morning driving back from his paper route and died in the accident. That really devastated him and certainly that was a monumental blow. It didn't help to have the change in the Senate also. And that's when the Democrats began to think about meeting on a regular basis for party caucuses, to have what might be termed group therapy sessions. They didn't have to do that when they were flying high.

Scott: One last question: What were your impressions of Howard Baker as majority leader? As Senator? As politician? Did you meet with him as you had with the other majority leaders?

Baker: You know, as a department head under the Secretary of the Senate there is a structural problem there about meeting with the party leaders. The person who is supposed to meet with the party leaders is the secretary. And then you meet with the secretary. So there's a clear chain of command. However, the reason I mention this is that there seems to be some license given to historians. So, any contacts always took place with full knowledge of the secretary. Howard Baker, I had always had enormous respect for Howard Baker. I liked him then as a human being. I liked his sense of humor; he didn't take himself too seriously. That characteristic made him a very effective party leader and, later, chief of staff to President Ronald Reagan.

Some of us remember the famous day in late 1980 after the election when he walked into the Disbursing Office on the second floor of the Capitol, right next door to the Republican leader's suite and looked around. The disbursing staffers were really impressed that the new soon-to-be majority leader cared about their operations and so-forth. Of course, what he was doing was surveying the space, which was right next door to his office. The office his father-in-law had had. Within a day the word came that this nice, avuncular new majority leader wanted them all cleared out and they moved downstairs—this was in 1981—to the floor

below which had been a barber shop. Then as soon as the Hart Building opened in 1982, they moved over here. So, he was capable of making, you know, tough decisions, for sure, but he came packaged in a very nice manner.

He cared a lot about the institution's history. When I asked for help from his office, for various things, he never turned me down. You know, I was careful what I asked for, but it was a very good relationship. At that point, I had developed a relationship with the Everett McKinley Dirksen Research Center out in Pekin, Illinois. I had first been associated with them in 1976 when they opened. They had a big opening ceremony and the archivist of the United States was going to give the keynote address. Well, the archivist, James Rhodes' plane was delayed in Washington National Airport so he was late arriving for the ceremony. So they looked around in desperation for someone, anyone, from Washington [Laughs]. So I ended up giving an impromptu speech. Subsequently, Senator Roman Hruska, who was a pal of Dirksen's, inserted it into the *Congressional Record*. This speech basically was about what it is we are trying to do in 1976 to get the Senate Historical Office going. From that point on I worked with the Dirksen Center and then eventually spent twelve years on its board of directors back in the days when Senate staff were allowed to serve on boards of directors. Senator Baker knew that I was helpful to the Dirksen Center. And that relationship with the Dirksen Center continues, even in my post-Senate life today.

Scott: Thank you.

Baker: You're very welcome.