

Celebrations and Commemorations

Interview #4

Wednesday, August 11, 2010

Scott: Welcome.

Baker: Thank you.

Scott: The final report of the Study Group on the Commemoration of the Senate's Bicentenary recommended participating in several ceremonies, one of which was associated with the signing and ratification of the Constitution. I wanted to ask you about your role and the role of the historical office in working on the commemorative meeting of Congress in Philadelphia on July 16, 1987.

Baker: That was a major project for a limited period of time, from early 1986 until July of 1987. The original plan was to have an actual meeting of Congress in Philadelphia. This would have been the first meeting of Congress in 187 years in Philadelphia. Needless to say, the city fathers and mothers of Philadelphia didn't miss the opportunity to realize the commercial possibilities of all of that. "And who knows, once they come up here maybe they'd like it and be happy to stay." That guiding assumption lasted until well into 1986, probably near the end of 1986 and then everyone involved realized the security costs of having the whole Congress up there. All of a sudden we began to hear from the various House and Senate officers, "We'd have to replicate everything that's in the House and Senate Chambers up there: the reporters of debate, the voting system, and so forth." I think some of these people didn't want to do it. So they were piling on all the potential problems. The idea of a real session fell pretty quickly as the time approached and they realized the cost of it. But again security was also a major issue. This ended up being a so-called ceremonial session.

So this was a commemoration of the Great Compromise, not the ultimate signing of the Constitution in September of '87, but the Great Compromise on July 16 of '87. This was going to be Congress's special day, the heck with the executive and judicial branches. "This is our part of the Constitution!"

We were involved in planning a trial run exactly one year to the day before the actual 1987 event. They had police up on the roof of Independence Hall and Congress Hall. They wanted to know exactly where the sun was going to cast its shadows on that particular day. Again, I think it was an opportunity for the

security to not only do their job but perhaps get a little extra funding and perhaps go a little bit over the top on that one.

We had a dinner on the site one year in advance and it brought together a lot of people from the House and the Senate, and from Philadelphia, as you would expect. It was nice to get to know the people from Philadelphia. It was also nice to get to know the people from the House, which can be as remote as Philadelphia! [Laughs] So that worked well. We got to know Hobart Cawood, who was the Superintendent of Independence National Historical Park. And they really knocked themselves out to make it a very friendly and great occasion. We had a number of planning meetings and got to know some good Philadelphia restaurants along the way.

Finally, on the day of July 16, 1987, the entourage assembled at Washington's Union Station. Some of us had gone up a day earlier, but most of the members of Congress—there were about 200 all together who participated—had a special car on a special train out of Union Station to Philadelphia. They had Navy Seabees along the bridges over the Susquehanna River to make sure nobody would try to blow up a large number of congresspeople. But it was an absolutely beautiful, glorious day. Just could not have been better. Not a cloud in the sky. The temperature and humidity were perfect and the day went beautifully well. Our main concern was that leaders of Congress and others members who were participating in the program would all get up and say the same thing. So we tried to give them talking points so that they would hit a different part of the story. And it really worked very, very, well. In the morning there was a joint meeting in Independence Hall in the very room in which the Constitution was drafted and signed. Then it moved over to Congress Hall next door and the Senate went upstairs to its chamber and the House downstairs to its chamber and had a very nice ceremony in each of those rooms. And then there was a luncheon and everybody really felt very good about it. And then they went back home, contented that they had celebrated the Constitution from the perspective of how did it make Congress unique. The Great Compromise that established the basis of representation in the House and in the Senate. From that compromise evolved two profoundly different institutions. It was a significant day and a good event.

Scott: I found a memo that you wrote to [Secretary of the Senate] Joe Stewart and you recommended that the House and Senate hold a joint session but that they also hold individual sessions. Why did you think that was important?

Baker: We needed to do something that symbolized Congress as a whole. This Great Compromise was principally about the whole Congress. But it was also about how you establish representation in the House and the Senate. So it seemed logical to start with a joint meeting. Each state, I believe, was represented by its most senior member, whether senator or representative, in the Independence Hall event. And then it was up to the House and the Senate to set up the separate programs the way they wanted. And we arranged to have a program printed and again worked on helping members with talking points in so far as they wanted them. Some of them handled it very nicely with their own staffs. Others came to us for help. Senator John Stennis, as the president pro tempore, was presiding. Strom Thurmond, as the senior member of the Republican Party, was there but we didn't put in any role for him. Senator Stennis was enough of a politician and a good colleague to say to Senator Thurmond that when he finished speaking, perhaps Senator Thurmond would like to say a few words. And we all thought, "Oh boy, there goes the program." [Laughs] Senator Thurmond got up there and we had official reporters of debates from the Senate up there so they took it all down so it looked like a regular session. Senator Thurmond made some nice remarks. Then we followed the script and other senators made their remarks and they all gathered for a group photo of about 25 senators.

Years later, senators who had attended would come up to me and say "That was a real special event. It really was nice. I remember the time we all went up to Philadelphia."

Scott: I noticed in the *Congressional Record* that throughout 1987 Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole delivered a series of bicentennial minutes on the Senate floor. These minutes seem to be in the mold of Senator Byrd's minutes.

Baker: Interesting you should pick that up. [Laughs]

Scott: I wonder if the Historical Office was involved in crafting these minutes.

Baker: From the period of the American Revolution Bicentennial, ten years earlier, a number of media outlets came up with their own historical minutes. They called them American Revolution Bicentennial moments, or minutes. So it was in the air. People are willing to sit still for something that they think is just going to last a minute. They can get their little dose of history—

Scott: As long as it's short.

Baker: That's right. Of course, Senator Byrd's speeches beginning in 1980 were quite long. Senator Dole was attracted by the idea of doing something. He was a supporter and an appreciator of the Senate's history and a student of it, to some extent. And so he asked me if we could help him prepare some minutes. First, you know, it's: "Can you give me some talking points?" But you really know that it would be most helpful to them to have the actual polished minutes, the text ready to go. For two years we wrote these minutes, most of them about 200 to 250 words. And he would read them ahead of time. Every once in a while we would get a question. Or, "The leader doesn't really want to talk about this." But that was a rare exception. He would read these minutes at the opening of each daily session of the Senate. That was special. And then at the end of the Congress in 1988 he called me up and said he would like to invite the entire Historical Office, and also people at the Government Printing Office, to lunch. We had decided that what we would do out of the Bicentennial Commission recommendations was publish the minutes in something called the Senate Historical Almanac. GPO provided three different cover and design samples for him. He chose the one that I personally liked the least. It looked like an American Express calendar and appointment book, sort of bound the same color and ribbon and all the rest of it. He liked it, and that was fine. He dedicated the book to the memory of his parents, which shows you how much it meant to him. So he invited our whole staff and some of the GPO people who worked on that book to lunch in his leader's suite in the Capitol. It was a great event. There is a picture in the Historical Office of that event. A good time was had by all. It was sort of his ultimate way of saying "Thank you for all your help." At one point he said to me, "If I can ever help you in any way, if I can ever help you get more space ..." It wasn't more money for staff. The real currency was space. I appreciated that very much.

Scott: That's great. That's one of the publications to come out of the Senate Bicentennial Commission recommendations.

Baker: It was politically nicely balanced to have a bicentennial publication for the Republican leader that reflected his particular interests and one for the Democratic leader that reflected his interests.

Scott: The Bicentennial Commission also recommended support for several other publications, including Senator Byrd's History of the Senate volumes, as well as later providing financial support for transcribing and publishing the short hand journals of Captain Montgomery Meigs. I'd like the talk

about the Historical Office's role in writing and producing those volumes. If we can start with Senator Byrd's History of the Senate volumes, what was the Historical Office's role in writing those first two volumes?

Baker: I think we spoke earlier in the interview about my meeting with him in early 1980 when he wanted to learn more about the role of the sergeant at arms, and particularly arresting senators. It was clear that he wanted that for his own tactical purposes if not strategic purposes. He really loved the idea of standing on the floor and teaching his colleagues, most of whom were not up to speed at all on the institutional history of the Senate. Nor was he, really, at that point. So, at one point he said, after we prepared two speeches on the sergeant at arms, he said, "We should really do something on the secretary of the Senate." And then, "What about the chaplain?" "What about the Republican and Democratic Party conferences and policy committees?" He was really getting into the inner fiber of the Senate. You couldn't go into any book store and find anything that remotely touched those subjects. And the momentum built on that. He was very interested and knowledgeable about the Constitutional Convention and the creation of the Senate. He had done quite a bit of reading on that. Well, once you get going on the creation of the Senate then you want to know how it turned out.

At George Washington University there is a documentary history project that edits and publishes the papers of the first federal Congress. My complaint about that project, it's a brilliant project for the first federal Congress but it totally ignores all the ones that come after. So if I had been shaping that project I would have made it at least 1789-1800. How Congress got off the ground. It was logical to then do speeches on the second Congress but we didn't want to get into the trap of doing it Congress by Congress. More than one hundred speeches! But some two-year Congresses accomplish more than others. Don and I worked out a table of contents, not thinking at all that this would ever be a book, but this was just a list of topics for floor speeches. Many of them were chronological topics. But every once and a while we would work in "the history of the Senate pages" or the "history of the Senate chaplaincy." Senators and staff began to tear out of the daily *Congressional Record* these speeches and keep copies in loose leaf binders—

Scott: For their own reference?

Baker: For their own reference. Of course they weren't indexed and after you collected ten of these, all of a sudden they were useless. So before very long

Senator Byrd started getting suggestions from members to turn this into a book. At the same time, the Senate Bicentenary Study Group was surveying possible projects. About 1982 they thought a book of Senator Byrd's speeches would really be great. So we worked throughout the 1980s on that.

He took particularly strong interest in the topical speeches. And perhaps the one that he displayed the greatest interest in was the chapter on impeachment. This was coming along at the same time that the Senate was dusting off its constitutional role for holding impeachment trials. It hadn't been done for 50 years, and many believed it had become a dead letter of the Constitution. All of a sudden these federal judges in trouble come along, three of them between 1986 and 1989. So Senator Byrd went back and he was particularly interested in the British House of Commons and the House of Lords, and in their procedures with regard to the trial of Warren Hastings in 1787. Just to see how American constitution writers were trying to figure out how to put together a constitution that allowed for the removal of public officials. So the Hastings trial really had a big impact on the way that the framers drafted the impeachment provisions of the U.S. Constitution. There is a book by a husband and wife team, Peter Hoffer and Natalie Hull, *Impeachment in America, 1635-1805*. He devoured that book. He really liked it. I think he wanted to interview the authors. He may have, I'm not sure. That was one chapter that he wrote entirely by himself. We ultimately transferred to his archives his yellow note pads with his beautiful handwriting. Then we went to work on the post-1789 impeachment history, which was good for the office because we certainly learned a lot about the process. There was a lot to read and scholars were stimulated by the 1986 impeachment trial. I remember books beginning to appear written by law professors and others. He really was interested in that particular chapter.

He also did a speech that we weren't involved in. There were several of them for this series called God and American History. He had a speechwriter, who was also an ordained minister, named Hampton Rector. Jerry Rector. Jerry cranked out a speech for him on God and American history. There was another one on West Virginia becomes a state. We worked very hard to keep God and American history out of this book because it didn't flow. There wasn't any good place for it. And we wanted this book to be as balanced and objective and have a broad public audience. There is nothing wrong with God in American history but it seemed like this wasn't the place to put it. So we managed to keep that out. West Virginia becomes a state did end up in the book.

Scott: How much editorial input did he exercise? Did it depend on the particular chapter or topic?

Baker: He exercised significant control at a number of levels. First of all, on the conception of the project, he knew what he wanted and what he didn't want in that project. On the individual speeches, as you suggest, some were pretty much boilerplate American history. He read those with great interest, but he didn't make a lot of changes in the drafts that we sent. I might add that basically we were turning out drafts at the rate of one speech per week. One 30-page speech per week. Then we had the opportunity to do some revising. That is, when a senator gets up and makes his speech from the floor, reporters and people all over the country, after television came to the Senate, are listening. Every once in a while we'd hear from people who had some quibble about some fact in the speech. So we did have the opportunity to kind of vet the speeches before they ended up in permanent form in the final published volumes.

He had a major role in reviewing the photographs that we selected for the final four chapters of volume two. He had some of his own that he offered and we used. The day-to-day kind of drafting, just as any speech that a senator would give on the floor of the Senate, had heavy staff input. But bottom line is that when a senator comes and takes a look at that text, he or she decides whether they want to use it or they don't. Throughout the individual speeches he would interject his own experience. We did a speech on the history of the Senate whips, the assistant majority leaders. And, as a former whip, he knew a great deal about it and he wanted to put in the whip notice that that office sends around to all of their party's senators. Don Ritchie wrote a wonderful chapter on the Senate in literature and film: *Mr. Smith goes to Washington* and *Advise and Consent*. Senator Byrd went over the film presentations and he said he would take the novelist to task for floor procedure. He said, "You would never do it that way" and so forth. The little gems in those chapters that he interjected were great fun.

Scott: I'm trying to imagine how anyone could put together a researched 30-page chapter in one week. That must have put a significant strain on your resources in the office. How many historians did you have at that point? Were there three of you?

Baker: There were three historians working on the project. And these were heavily documented and carefully footnoted. So it was one of our major projects. We had a lot of other things going on at the same time but we worked very hard on that. Ultimately, it came at just the right time in the evolution of the

office and our evolution as historians here because we had to cover the whole waterfront. I think as I mentioned earlier, not only did we draft the original text for many of the speeches but we also then had to read it repeatedly in galley proof and page proof prior to the time it was published.

These speeches got a lot of favorable attention, not only from the general public. Probably 10 or 15 senators really loved them and went out of their way to tell Senator Byrd not only just to flatter him but genuinely that they liked them. Probably another 20-30 senators sort of were glad that they were there, just for future use. They had their grandchildren read them so they could say grandmom or granddad was in the Senate and they should know about the Senate. Also they got good reviews from scholars around the country. He got a lot of correspondence, back in the days when people sent letters, from experts who said, "You've got it exactly right and I'm very glad to see you quoted my book." [Laughs]

And the ultimate was that the book won two major awards. The Society for History in the Federal Government gave it an award for the best book of government history published that particular year. He attended the luncheon award ceremony and got up and made some brief remarks. It was a very nice feeling. And then the American Library Association designated it one of the notable government publications of that year. As a matter of fact, there was a third award within the printing industry. The Government Printing Office won an award for the printing and graphics of the book and how they put it all together. So it was a very positive situation.

He had a book party for it in his Democratic leader's suite for volume one. And then for volume two another book party over at the Library of Congress hosted by Jim Billington, the Librarian of Congress. People on the House of Representatives side kind of looked with a bit of envy that the Senate would do something like this, particularly after he sent each of them a copy. They raised the obvious question: "Why don't we have something like this over here?" They did have a book that was quite dated by that time, by Neil MacNeil of *Time* magazine, a congressional correspondent, called the *Forge of Democracy*. A nice one-volume light popular history of the House. But then a new member of the House named John Larson from Connecticut said, "Freshmen senators receive a copy of Senator Byrd's history of the Senate. What do we have over here on the House side?" That kind of initiative and institutional concern eventually earned Mr. Larson a House leadership post.

So that stimulated efforts that ultimately led to the hiring of a distinguished American historian named Robert Remini. Before they actually hired him as historian of the House, there was a period when he was a Kluge Fellow at the Library of Congress, a richly endowed chair. There were a number of Kluge fellows in different disciplines. His job was basically to write a history of the House of Representatives and he had about four years and some support staff to get it done. A real challenge to do that. A real challenge. There are strengths and weaknesses to any kind of enterprise where you try to put into one volume all of the nuances and personalities, particularly in a body as huge as the House of Representatives with more than 11,000 members over the years.

With Senator Byrd's project, we knew we couldn't do it in one volume. So we ended up with two volumes and then two appendix volumes. One was a book of statistics, which immediately went out of date. A lot of this occurred well before the Internet. What the office does now, as you know, is to have these statistics available up to date online. They are heavily used and regularly updated. He also wanted to have, as the fourth volume, a collection of notable Senate speeches. That in itself was a huge research task. We contacted scholars of speech, including Bernard Duffy at California Polytechnic State University and Halford Ryan at Washington and Lee University, and asked, "How you go about such a project. What makes a notable speech? What are the judging criteria?" Some are obvious. Daniel Webster's reply to Robert Hayne in January of 1830, Webster's Compromise of 1850 speech, and the 7th of March speech of 1850. We ended up with 46 speeches and we deliberately, probably yielding to the inevitable, included four speeches from Senator Byrd. Here was a flesh-and-blood live senator who had been around the institution long enough to know what made an effective speech. He had delivered a number, in particular, as Senate leader, of effective speeches. So it wasn't too difficult to come up with four, with some help from him and his office, that he considered models of effective Senate oratory. So those are the last four. Of course, afterwards we got a number of comments, the usual comments, "Well, it's just a puff piece for Senator Byrd putting him in the same league with [Henry] Clay, Webster, and [John] Calhoun for great speeches."

The National Communication Association loved it. Word got out in their newsletters and they basically bought a lot of copies of volume four. It had a very good introductory essay and a lot of it was enriched with the cooperation of the experts on rhetoric whom we consulted. It gets forgotten about as an appendix volume but I think it will have a lasting value. I'll bet it's on the bookshelves of a number of specialists in the history of American speech.

Scott: What about the Meigs volume? This is a huge project that the office undertakes. It takes some ten years to produce. Can you tell us a little bit about how you came to embrace the Meigs' project?

Baker: I loved that project. It was one of the most enjoyable things that we did. We learned about the existence of the shorthand journals of Montgomery Meigs, who was an army captain in the Quartermaster Corps. In 1853 he was assigned to help construct an aqueduct for the city of Washington to bring water from the Potomac River because there had been some disastrous fires including a fire at the Library of Congress portion of the Capitol Building that had resulted in major destruction.

While he was at it, they gave him additional duty to plan for the construction of the House and Senate wings and eventually the Capitol dome. It had previously been managed by the Interior Department and there was a bit of graft and corruption and inefficiency there. What they were building was out of alignment with the existing building; they needed professional engineers and people who were subject to military discipline. Montgomery Meigs was the guy for the job. He decided to keep daily journals in shorthand. As he said, "I love shorthand. I can write six times faster with it than I can with long hand." He was using what is today an obscure form of shorthand, Pitman shorthand. He kept these journals throughout the whole process of building the House and Senate wings and it wasn't just about "how many bricks did we order today," or labor strikes, or "we can't get enough workers," or "these Irish workers coming in, the immigrants are harder to deal with." It was also "I had lunch with President Pierce." The immediate politics of getting congressional funding for this project, particularly the difficulties on the House side. I appreciated his laser-like focus on principal congressional figures, as well as on the life and culture of living in Washington D.C. at the time, what his family life was like and all of his concerns.

We hired a former official reporter of Senate debates named William Mohr who had just retired and happened to know this archaic form of Pitman shorthand. So he went to work. The journals were in the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress and they had been microfilmed. We were able to purchase microfilm copies of all of the journals. A huge amount of text! Then Mr. Mohr transcribed from those photocopies, transcribed from Pitman shorthand to the modern version of Gregg shorthand. So he had to do several translations and then translate it into English. Once the project got going, for over a period of about four years we would receive thirty-page transcriptions of another month in the life of Montgomery Meigs in Washington, D.C., in the U.S. Capitol. It was

literally like getting a letter from the 1850s. You couldn't wait for the letter to arrive. It just grew.

In 1859 Meigs had a falling out with the superintendent of the Capitol construction, named William Franklin. He was ultimately transferred down to the Dry Tortugas in Florida. He built forts down there. He returned a short while later. During the Civil War, he was appointed quartermaster general of the Union army. It was his plan to turn the Robert E. Lee estate in Arlington into a cemetery as a sort of revenge against Robert E. Lee for leaving the Union. One of the things that we learned from these shorthand notes was that he was trying to get his son, John, into West Point. He had been a West Point graduate and wanted John to go. He had great difficulty doing it, but eventually he won and John graduated. John Rogers Meigs became an officer in the army and in 1864 was gunned down by Confederate soldiers. It wasn't just that he was a casualty of war. It looked like he'd been singled out, he and a couple of others. He was assassinated. That inspired Meigs to think about having his son reburied in what had become Arlington National Cemetery.

We heard about this project because a historian-archivist at the National Archives named Mary Giunta was working on an extended article about John Rogers Meigs and had run across some shorthand notes from the period during the Civil War. She also knew about this larger body of material and figured that we too might want to know about it. Even though it was not too far away, just over at the Library of Congress, we had not heard about it, nobody at the library had told us about it. It was Mary Giunta who opened our eyes to this marvelous project. We published the book in 900 pages and that amounted to about 40 percent of the entire bulk of what we had had transcribed. It really was tough for me and for the historical editor to cut it down to 40 percent but we figured that if we wanted it, there would be a lot of people who could be potentially interested in this, certainly architectural historians, historians of the mid-19th century.

Today we would have done it differently. Today we would have had a Website and we would have had most of it there; we would have produced a 150-page book. I have often thought that a good retirement project would be to take that 900-page book and boil it down to a highly illustrated volume of about 150 pages that might appeal to visitors at the Capitol Visitors Center about the building of the Capitol. Unfortunately that is a deceptively big project and there are other things going on. The other sad thing is that this book was published just at the time of September 11, 2001. So any efforts to publicize it really got lost in all of the tragedy of 9/11. We did, however, arrange to distribute copies to an

association of architectural and engineering historians. They were very happy to have surplus copies that we had available. It was very well received.

Scott: How did you secure funding for this big project?

Baker: We basically used funding from the Senate Bicentennial Commission and they had access to ample funds. The main funding was to pay Mr. Mohr for his time and effort. The book was published through the Congressional Printing and Binding Fund at the Government Printing Office.

This book was edited by Wendy Wolff who spent a huge amount of time. The success of the book is almost entirely due to Wendy Wolff's hard dedicated work. As a payback for that, the Society for History in the Federal Government named it the best book of the year, the best documentary edition, and awarded the prize not the Senate Historical Office, but to Wendy Wolff, which I thought was very appropriate.

Scott: In 2006 the Senate Historical Office published *200 Notable Days*. It's a collection of the historical minutes that you had been delivering to the Democratic caucus. I'd like to know the back story, how did you come to be invited to this caucus and to offer these minutes at the weekly meetings?

Baker: Early in 1997 I was one of about four people who were in briefing Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle about some archival matter, historical matter. As part of that meeting, perhaps before it started or near the end of it, I was chatting with him a bit about the history of his office, the history of the Senate Democratic Conference and the Senate Democratic leader. He just asked me this string of questions. Fortunately I was able to answer most of them. He said, "Would you be interested in coming in to our weekly caucus luncheons of the Democrats and talking about other such stories that you know about related to Senate history in general? Non partisan." I said "Sure, I'd be delighted." So he said, "We'll just do it on a trial basis for a couple of weeks." And so he introduced me, it was February of 1997. I didn't know how long these should be, I think they were probably about the same length as the Bob Dole Bicentennial minutes for a while.

But I realized that 200 words isn't enough to engage an audience. It's the toughest audience anybody could ever face. Certainly the toughest audience I've ever faced. Senators sitting there, they are ready to start, they've just had lunch and they are ready to talk about the boiling issues of the day. All of a sudden

some historian comes along and starts talking about the early 19th century. It had better be good, it better have a good punch line. It took me a while to work that through. Also I realized that there had to be a little mission creep here, that I had to go from 200 words to over 500 words. And then I got the stage hook from the Democratic Party Secretary Marty Paone who said that they were too long and we have to cut them down a little bit. So I cut them back. Eventually, we settled on about 450 words. That was enough to set the background, give some detail and then to come through with the crunching final statement. The three-week trial period ended up being a 12-year run until I retired.

When Senator Daschle left the Senate at the end of 2004 and Senator Harry Reid became the leader, the first word I heard was that he's going to run these meetings differently: "Thank you, we don't need your minutes anymore." For about six months I found other things to do with my time on Tuesdays. Then the word came that Senator Reid would like to revive the historical minutes. Of course I would like to think that that was the result of enormous grumbling on the part of Democratic senators. I would run into senators who had been late to the luncheon and they would say, "Oh, we didn't get our fix this week." "We're really sorry to miss you." So he restarted them. The structure of the meetings was different. When I did it under Senator Daschle the room was filled with people, not only senators sitting at the six or seven round lunch tables in the Lyndon Johnson room of the Capitol, but also staff. Every senator would have one or two staff members there in case some issue came up that they needed help with. So I was giving these speeches to a large audience, probably a hundred people in there. Senator Reid changed the format to senators only. Of course I didn't really know that until I showed up to give my first speech under him. I started out doing it every week, and then it changed to every other week.

At one point I was talking to a reporter and I had said I was still doing the speeches. The reporter said, "I thought you had stopped giving these speeches, why did you start again?" I said "Senator Reid asked me to start." And she said, "What were they doing on the alternate weeks?" I gave her a one-sentence explanation of what they were doing in the alternate weeks even though I wasn't there. I was told only to come back every other week because the other weeks were covered with events. What I should not have done was given her some hint as to what was going on in place of me in the alternate weeks. That created a fair amount of heartburn on the part of the leadership. These meetings, which had been open to large numbers of authorized staff all of a sudden were senators-only events. I had been gone for the first six months and I didn't know the ground rules, but I still had been around here long enough to know that I shouldn't have

mentioned to a reporter what might have been going on behind closed doors when I wasn't in the room.

Scott: Did you hear from Senator Reid's office?

Baker: I did hear from Senator Reid, on December 6, 2006, in a rather dramatic way. That was that and everything worked fine after that. And so we continued on. I must say, when I look back on the time I spent in the Senate Historical Office, one of my proudest memories is at the time I retired, Senator Mitch McConnell called me into the Republican leader's office and said he was really sorry that he hadn't taken me up on earlier offers to do these minutes for the Republicans. It was an obvious question: why are you doing them just for the Democrats? We would have been very happy to provide a historian to do that. At the time I retired, he decided he was going to change that and have the associate historian, since Don Ritchie who was going to be doing the Democrats, in my place--Betty Koed, the Associate Historian, would be speaking to the Republicans. From everything I've heard it's a tremendous success. The Republicans love Betty and the Democrats love Don and I can go off into the sunset feeling very, very good about that. All that really began out of the Bob Dole historical minutes. It's amazing how members remember some of them, particularly if they are related to their states or something that they had some involvement in related to history. So they were very well received.

Scott: This was a weekly minute, which again seems like it would require quite a bit of work on your part to come up with something new each time.

Baker: The idea of doing it in alternating weeks died pretty quickly. What they had planned to do in the other weeks didn't work out as they had expected. You're right. It became a weekly event. A lot of work, a sort of preoccupying concern. Particularly that punch line. You want to walk out of there with everybody smiling or gasping or what have you. We decided to put these up on the Internet because there was so much work involved, rather than doing it for this one closed audience. Very quickly the editor of the *Hill* newspaper, a man named Al Eisele, asked me if I'd be willing to give them the minutes as a column and do a column each week after I'd done them for the Democratic caucus. Nobody had any objection to that. From about 1997 or maybe early in 1998 until Senator Daschle left in 2004, I did it as a weekly newspaper column which meant that I had another deadline. It also meant that even during some recess periods they still wanted material for the newspaper even though I hadn't given a minute that week. So it was another burden and I received some pretty good response from readers

of that newspaper. But I was glad when that ended. I was sorry though and one of my feelings about leaving here was that I really enjoyed doing that every week. It was a great way to get to know all the Democratic senators. Don has continued it beautifully. Think of it, two historians in the historical office get to speak to every senator once a week about something related to Senate history. That's the bottom line and I think that's just terrific.

Scott: How did you feel that first time when you stood up to give your minute? Were you nervous?

Baker: Not as nervous as I was when I went in to see Senator Byrd for the first time in 1980. By that time I had a fair amount of experience speaking to groups and senators. I was more concerned about the format. Some of them just didn't work. The trouble was that the arrangement of the room--in the LBJ room, you walk in from the rear of the room across the room up to where the lectern was placed and then give the speech and then walk back out. It's a very long walk particularly if the talk wasn't stellar. People scratching their heads, "What the hell did he say?" [Laughs] Near the end of it, Senator Edward Kennedy would often sit in the back of the room. Sometimes I didn't notice him there as I had tunnel vision trying to get out of the room. But all of a sudden I'd see this big bright grin, and he'd say, "You nailed it this time!" He was a great cheerleader. In his memoir he mentions the fact that his daughter Kara gave him, as a Christmas present, a copy of the *200 Notable Days* and he had some nice things to say. That was great.

Scott: What was the process like for crafting these minutes? How did you find the stories that you were going to tell?

Baker: It took me a while to realize this, but, some of the stories were right there in the Dole historical minutes. I tried to be very careful because I did not want this to be an expanded version of the Dole almanac. There was a period of time when I purposely did not look at the Dole almanac. But just working on Senator Byrd's history, we found lots of stories. There are large databases of newspaper files and particularly now with electronic searching and you can put in some key words. Over the years we built some very good files of Senate history-related material. Rich biographical files and some crazy stories that occurred related to some senators. So it was all there. It was really a matter of organizing and trying to second guess the audience. What would this audience be interested in? And also to try to keep it topical. The original idea was to tie into something that happened that week "x" number of years ago. That was the theme of the bicentennial minutes. We were somewhat limited because there are some times of

the year when nothing much happens related to Congress, particularly in August when they are not here. It took a bit of planning. As I was retiring, I said to both Don and Betty that I estimated sometimes it took me as many as 15-20 hours to write one of these. Well, in a 40-hour week, that's half the week. Needless to say I spent a lot of time at home and over the weekends until I really picked up some rhythm. I didn't really know that I had done a credible job until I'd given it to our historical editors, Wendy Wolff and then Beth Hahn, and she would come and say, "That's a good one," or, "I don't understand the ending," or whatever. Sometimes I'd show them to my wife. She's my toughest critic and she didn't hesitate to say, "Why would you say this? Why would you give this kind of a talk?" Anyway, it was a burden but it was a burden that I was delighted to bear, for sure.

Scott: What made you decide to publish them as a volume? Was that at someone's suggestion?

Baker: There was so much work that had gone into them. Even though they appeared in *The Hill* newspaper, they get thrown away every day. I think the secretary of the Senate at the time, Emily Reynolds, really liked them. She was a Republican appointee and observed that the Republicans didn't have access to them. We were looking for a special publication to do for a number of audiences. The timing was right. The Government Printing Office had been doing some really interesting work in designing congressional publications for a large audience so that they looked like commercially produced works. Beth Hahn selected 200, at that point there were probably well over 300. Two hundred is a big number around this office as we've celebrated so many bicentennials. And there was some heartburn also about not having the last minute be about Senator Byrd becoming the longest serving senator in history. People in his office were not pleased that we did not include him as the very last one. My feeling was that he's an incumbent senator and this is not about incumbent senators.

Former senators, including the living ones got their hands on it--I remember getting a phone call from former New York senator Al [Alfonse] D'Amato. He said, "My God! Somebody called this to my attention and my wife said that's the best picture of you I've ever seen!" It was about a filibuster that he waged in 1988. People read the book and took it seriously. It came out just before the Christmas buying season. One senator purchased 300 copies and gave them to all of his staff and campaign contributors and others. There were other large bulk purchases on the part of senators. I think the government got its money back on that book.

Scott: I think that's a good place to stop.

Baker: Good.

[Photo on the following page: Senators Ted Stevens, Chris Dodd, and Bill Frist listen to Richard Baker's remarks at the unveiling of a portrait honoring Roger Sherman and Oliver Ellsworth in the Senate Reception Room in 2006.]

