

**Richard A. Baker**

**Senate Historian  
1975-2009**

Oral History Interviews

Senate Historical Office  
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## Preface

by Katherine A. Scott

In the wake of the Vietnam War and the Watergate presidential scandal, many Americans demanded greater transparency from their national institutions. In the United States Senate, two historically minded members, Majority Leader Mike Mansfield of Montana and Minority Leader Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, proposed creating a historian's office to "help senators, scholars, the news media and the general public" better understand "one of the most important institutions in this nation's political history." In 1975 the Senate appropriated funds for a small staff in the Legislative Appropriations Act of 1976 and the Senate Historical Office was born.

During the time that Dick Baker served as Senate Historian, from 1975-2009, the Historical Office grew from a small staff of three historians and a secretary in the attic of the Capitol Building to a nine-person office of historians, researchers, editors, and archivists with an office in the Hart Senate Office Building. As the collector and keeper of the institution's memory, the Senate Historical Office, under Baker's leadership, quickly earned a reputation for providing professional, non-partisan service. In 2005 Norm Ornstein, a Washington insider and close observer of Congress, credited Baker with building "one of the premier institutions of historical study and information in the nation." Members, staff, scholars, and the general public alike came to trust the office because, as one scholar observed, "When you get information from the Senate Historical Office, you have to consider it definitive. There is no better authority on the Senate."

Baker's interest in politics began at an early age. He took his first tour of Capitol Hill at 16 years old while on a high school field trip. After graduating from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, with a degree in history, he pursued graduate degrees, one in history from Michigan State University, and a second in Library Science from Columbia University. He later earned a Ph.D. in history from the University of Maryland, College Park. He returned to Washington, D.C., in 1968 to join the Legislative Reference Division (later the Congressional Research Service). Baker served briefly as acting Senate curator and then became director of research for the Government Research Corporation, publisher of the *National Journal*. In 1975, when the Senate established the Historical Office, he accepted the position of Senate Historian.

Senator Robert Byrd, who worked closely with Baker on his multivolume history of the U.S. Senate, recalled how Baker was always “ready to go above and beyond the call of duty in providing his assistance,” and “although he was responsible to 99 other senators, he was always there, eager to help.” Baker championed the history of the Senate whenever and wherever he could. During his tenure he published a number of works, including *Conservation Politics: the Senate Career of Clinton P. Anderson* (1985), *Senate of the United States: A Bicentennial History* (1988), *Thirty Minutes of Senate History* (1998), and *200 Notable Days: Senate Stories, 1787 to 2002* (2006).

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About the interviewer: Katherine A. Scott is assistant historian of the Senate Historical Office. A graduate of the University of Washington, she received a M.A. in history from the University of New Mexico and a Ph.D. in history from Temple University.

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