

THE GANG OF SIX

Interview #5

September 17, 1993

VASTINE: I heard John Sununu speak yesterday at an event—a not-for-attribution luncheon, closed to the press, of the RAMS, the Republicans Allied For Mutual Support, which is an old-line, Capitol Hill, senior staff group. I was head of this group—RAMSHEAD—in 1990. Once a RAM always a RAM, so lots of people who are no longer on the Hill go to these things. He was surrounded at the head table by all his former congressional relations staff. He chose to take as his theme: “Why I was right.” It wasn’t me. We had the policies. We had the programs. We had the ideas. But the Bush campaign didn’t put any of those forward. The campaign let the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* dictate the campaign agenda. So we didn’t lead with our strength which was foreign policy.

The reason George Bush lost—get this!—is “that the American people, because of the absence of the Soviet threat, felt they could be capricious, irresponsible in their voting behavior.” They no longer had to be serious. “I guarantee you,” he said, “I guarantee you that, if the Soviets hadn’t been out of power, if the old Soviet bear were still the threat it was, George Bush would not have lost the election.” And it went on and on. There’s not a scintilla of humility. Nobody suggested that Sununu may have had something to do with having helped George Bush lose the election. After all, he was chief of staff for almost three of the four years.

He never did get around to acknowledging, which was the great problem and the reason George Bush failed—George Bush, and [Nicholas] Brady and Sununu refused to acknowledge that many Americans were scared about losing their jobs in the summer of 1991. Despite the euphoria after the brief war, regardless whether or not there was a full-fledged recession in progress, people were worried. And the administration refused to acknowledge that. And

Sununu never did! The man has got unmitigated hubris. But that was a digression.

RITCHIE: Interesting insight.

VASTINE: I've actually had him as my guest at luncheon three times: twice with the Senate administrative assistants, Republican administrative assistants and staff directors whom I used to have a bi-monthly lunch for, and one other time for the RAMS, this Republican group. I've invited him twice to speak to Republican senators at our weekend retreats. He has a way about him, I must say. He can be sometimes charming and down-to-earth and very hail fellow, like a local politician like a governor you'd expect to be. But I've seen him put down senators and tell them they're wrong in the company of other senators. That doesn't win you any friends on Capitol Hill. He was, for very good reason, *very* disliked.

RITCHIE: My sense is he's a man who never listened because he felt he already knew the answers to the questions.

VASTINE: Oh, absolutely! Ed Rogers was his assistant at the White House, and Sununu came up a couple of times to our Republican Conference television studio to do broadcasts for Republicans. One of the stories he used to tell on Sununu was that Sununu could multiply any set of numbers instantaneously. Virtually instantaneously. You could say 5,392 by 564, and he'd have an answer like that! Very, very quick. And he made no bones about the fact that he was probably brighter than anybody else around. Not a very attractive man.

Where were we?

RITCHIE: Well, this is a good point, actually, because I wanted to go back to 1981 and that period when you were on the transition team at the Treasury Department at the beginning of the Reagan administration. I wondered if at that time when you were looking over the type of people coming

in, did you envision that you might go back to the Treasury Department under Reagan?

VASTINE: Well, at first I didn't. Then I got Potomac Fever again, and I wanted to. But I shot too high. The job I wanted was to be assistant secretary of the Treasury for International Affairs. And that just was too political and big a job for me. I didn't realize that. So I should have been happy to get back my old, deputy assistant secretary job. Or one in another subject area, but also a DAS, and work my way up to assistant secretary in due course. But I didn't do that.

So, yes, tactically I didn't make a very good move then. But in some respects I wasn't yet ready to come back to Washington.

RITCHIE: I wondered maybe that, the reason I saw the connection there was that Donald Reagan was the same personality. . .

VASTINE: Regan.

RITCHIE: Regan was the same personality as John Sununu. He appears that way at least, and I wondered if that would have been a problem in having to work in the Treasury Department headed by him rather than by William Simon.

VASTINE: If you could work for William Simon, you could work probably for Don Regan. They weren't too different, actually, in their personality types. They were both bullies.

You know, the Treasury transition experience was kind of crazy because part of the transition was run inside the Treasury and part of it outside. I would say that the important part was outside where they were picking their personnel. That's always the key distinction. The people who were in the personnel office, where you choose Don Regan and the under secretaries, that kind of thing.

RITCHIE: Now, speaking of the Treasury Department, there. It wasn't just the patronage. There was a lot of pressure to have a philosophy in that Treasury Department, wasn't there?

VASTINE: Umhmmmm!

RITCHIE: The beginning of the supply siders.

VASTINE: Absolutely! They moved in there with a mission. That was Norman Ture and Paul Craig Roberts. Another interesting aspect of the transition team was that a guy who worked for Bill Roth, named Bruce Thompson, whom I had known when I was on the Government Affairs Committee—Bruce Thompson was on the key transition team, the personnel part. Bruce was Roth's tax guy, so Bruce handled the Roth part of the Kemp-Roth bill, and then went down to the transition. He made damn sure that the key supply siders, Norman Ture became under secretary for Economic Affairs. And Paul Craig Roberts, who'd been on the Joint Economic Committee staff, with Roth, I think—knowing Roth in that capacity—became assistant secretary. So, believe me, supply side got built into the Treasury very early.

RITCHIE: Where did you see yourself going at that stage?

VASTINE: Well, I saw myself going back to San Francisco, which is what I did do. I was glad to get back. I remember it was sort of a wrenching decision. I said, "Shall I stay here and play this game and, you know, work at getting a good job? Or shall I go back?" I went back, and I was glad. I'd had this big burnout in Washington when I left in '77 after the Simon Treasury and working for Chuck Percy. It took four years or so to work that through. By the time the middle of or the Fall of '81 came around, I was really ready. It was then time to come back. I met Senator Chafee, and one thing led to another.

I remember on the day that the Florida airline crashed and hit the 14th Street Bridge, that was the same day, I think, that there was a subway accident.

RITCHIE: Yes, the first fatalities.

VASTINE: Oh, a very fine friend, named William Roesing, now vice president for Seagram in Washington, Senator Chafee's campaign manager, formerly Senator Percy's assistant in a first Senate campaign and a friend from the Percy office. I called him at home in the evening, from my office in San Francisco. He'd just gotten home. It must have been eight o'clock or nine o'clock, or something like that. I said, "Bill, it's Bob." And he said, "Excuse me, I'm gonna make myself a drink. Don't go away. I want to talk to you, but I've got to make a drink!" And he made himself a bourbon, and he came back. He said, "I have just been in a subway accident." He had just walked his way out of the subway and walked home. But it was he, that evening, who put me into, in a sense, the Chafee job. So I came back on February 22, I think, of '82, to become Senator Chafee's leg. [Legislative] director, and found myself back in Washington.

On the third or fourth day I was back, I was taking a jog on the Mall. One of the things I'd done in San Francisco was to do a lot of running. In fact, I ran my first and only marathon, I think, on my forty-second birthday. And did well, too! It was about five o'clock in the evening, and it was one of those late, winter evenings when the sky gets kind of deep lavender. The Capitol Dome lights had just come on, and the dome was illuminated against this wonderful lavender-rose sky. And I was just dumbstruck! I almost had to stop in my tracks. And I said, "Thank, God, I'm back here." [Laughs]

Because San Francisco is shallow. Bottom line is that San Francisco may have tourist appeal, but those three-story, stucco, bay-front houses marching up and down those steep, little hills, endlessly, one after the other is very boring. I much prefer Georgetown brick. Stop me if I've already talked about this—but the cultural, intellectual life there was dominated by a couple of hundred people. The boards of directors of the big organizations, the World Affairs Council, and the symphony, the ballet, those sorts of organizations. It's the same bunch. They're vibrant, interesting people. But it doesn't go much deeper than that. Lots and lots of very highly educated, very intelligent people go to San Francisco

and veg out on the life style. They get into the food, and the Sonoma grapes, and the Napa grapes, and the differences between them, and the chocolate. I learned about chocolate desserts in San Francisco. I learned about coffee in San Francisco. I learned about gorgeous weekends in Mendicino. But, you know, you couldn't have a political event in the financial district after noon on Friday because nobody was there. I did political kinds of things there, including I was president of the California Republican League's San Francisco Chapter, so I brought Senator Bill Cohen out for an event. Sorts of things like that. I had a big event for George Bush. Did I tell you that?

RITCHIE: Yes, you mentioned that.

VASTINE: Yes, in the financial district. But, it was pretty thin, finally. So there we are. It was time to come back, and I was glad I did.

RITCHIE: How was it different working for somebody like John Chafee than for Charles Percy?

VASTINE: Oh, tremendously different! Again, in the candor this room encourages, it was very, very difficult, because I was very much a fair-haired boy with Percy. Sort of a leader, if not the brightest star, certainly right up there in the firmament, [chuckles] in his office. Well with Chafee, I came into a situation where I was a legislative director—I mean, I'd been around a lot, and I knew a lot of people, I knew a lot about a lot of things—but I was in an office that had been together for a long time. And they decided they didn't like me, that I was not one of them. It's a classic story! Part of understanding the Senate is understanding the makeup of a senator's office. And part of that is knowing that they're "families," and they often reject outsiders. Unless you come in as a new guy and work your way up. But to come in new and be imposed from above on a group of strong-headed legislative assistants, it's a formula for disaster. I have seen it again and again.

There are lots of cases where legislative staffs have succeeded in expunging the legislative director. The leg. director can't get credit but gets the

blame. The credit has to go to the LA when, you know, bill “X” passes. And Johnny Green has been the legislative assistant on bill “X.” Johnny Green gets—expects to get—the major credit. The leg. director may have done a lot of work in getting it through, but he or she doesn’t get the credit.

On the other hand, if this bill doesn’t pass, it’s the leg. director’s problem and not the LA. “Well, I didn’t get support from the leg. director.” And the AA, of course, is saying, “It’s his job to get the stuff passed; it’s not my job.” So the senator turns to the AA who turns to the legislative director; and the legislative director can’t turn to the LA and say, “That guy wrote a bad bill.” Because the LA won’t accept that. It’s probably the worst job in any Senate office to be the legislative director. I eventually carved out my niche in the budget process. Have I talked about the Gang of Six?

RITCHIE: No, not yet.

VASTINE: Well, the first assignment when I first came to the Chafee office was to rock no boats. Chafee was coming up to the end of his first term, his second election as senator, and things were going just fine, thank you. He had great name ID. He had a great re-elect number. The key question in any poll of an incumbent senator about an incumbent senator is: “Do you think John Chafee should be reelected?” And that’s different from: “Do you think he’s done a good job?” That’s a different question. “Do you know who he is?” That’s still a different question. But: “Do you think he should be reelected?” is the bottom-line question. It’s called the re-elect number. And if you’re under fifty percent positive response, you’re in trouble!

Well, Chafee was *way* above fifty. So we went into that election down into the summer time in great shape and, all of a sudden, found ourselves in a real horse race because there was 12-percent unemployment in Rhode Island. A feisty, Jewish former attorney general of the state of Rhode Island—whose name was Michaelson—came on with a slogan, “A fighter for Rhode Island.” And took Chafee on. The margin just slipped like crazy! Finally, we ended up by winning by maybe two percentage points. Part of the evening we were losing. I

remember that very clearly because I went up there to campaign and pound around door-to-door in precinct after precinct. Handing out literature and doing all that kind of thing. Putting up signs on election night.

But re-election was won, and Chafee was returned. That began my metamorphosis in the office. The substantive base was the budget, because that was an area of strength for me. Chafee decided he wanted to offer his own budget resolution. That's something I knew how to do. So I wrote up a Chafee budget resolution, which then became the resolution of the Gang of Five, later six when Mark Andrews was added to the Gang of Five by [Charles] Mac Mathias. Without asking anybody else, Mathias just included Andrews, who was not necessarily welcome!

So this group of Chafee, [Lowell] Weicker, Mathias, and [Mark] Hatfield. Who am I missing? Then, finally, Andrews. Oh, [Robert] Stafford. They proposed their own budget resolution. Well, I think our high-water mark in 1983, we were how many Republicans? Fifty-three? Or Fifty-five?

RITCHIE: I'm not sure [54].

VASTINE: Okay, well, we had six Republicans who weren't going to go along with the budget resolution reported by Mr. [Pete] Domenici. And it took all of Senator Chafee's fortitude to—he really wanted to go over and be a good guy and work with [Howard] Baker and be part of the team with Jim Baker downtown, all of that. But he stuck to his guns.

So each year for three years running the Gang of Five (or Six) forced upon the leadership elements of its own budget resolution which I had written. In other words, I became important in the office and accepted. And legislative director fully. I mean, I wasn't being bucked all the time. But it took awhile. It was harrowing. It was not a good experience.

RITCHIE: What was the thrust of the budget resolution that the Gang of Six proposed?

VASTINE: It was to add more money for certain social programs: education, child immunization, women's and infant's—the WIC program. That was basically it, each time. It was more money for Pell grants. Secondary education. I've forgotten precisely the budget categories. But, in a budget resolution it doesn't get too precise. You do it sort of generally.

We'd add money to one of the thirteen categories and in our rhetoric accompanying it specify the programs it was intended for. That was the emphasis. It wasn't a lot of money. A billion bucks or something like that each time. Hardly destroy anything. But, it delayed the budget process by weeks, in each case.

Jim Range, floor advisor to Senator Baker, knew that I had helped to write the budget process to start with. At the end of one of these at a crucial moment when Senator Chafee insisted upon the Gang of Six's position on the Senate floor, Range was standing behind at the back of the chamber. I was sitting next to Chafee on one of those staff chairs, and Range said in a tone projected toward me. "Bob," he said, "you're destroying the budget process."

RITCHIE: What was the reaction of the leadership? How did they try to get Chafee back in their, in the reservation?

VASTINE: Well, you know, Baker was a conciliator. Baker was a hands-on nice guy. They tried everything. They'd bring in the administration. They'd bring in Jim Baker. They'd bring in David Stockman. They'd bring in Jim Miller. All the levers were pulled. All the White House connections, including going down to the White House. They had six moderates on their hands, and they really never figured out how to deal with them except, finally, to give them some of what they wanted. Our job was to keep the senator on the steady path. Our job, meaning the staff. Because the inclination of all these senators—except for Weicker who was a real maverick—certainly Chafee's inclination was to want to be a good guy, and a team player, and go along with the

team—especially Howard Baker whom he really liked. I don't know whether that answers your question.

RITCHIE: Was this sort of a sign to the Republican leadership that they might break on other issues as well?

VASTINE: Oh, yes! And they did, occasionally, for example on Central American policy. It was that group that broke away on other issues. But, really, our concerted activity was budget activity. We were the Gang of Six really when it came to the budget.

I remember one year Chafee came back from the big President's Day vacation, whatever it was, and said, "This budget deficit. This is the reason why we have 14 percent interest rates." Remember this was the period when interest rates were intractably high. "We've got to control the deficit." "Bob, I want you to go off and write a budget that will reduce the deficit."

I said, "Well, does that mean I can cut back Social Security COLA's?"

"Yes. Yes. Whatever you have to do."

So I put together this budget resolution that reduced the deficit. I remember at two o'clock one afternoon having to present it to all the Gang of Six plus Keith Kennedy, the then-majority staff director of the Appropriations Committee. A daunting crowd, but these guys were *not* buying it. I mean, when you saw, even then, what you had to do—that was 1983—what had to be done to control the deficit, it was frightening! You had to cut away at the hard stuff, the difficult-to-cut entitlement programs. So I laid out what would have to be done. And it was sobering. So sobering that they all sort of walked away and shook their heads. And Chafee had to forgo. Not that he didn't want to try, but he knew he would have no support amongst the others.

RITCHIE: Well, to some degree it makes sense why the moderate senators might be resistant to do that, because it would involve a lot of

programs they had supported over the years—even the Gang of Five. But, what was your sense of what happened to the rest of the Republicans in the Senate? Reagan was the most fiscally conservative president since [Calvin] Coolidge, and he managed to create. . . .

VASTINE: Hugest deficits.

RITCHIE: . . . the worst deficits in American history.

VASTINE: Well, it was the supply side. I haven't really sorted out for myself why it failed. But the tax act of '81 cut receipts to a historical low. I think there had been a historic norm, let's say, of 21 percent revenue to GNP. Between 20 and 21 percent. Revenues had always been 21 percent of GNP or something like that. And all of a sudden, the great tax act of the first Reagan reconciliation bill, which was the tax cut *and* spending cuts, reduced revenues—too much. And TEFRA brought them back—the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982—redressed that a little bit, but not enough. Then we had the recession. I don't think anybody counted on the fact that there would be such a slow down in '82 and '83. So receipts were way off. The other part of it is that we never really solved the problem of capital formation. Weak capital formation in this country. Because we never reduced the tax burden on savings and dividends—dividends and interest.

I heard Martin Feldstein, the economist, explain this extremely lucidly one time in a Republican Conference weekend retreat that I organized. I asked Senator Packwood afterwards what he thought of it. He said, "Well I always discount Martin Feldstein because I know what he's going to say ahead of time." But I thought Feldstein did a great job explaining why it's not worthwhile to save. Because by the time you get finished taking the tax burden off—state and Federal tax burden—it's barely worthwhile after inflation is netted out.

I don't know whether I'm answering your question or not, why did the Republicans go along with this cockamamie program. Well, I guess, first of all, Reagan was elected on that platform. He swept in a majority in the Senate.

There was a sense of euphoria. Everybody *wanted* to believe. It had a certain credibility. The plan. That was the Republican platform, the Republican program.

RITCHIE: In terms of the budget resolution and things like that, Senator Domenici got front-row center attention as chairman of that Committee.

VASTINE: Oh, yes. Did a wonderful job.

RITCHIE: But you were taking him on with this Gang of Six. . .

VASTINE: Yes.

RITCHIE: . . . constantly. What was your sense of Domenici?

VASTINE: Well, he would call us in. He and Steve Bell would. They knew we were coming, and they would try to head us off at the pass. But it didn't work.

Everybody loves Domenici. He's a wonderful guy. I like him very much to this day. He's a great, great person.

RITCHIE: Was he an effective chairman?

VASTINE: Oh, very! I think very, very good chairman. He really mastered it. It took him a while. I think he'd been mayor of Albuquerque or something like that. Isn't that right?

RITCHIE: I think so. [Domenici was chairman of the Albuquerque City Commission and ex-officio mayor until his election to the Senate in 1972.]

VASTINE: And, so I'd seen him in Government Affairs Committee as a very young, kind of wet-behind-the-ears senator. He has kind of an "aw shucks" down-home quality about him. I remember him once saying to Chafee, "Chaf,

I really got it! I finally got this stuff. I really understand it!” [Laughs] So even he knew that it was his learning process, too.

RITCHIE: My sense was that he was also standing up against the Reagan administration. I mean, he wasn’t giving Reagan everything he wanted.

VASTINE: That’s right.

RITCHIE: But, he was trying to balance what Reagan wanted and then what the moderate Republicans were asking for as well—trying to steer some course through the center of it.

VASTINE: Yes.

RITCHIE: You were tugging on the other side.

VASTINE: We were his counterweight on the moderate side. I used to go to the Budget Committee hearings and markups a lot, because I needed to have the background for what we would do later. So I saw him run the committee, and I think he did a wonderful job. A very good committee.

I think we had wonderful chairmen! I think Mark Hatfield was a wonderful chairman of the Appropriations Committee. Extremely effective chairman! I’m talking about the floor—floor action. And Domenici was a fine chairman. And Dole was a wonderful chairman. And Lugar, for awhile—wasn’t Lugar. . .

RITCHIE: No, Percy.

VASTINE: No! It was Percy.

RITCHIE: Lugar followed Percy.

VASTINE: Yes, well, Percy wasn't so good for reasons we've discussed. And we had some other good chairmen.

RITCHIE: Stafford was in Environment.

VASTINE: Stafford. Umhmmm.

RITCHIE: It's interesting that even though the party had swung to the right, the moderates got many of the chairmanship.

VASTINE: Yes. And after Dole, Packwood.

RITCHIE: Packwood was [chairman of] Finance.

VASTINE: Yes, it is interesting because that famous class of Hatfield and. . .

RITCHIE: The Class of '66.

VASTINE: . . . and Percy matured and became ranking. So they came to power.

RITCHIE: Now, you mentioned that the Gang of Six started out as the Gang of Five, until Andrews was added. Why was there resistance to Andrews?

VASTINE: He was a—well, personally, he's not very nice. He wasn't considered a heavyweight like the others. He hadn't paid his dues. He was too new. It was a kind of: Who's this guy buttin' into our club? But Mathias was right. If you've got six, six is better than five! [Laughs]

RITCHIE: Was Mathias sort of the center of this gang?

VASTINE: Hmmm. That's interesting. Well, I suppose from the standpoint of seniority he was. But he had as much seniority as Hatfield.

RITCHIE: I think they came both in '66. [Mathias was first elected in 1968.]

VASTINE: I'm not sure. I would be hard pressed to say he was the leader. Chafee always deferred to the "G'vernor." Stafford. "G'vernor." Because he was very senior. [Stafford was appointed to the Senate in 1971.] He may have outranked them all. We met sometimes in Mathias' hideaway, which is a wonderful room right next to the Senate librarian's room, with a round oculus looking down the mall. A wonderful room.

RITCHIE: That's Senator Kennedy's room now.

VASTINE: It had a wonderful, carved marble fireplace by Charles, who's the...?

RITCHIE: Bullfinch.

VASTINE: Bullfinch mantle. Chafee sparkplugged the Gang a lot because he had ideas. Certainly the budget thing was his idea.

RITCHIE: What is the job of a legislative director in general? I understand what a legislative assistant does, but I'm not sure I understand a legislative director.

VASTINE: Well, in theory you're supposed to be the person who motivates, leads, and manages the legislative staff. Of course that is internally contradictory. Legislative assistants are little tyrants unto themselves. They all want access to the boss *when* they want it. And very few senators that I know of will only work through a leg. director and really let the leg. director be a manager. So, a leg. director job sort of becomes titular. It means, in Chafee's office it meant that you had to—when I was doing it—that you had to manage the mail, make sure that the mail was being farmed out and answered, and that the form letters on the mail—the responses to mass mailings—were accurate and politically correct. You had to see that people were working. If you had a

sluggard or a laggard, it was your job to kind of counsel that person and bring in the senator or the AA to try to bring him along. To make sure that you knew what was happening on the floor. To make sure that the encyclopedia of the senator's votes, decision, were being kept up. And to be generally on top of whatever he was doing. Also leg. directors often have subject areas that are "theirs," as I had budget issues.

As a true management job it just didn't have substance. It just didn't work.

RITCHIE: Was the staff sort of on par, or did you have some problems with some people who were stronger than others?

VASTINE: Oh, definitely, always some people who were stronger than others.

RITCHIE: So I assume there was some personnel management as part of what you are doing?

VASTINE: Yes. But, I'll tell you, not a lot.

RITCHIE: You preferred to stay with the ideas rather than the people?

VASTINE: Oh. No, I just meant that people, if they felt that you were interfering in the way they wanted to do business, they would complain. So it was sort of touch and go. Like anything else, you built alliances, as I finally did with enough of them that I could control the situation. In the end it wasn't so bad, but there was never a clear delegation of authority to the leg. director to run the legislative shop. It was nebulous. It was "Come in and be leg. director. We need a leg. director." I *thought* I knew what that was.

Every office is completely different. Well, I shouldn't say completely different because they follow some patterns. I think the pattern I was describing in the Chafee office is kind of a prevailing pattern. In the Chafee

office the pattern was very clear and I think characteristic of a titular leg. director who has nebulous managerial and oversight responsibilities of the legislative program. One of the things that I had to do was to organize an annual legislative conference and seminar in which I would try to motivate legislative assistants to come forward with brilliant ideas and programs and lay out their plans and goals for the year.

We always did that, and it was always interesting for awhile. But getting action—getting the plans implemented—was a lot harder. I'd say that Chafee has finally hit his issue, though, on health reform. And he did it through the energies of a woman named Christie Ferguson, a feisty young woman who came to the staff right out of college, who then went to law school while she was on the staff, and who began to concentrate on health-care issues. She has become over time—she must have joined the staff in '81—over the years has become one of the Capitol's authorities on health care legislation and health care programs. She is the architect of the Chafee plan. The moderate, Republican plan which now has twenty-four adherents, including Senator Dole.

RITCHIE: You have a variety of legislative assistants. Each one has an area that they're specializing in. Do they have to compete to try to get the senator's attention?

VASTINE: Ab-so-lutely! That's the whole game. It's highly competitive. Yes, there is tremendous competition for the senator's time in every office I know. The guy or girl who has the brightest idea and gets the press release is the fair-haired person. It's really all competition. That's why it's hard to be a successful legislative director because everybody else is—and at some point, why is the legislative director there? If the LA has all the facts and the senator wants the LA to write the speech, or write the amendment, or brief the senator on X, Y, and Z, the LD is just in the room to be there. There's no role, unless the LA has gone off the track, and you need to help bring the LA back on. Usually the senator does that. Yes, there is tremendous competition.

RITCHIE: I once talked to a press secretary who said it was impossible to be a press secretary in most senators' offices because everyone on the staff wanted to talk to the press. They would never wait and go through the press secretary. I imagine it's sort of the same way to be a director of an office, that everybody want to deal directly with the senator.

VASTINE: Absolutely. It's axiomatic. Everybody lives to be with the senator. All the Senate staff. It's a daily fight to see how much time you can spend with the senator. That's where the "high" is, to be in the presence, to be on the floor, to be managing an amendment, to be in committee. It's a great thrill, to be with the great man! It's kind of a disease. The adulation of the senator in the Senate system.

I saw it most recently with Senator [Lloyd] Bentsen, for whom I worked for a few months at the RTC Oversight Board. I worked with him in March 1993, because I had to prepare him for hearings—his first hearings in the House and Senate Banking Committees, which were on the subject of Resolution Trust Corporation funding. I'd seen him around here a lot, and I think he knew that he knew me, so it wasn't a brand new experience. But I noticed that his very senior people—people who had been with him for a long time—were really daunted by him. There was still this quality of "The Senator," you know, the Big Man, that kind of awed them. I could see that with fresh eyes because I'd been in the bureaucracy for awhile. Just noted it. He is a fairly daunting person, by the way, as you may know.

RITCHIE: I gather that the legislative director like the administrative assistant is trying to impose some hierarchy in an office in a situation where hierarchy is very unnatural.

VASTINE: That's right.

RITCHIE: The hierarchy is the senator, and everybody works for the senator.

VASTINE: That's right.

RITCHIE: But you're trying to create a pyramid structure. And that's.

..

VASTINE: Almost impossible. Umhmmm.

RITCHIE: It's not a military staff system in any way?

VASTINE: No, but I'm told that some senators try to run it like that. Chafee, in spite of his military training and experience as secretary of the navy, which was extremely hierarchical. In spite of all that he worked one-on-one. You're right in all those respects.

RITCHIE: What would be your relationship with his people on the committees? Did they reflect legislative interests or were they really just a separate entity altogether?

VASTINE: They went off on their own. They were constantly running their own game, which was my experience when I was in the Government Affairs Committee. I wanted to do what I wanted to do. And I happened to be very good friends with Percy's leg. director. He was there stuck reading the mail all the time and trying to do a systematic job of creating some consistency in the senator's legislative effort, while all those legislative entrepreneurs were out there putting in bills and wanting to do this and that, doing things in committee, taking the senator off on digressions.

You know, every senator that I've been around wants to have focus. "I want to focus. I want creativity. I want to focus on new ideas." Oh, I've heard it so often. I mean, they all want it! They want focus. They regret the tremendous tendency to go off on wild goose chases, to go off on tangents, to pick up whatever's popular at the moment. It's a constant struggle. And it never works. I don't know any of them who can sustain a focus on three or four issues.

Percy used to talk about it. We'd *never* do it. Because the next day, you'd have the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Or the day after that you have the airline strike. Or the following day Lock and Dam Number 64 on the Mississippi needs to be rebuilt! It's just one opportunity after the next to be involved in something fun, something interesting, and something that may get you a line in the paper. So it's very, very hard for a senator to impose on himself and on his staff the kind of discipline that would result in a real concentration. And, really, that only comes when someone like Christie Ferguson—or in my case Congressman Curtis—has a tremendous personal interest in a subject area. And the senator's committee assignment gives that person scope to work in that field as in the case of finance and Christie Ferguson. She did health work there. In my case the Ways and Means Committee, Curtis' work there gave me scope for work on a trade policy. Yes.

RITCHIE: Did you find it was any different working for a senator from a small state like Rhode Island as opposed to Illinois with its urban-rural split and all of its varying constituencies? I would think Rhode Island has to be about as compact a state as anybody would represent somewhere in the Senate.

VASTINE: Well, day by day it didn't matter that much. In terms of the quality of the work, the quality of the environment.

I'll tell you this, Chafee's office was much more politically sensitive. Much more. I think smaller states, with only a million people, you have to watch it. You can't offend too many folks. Another thing about Percy was that he didn't put too heavy a political restraint on us. Of course in the Government Affairs Committee, we weren't getting into very much hot water either—except for the Consumer Affairs bill. And that's a good example.

Percy gave full rein to a staffer named Stewart Statler to write—for three Congresses in a row, or at least two Congresses, four years, whatever—to spearhead the creation of a Consumer Protection Agency. Well, when I had been a private-sector lobbyist, I had managed to kill that thing in the Rules Committee by one, by a vote that I influenced. Industry absolutely hated it!

Whether rightly or wrongly, they really hated the CPA. It's never become law. But Percy, in spite of the fact that he was thumbing his nose at his own business roots and offending big sections of his business constituency by his continual, ongoing sponsorship of that damn bill, kept on *doing* it! And Stewart Statler was very smart, and a real gut fighter. He didn't endear Percy to any of these business types. So Percy, for six or so years, went about offending the business community.

RITCHIE: As legislative director, did you find yourself sort of looking over your shoulder at what the impact of what the legislative assistants were doing?

VASTINE: Yes.

RITCHIE: In other words, at the mine field they might lead the senator into?

VASTINE: Yes. But I had to learn that for myself, too, because the Percy emphasis was so different from the Chafee one. The real mastermind of the Chafee operation was his chief of staff in Rhode Island, a *real* politician, who had his finger on the grassroots pulse. He had his fingers down in the soil, firmly planted. Every day. He really knew what was going on in that state. He knew when we were going over the edge. I would get calls from him saying, "Hey, what's going on? Why are we doing this? Why are we doing that? Don't you think John ought to be doing this? Don't you think John ought to be doing that?" So there was that constant monitoring based on what was happening in the state.

I didn't have that sense at all in the Percy operation. I think, finally, that's why Percy was defeated. He lost touch with too many constituencies. He did maybe what was right or what he felt was right too often. And he got lost in the Foreign Relations Committee stuff and his interest in meeting with ambassadors as opposed to meeting with local union leaders. So, there we have it. What time is it?

RITCHIE: Ten to five. I just want to ask, what was the atmosphere for being in the majority? For the first time in your political career—other than working for Ford in a Republican administration—but here on Capitol Hill for the first time you were on the majority side. How different is that than being on the minority side?

VASTINE: Oh, well. It's so different. You control the agenda. That's the bottom line. Control of the agenda is everything! As Bob Teeter used to lecture us, when we would have Republican Conference retreats. He said, "The party that controls the agenda will win the election." And for the first time in a long time, we controlled the agenda, and the resources to implement it.

There are some who argue Howard Baker didn't capitalize on that. Wasn't tough enough. I think he was a very fine leader, actually. When he left. Bob Dole was elected partly because Dole was going to be "tougher."

But, no, it all boils down to control of the agenda and the ability to implement your program. Control the staff. It's quite a nice feeling.

RITCHIE: You mentioned even the minority had to scramble for office space. I would imagine. . .

VASTINE: Oh, yes. All of that.

RITCHIE: . . . you were in a very different position to call the shots.

VASTINE: Ummhmm. Well, again, there were those who argue that we weren't tough enough when we took over the Senate. We didn't clean house enough. And Senator Mathias left in Rules Committee a bunch of old staff who, many felt, were determined to frustrate Republicans at every turn. People railed at Mathias for these folks he had in there in the Rules Committee, who were constantly obstructing, making it hard to get rooms and computers. The whole panoply of Senate administrative things.

So there were some who'll argue that we weren't tough enough in taking over and that Baker left too many Democrats in crannies in the Capitol. That kind of thing. Didn't ferret out—didn't change the infrastructure sufficiently to put in Republicans as opposed to Democrats. So they just waited until they could get back, the folks down in the bowels of the sergeant at arms office. That kind of thing.

RITCHIE: Maybe having been in the minority for so long Senator Baker was sympathetic to the new minority.

VASTINE: Oh, well, Baker was a very nice man. He was not a vindictive, mean politician. And he understood the value of building relationships with Democrats based upon being a gentleman.

RITCHIE: I think also one of the advantages the Republicans had then was the Democrats really were so dispirited after that election in 1980. They were *not* used to being in the minority.

VASTINE: They were not. Well, I mean, it was palpable in Senator Robert Byrd. It was just a bitter, galling pill—daily to him to accept the fact that he didn't have the votes. It just was palpable. He was bitter about it! And sometimes that would come out—I can't think of any examples of it, but it would come out in his demeanor on the floor, standing on his rights, demanding his moment. "I have *been* leader!" You know, "I know what the leader's trying to do!" "I've been there. So don't tell *me* about this!" That kind of quality in his behavior. Does this ring a cord with you?

RITCHIE: Umhmmm.

VASTINE: Strike a cord with you? Yes, very tough. Of course, the staff and the senators, Senator [Russell] Long didn't take it well. But I can't remember any specifics about that.

RITCHIE: That was Senator Dole’s famous line, on election night. Howard Baker called to say, “Bob, you’re going to be chairman of the Finance Committee.” And Dole said, “Who’s going to tell Russell Long?”

VASTINE: [Laughs] That is a good line. That man Dole is just so witty. He’s unbelievably funny. I went to a goodbye for Walt Riker, his longtime press secretary, couple weeks ago. Dole was there and made comments. He just couldn’t stop himself! He didn’t have anything written down. Just one one-liner after the other. Each one funnier than the next. He had the room just roaring with his native wit! There was some self-deprecating wit. There was some poking fun at other people, but it wasn’t—people say he has an acerbic, mean-spirited sense of humor. It was not that. It was just funny. He’s just very, very funny! He plays on words, inversions. Just good, great wit.

RITCHIE: It’s always struck me how many people who are in public life really *don’t* have a sense of humor, and can’t tell a joke to save their life.

VASTINE: Yes.

RITCHIE: But to Senator Dole, it just comes natural.

VASTINE: Yes. He’s got a beautiful sense of humor, wonderful sense of humor. Too bad that doesn’t come across on television. He tends to project an anger on the tube that sometimes is there, but often is not. He’s just laid back and funny. Great man.

RITCHIE: Well, would you like to take a break now; and we can pick it up when you went to the Republican Conference.

VASTINE: Yes. Let’s do that.

End of Interview #5