
Interview with Rudy Abramson

The interview was conducted by David Welborn in Washington, D.C. on March 3, 1993

Audio cassette 202a
DW: First of all Mr. Abramson, thank you so much for putting aside some time to talk about Howard Baker.

RA: Happy to do it.

DW: First, let’s put on the record a little of your personal background. Am I correct that you are a Tennessean?

RA: I actually grew up in north Alabama. I worked on The Nashville Tennessean from 1958 until 1965. I consider myself a Tennessean; my wife is from Nashville, so that’s home now.

DW: During the time that you were in Tennessee working for the Tennessean, were you aware that there was a Howard Baker?

RA: Not really. I was aware that there was a Howard Baker, Sr., for sure. The Tennessean, as you have undoubtedly discovered, was a newspaper that had a very distinct political perspective on the world, and we didn’t cover Republicans in great depth in those days, so I was much more aware of the politicians of the Democratic party persuasion.

DW: So you don’t have any recollection of Baker’s first Senate race in 1964?

RA: No, no personal recollection of it at all. As a matter of fact, in 1964 I was away at Columbia on a fellowship for a year. I had known both Ross Bass and Frank Clement for a long time but I had never met Howard Baker at that point.

DW: Where did you go when you left Nashville?

RA: After a year at Columbia I came to Washington as a correspondent in Washington for the Tennessean. I stayed for about eight months and then I came to work for the Los Angeles Times. Where I’ve been since that day.

DW: What were your first associations with Howard Baker?

RA: My first association with him was, I’m not sure what the year was, he had just been elected to the senate. Let’s see, was that 66?

DW: He was elected in 66 and took office in January of 67.

RA: Okay, so it would have been in 1967. I was covering science and the environment and he was on Senator Muskie’s committee which began hearings that led to the first federal clean air act regulations in 1969 or 70.

DW: Actually, that clean air act passed in 67.
RA: Oh it passed, okay, my memory is getting a little hazy, but anyway. That was my first meeting with Howard Baker.

DW: Did you cover the public works committee and the environmental sub-committee fairly regularly?

RA: I didn’t, not as an institutional sort of thing; I covered the clean air hearings and the debate in the Senate and the House in some detail because that was a subject of extraordinary interest in California, as you know. The big issue, as far as we were concerned then, was whether California was going to be able to adopt standards that went beyond the federal standards.

DW: What were your first impressions of Howard Baker?

RA: My first impression of him was being terribly impressed with his technical grasp of that subject, which can be quite arcane even now. At the time it was perceived as being even more so, because it was a new subject to people in politics. It was to me as a reporter, and I know I was impressed with the depth of his grasp of that subject.

DW: How would you compare your impressions of his technical grasp of the subject matter area with Senator Muskie’s grasp?

RA: I think he knew the turf almost as well as Senator Muskie did, and Muskie really did know it. The thing that impressed me, so far as the relationship between the two of them—and you saw this, Baker and other people, a lot later on—was the sort of sharing of leadership responsibility in that committee. Muskie obviously was willing to make Baker a partner in that process, and it wasn’t a case where, as it often is with the ranking—well, Baker wasn’t even ranking, he was down at the end of the table—but he was very much a part of the process and minority members very often get left out. Muskie was a volatile kind of character, a very forceful figure, so it probably wasn’t an easy committee necessarily for a young senator to serve on. But Baker was there, and he was very much engaged and obviously had done his homework.

DW: During the work on the Clean Air Act, do you recall ever seeing any conflict arise between Baker and Muskie?

RA: I don’t recall that I did.

DW: After this initial exposure, what brought you into Baker’s orbit?

RA: The Tennessee connection. Even after I had gone to work for the Los Angeles Times I had really taken some effort to maintain my Tennessee connections, because I always figured I’d probably go back there someday and I liked the people there, so I covered the Tennessee delegation even though it wasn’t my business anymore. My wife was working on the Hill for a member of the Tennessee delegation.
DW: Who did she work for?

RA: She worked for Dick Fulton—and even beyond that, she had worked for Albert Gore, Sr. But she worked for Dick Fulton up until 1969, so I had on occasion social contact with members of the delegation at the Tennessee State Society and things like that.

DW: Would you drop by Baker’s office from time to time?

RA: I don’t recall that I did very much except in the context of when the Clean Air hearings were going on. I really didn’t have a lot of contract with him from that period up until the Watergate caper. I had gone off to cover the Pentagon and to work on other things that just didn’t bring me into contact with him in a business sense.

DW: Did you cover the Watergate hearings?

RA: Yes. And that was when I really got to know him, during the Watergate hearings. I was assigned to do the color piece, as it’s called, or the analysis of what was going on at the hearings on a given day. So I got to know him much better then, and the people on his staff like Ron McMahan, Fred Thompson, and Howard Liebengood and people who worked for him. It was in that context I had my first occasion to go down to Huntsville and spend a few days down there and see him out of the committee setting and the Washington spotlight.

DW: Were you given this assignment because you did have Tennessee connections, or was it just happenstance.

RA: No, I guess I flatter myself a bit, I was considered one of the writers in the bureau and was somebody to convey some of the drama and the color and the atmospherics that surrounded the hearings there.

DW: Talk about your trip to Huntsville. How did that come about? What did you do down there? What resulted from it?

RA: As you may recall—others have told you, undoubtedly—once those hearings got started, Baker was an overnight celebrity. The whole country discovered Baker at that time; even though he’d been in the Senate for several years and had really carved out a place for himself in the Senate, it was in the context of Watergate that he became really well known around the country. It was because he was such a relaxed, disarming sort of figure who seemed to really be making an effort to be evenhanded as far as Richard Nixon was concerned and honest as far as his investigation was concerned, asking the question over and over again, “What did the president know and when did he know it?” All of a sudden there was this incredible interest in Baker, so I was asked just to do a piece about him, about how he was reacting to his role of being a celebrity and how people in Tennessee were reacting to him and that sort of thing. I went down—seems to be it was the 4th of July, I’m pretty sure it was the 4th of July, because he had, I learned, he always had a 4th of July picnic at his house, it started with his father, but all the Tennessee republican
establishment gathered at Baker’s house on the 4th of July for the picnic and tennis and this sort of stuff. I was down there for three or four days and had the opportunity to stay at Tobe’s Motel and to hang around the courthouse and the law office and to talk to him in a totally relaxed kind of environment, as much as possible because he was at that time pursued not only by me and two or three other writers but three or four television crews. I was really impressed by the way he handled all this. Ron McMahan, who was his press secretary, somewhere had some tee shirts made up with “Senator Baker for President” on them and showed up with one of them on, and Baker sent him away to change clothes! It was a lot of fun being around him; they like to play hit and giggle tennis, as they call it, and Baker’s a pretty fair doubles player.

DW: Did he give you as much time with him as you needed?

RA: I think he did. As a matter of fact, I stayed around for a day or two after the picnic there so, yes, we sat around the guest house there and talked for a long time. Baker was always generous with his time, even later on when he was majority leader and terribly pressed.

DW: This was not the 4th of July celebration where Ron McMahan did something outrageous?

RA: Well, McMahan probably did something outrageous.

DW: In regard to a member of the press who was around with what was viewed as a hostile agenda, and I’ve never been able to get the particulars of that story, but I’ve heard innovations of it, it had something to do with a swimming pool, I think.

RA: I don’t recall it. I remember I went for a long walk with Baker down there; he grabbed a camera and went off to take pictures. We were walking around in the woods down there. My recollection is getting a little hazy—it seems like there was an old covered bridge down there somewhere that we walked to and he shot some pictures of it. But it was a place where I—reporters probably get too close to people in politics—but I liked Baker and I liked the people around him down there, Don Stansberry and the guys who were in the law firm. I always hoped that Baker would get elected president some time because I could have made a living writing stories that he told about people down in East Tennessee, you know.

DW: On that trip, did you learn some things about Baker that you didn’t know before?

RA: Oh, I’m sure I did, because actually I didn’t know that much about him. I do remember one thing that I learned about him; this is the first time that I noticed he was always quoting Mother Ladd. So I inquired about who Mother Ladd was, and he told me a little bit about her, and McMahan’s mother told me about her. Then later on—I’ve forgotten, sometime not long after that—I went down to Florida to interview Mother Ladd and wrote a long piece about her.

DW: Who is Mother Ladd?
RA: Mother Ladd was his maternal grandmother who basically reared him; his mother died when he was very young, and Mother Ladd basically reared him. She was, you probably know, sheriff down in East Tennessee; her husband had been sheriff and died and she succeeded him and then was elected to office in her own right. I’ve always thought that he—Baker used to tell these Mother Ladd stories and at the time I thought that this was just a way to inject a little humor or to relax people he’s talking to, but I really think Mother Ladd was somebody who was very important in the formation of his personality and his views about things.

DW: In regard to Watergate, what kind of relationship did you have with McMahan. Let’s just focus on Ron for a minute, because he was deeply involved in helping Baker in this investigation. Talk about the role Ron played.

RA: McMahan was a guy who was easy to underestimate, and I think a lot of people did underestimate him. Ron’s a big, husky guy who played the country boy role very well. I think he was a lot shrewder than most of the reporters around Washington realized, and even I realized at the time. I finally began to appreciate then and very much appreciated later on that he was somebody whose views about things Baker really respected and asked for and gave him a lot of leeway insofar as dealing with people in the press. They were an interesting duo. Somebody wrote a piece in Rolling Stone and called them Lenny and George, referring to the characters in John Steinbeck’s book Of Mice and Men, because there was this—one of the Steinbeck characters was this huge, lumbering, not very bright character who was pretty much ordered around and served the other. Somebody used that comparison to Baker and Ron, but Ron had no little to do with the good press that Baker got. One, because he had a certain amount of latitude that the Senator gave him; he knew what he could say to reporters, and he knew that he could talk to them on a background, sort of off-the-record basis, give them some idea about what Baker thought about things. He played a very important role in Baker’s career.

DW: What about Fred Thompson and Howard Liebengood’s dealings with the press? Could you get to them, could you talk to them?

RA: Not very much. One of my regrets about Watergate was that I hadn’t known Fred in Nashville. The first time that I approached Fred it was in the context of all this hullabaloo around the hearings, intense media interest, so it wasn’t really a time to turn Fred into a good source, though I know that some of my friends and colleagues who had known him from Nashville got help from Fred during the investigation.

DW: What’s your view of the leaking that was going on in the course of the investigation? Were you touched by that?

RA: Are you talking about in the context of the hearings?

DW: Yes.
RA: You see, by the time the Ervin-Baker hearings started, the outlines of the story had pretty much already been reported by the major newspapers, particularly the *Washington Post*. The leaking that went on during the hearings seemed to me fairly sort of petty stuff. One paper, one network would get something six hours or overnight before it was going to be testified at the hearings and stuff like that. My recollection of it was that the leaks were not things that really changed the shape or direction of the hearings, it was just these things that people will do for friends to give them a little advantage, a break on something, where they already had an affidavit and it was going to be presented to the Committee in open session the next morning or something like that.

DW: Do you recall anything about the relationship between Baker and Weicker during the hearings?

RA: Not really, except that Weicker was kind of a lone wolf as far as the Republicans were concerned. Weicker’s approach to Nixon and approach to the investigation was much more like that of the Democrats than it was the other Republicans. Of course, Baker was treading a very narrow and difficult course there, trying to be a loyal Republican but at the same time do what he had to do in terms of his personal integrity there. I’m sure Weicker must have caused him problems, but you’d never hear, or I never heard, any—

DW: There was no criticism or evidence of this.

RA: No, no. There’s one thing about Baker, there are very few times—I’m having a hard time thinking of times—when you’d see Baker aroused to obvious anger or ever hear him express frustration or criticism of a colleague.

DW: Can you think of any time when you’ve seen anger or frustration or irritation?

RA: Yes, I’ve seen him frustrated. I guess the time that comes best to mind—it was an embarrassing thing for him—was in the—you’ll have to help me on what year this was, he made a serious, it was 1979—when he made a serious run on the Republican nomination, and his first big opportunity was the Maine caucus and they put a lot of effort up there ahead of time, trying to get it organized. They thought they had it and it turned out George Bush won or at least did much better than anybody had anticipated. It turned out to be a disaster for Baker, it might have even been fatal at that early point given the big build-up. He was terribly frustrated.

DW: Did you go to Portland for that?

RA: Yes, yes. As a matter of fact—that was the other thing—they made such a big deal of it. Baker—this was 1979, this was early, early on, this was a year and a half, 18 months before the election—and Baker chartered a United Airlines 737 and had it loaded up with reporters who went up there and spent the day. They fully expected, and I’m sure all the members of the press on the plane expected, that was Howard Baker’s launching pad for a serious campaign for the nomination. I don’t think they ever recovered from that.
DW: Baker had been in Vermont and New Hampshire before coming to Portland. Where you with him on those legs or where you just on the Maine trip?

RA: My recollection of it was that we went up to Portland in the morning and he did some stuff there and then he went over, after he did his appearance there before the caucus, he went to the Burlington or Montpelier or somewhere during the middle of the day and then came back late in the afternoon. This thing went on all day. I don’t remember who many candidates there were, but several people spoke. I remember George Bush drove up there form Kennebunkport and made his little pitch to the delegates. He came back and sat down with a dozen or 15 reporters who were covering things, clearly expected nothing there, and he was making excuses, saying having a home down at Kennebunkport didn’t count for anything there and obviously didn’t expect anything to happen. He got in his car and was driving home when the votes were counted. Lo and behold, he—

DW: Do you remember Baker’s speech in Portland?

RA: I don’t; I should have gone back and looked at some stories that I wrote about some of Baker’s speeches, because I spent a good bit of time with him in Iowa and some other places along the way that were late in 1979 and early 1980.

DW: Talk about the mood on the plane as you were getting ready to return to Washington.

RA: I don’t remember the Senator specifically, but I know McMahan and Lonnie Strunk and the whole entourage, they were obviously astounded at what had happened. He came over, I do remember, and had a press conference at the hotel where the press center was before we came back. They put the best face on it they could, “it just wasn’t the end of the world” and all that. The problem was that they had been so open beforehand about their expectations, that they thought they really had it wired. Don Sundquist, who is now a member of Congress from Tennessee, was the guy who had—I’ve forgotten what his title was, whether he was called Baker’s political director or what his title was—but he was the guy who had been up there and who they had depended on to make sure that everything was set up. I never talked to Sundquist about it in the aftermath, but I’m sure he was surprised, too.

DW: I’ve heard a story that although Baker and his people wanted nothing more than to get out of Portland and back to Washington as quickly as possible, he held the plane on the tarmac at Portland for a period of time to allow some reporters to file their stories. Do you have any recollection of that?

RA: I don’t, but that sounds reasonable. I never was one of the people usually who was late filing, so I probably was on the plane waiting, even though California gave me a three-hour pad on that deadline. I don’t recall that.

DW: We’ll get back to presidential politics in a minute, but I want to go back to the Watergate period. From a public relations standpoint, although clearly Baker derived a lot of benefit
from Watergate and his performance at the hearings, in your view did he make all that he might have of the exposure he was enjoying?

RA: I think he probably did. I think if he had done—if he had been publicly more aggressive than he was in going after Nixon, it probably would have ruined him in the Republican party. He would have been viewed as really trying to capitalize in an unseemly way on the president’s predicament. I thought that was all handled very skillfully; Baker always seemed to me that he handled it in a very sort of sensible way. He realized what was coming to him in terms of national exposure, being on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek* and having a wonderful partner like Sam Ervin to interact with. I don’t know how Baker would have done if he’d had another chairman there who was not as good-humored and loquacious and philosophical as Sam Ervin. That was a partnership that was made in heaven as far as the media was concerned. That was a great act; I can’t think of one comparable to it in my years here.

DW: How much access did you have to Baker personally as a journalist during the course of the hearings, beyond the trip to Huntsville?

RA: I don’t recall that there was a lot. I probably talked to him on the phone two or three times in the course of that and during breaks in the hearing and what-not, stand around in a crowd of people and talk and that sort of thing. But that was a really very intense sort of period, and I think his media contacts during that period away from the hearing are probably like being on the *Today* show and things like that, rather than sitting down with individual reporters.

DW: So you first really began to develop a personal relationship with Baker on that Huntsville trip?

RA: Yes, and then later on, like you say, in the presidential campaign.

DW: Between Watergate and the presidential campaign, what was the nature of your coverage of Baker?

RA: During that period, I don’t know … it was probably more of a social nature than anything else, staying in touch with McMahan and dropping by the office and saying hello and that sort of thing, because I wasn’t assigned to cover the Senate. So basically my relationship with him just went from the Watergate hearings then into his presidential effort, which sprang directly form that.

DW: Let’s talk about the presidential race. We’ve talked about the trip to Maine, what about subsequent travels with Baker or coverage with Baker?

RA: One episode that I remember out in Iowa—and I don’t remember even the town—but I thought it was revealing about Baker. We’d gotten to some very Spartan, awful little motel where he had to kill three or four hours until his next event. He’d spend time like that usually getting on the telephone and making calls to people around in other states or even
in other parts of Iowa maybe. He finished up his call list that McMahan had supplied for him, and he called—I was sitting down in my room—and he called and said, “Do you want to go have breakfast?” So we got in the car and went down to a truck stop on the road there; Baker already had Secret Service people along with him then. So we walked in, it was snowing I remember, and we walked into this crowded truck stop there; it was Baker, me—and I don’t remember if McMahan went along or not—but the Secret Service detail, two or three of these guys. They really don’t know how to be unobtrusive; they escorted Baker and me through the place to a table over in the corner somewhere. Of course every farmer and truck driver in the place turned and followed every step as we made our way through the place. We sat down; Baker was kind of embarrassed by it all and didn’t quite know what to do. He sat there for awhile and we ordered and he said, “You know, I’d like to get up and just go around and talk to people a little bit, shake hands with people, but I don’t want to create an uproar.” The Secret Service agent was sitting beside him and he said, “Go ahead, Senator. We’ll stay off of you, we’ll let you do it.” So he got up and made his way around in an unobtrusive sort of way. There are so many politicians who, in a situation like that, would—the bigger commotion they could create, the better they’d like it. But he didn’t want to go dragging a Secret Service detail and a lot of people along behind him when he wanted to talk to people.

DW: How much time did you spend with Baker in Iowa?

RA: I don’t remember, I just know we went out there, it seems, two or three trips.

DW: Who was traveling with him as he would go out to campaign?

RA: Ron was always with him; I can’t remember—Dick—a real estate man in Iowa, who was his state—was his name Redmond?—Dick Redmond I believe his name was, who was his state coordinator out there. He was always with him. Then of course Lonnie Strunk was flying him. I don’t remember whether Doris, his secretary, went along or not. I’m inclined to think she did. It was a really small affair.

DW: How much media?

RA: Usually there would be two or three. Some of the people from Nashville probably traveled with him, some of the people from Commercial Appeal might have.

DW: But you were the only “national” media?

RA: Yes, I probably spent more time with him than anybody. But there’d always be somebody along.

DW: What kind of plane was he using then?

RA: It was a Twin Beech.

DW: Those don’t hold too many people.
RA: No, it was about six or eight passengers. I remember one night we were in Mason City, Iowa, and it was God-awful cold. There were puddles of water that had frozen over on runway there. We were going out, and I slipped and fell flat on my back and cracked my head on the tarmac out there. But I recall on the plain that night, seems to me there was nobody on it but Baker and me and Ron, going from Mason City back to Des Moines or wherever it was. But it was a Twin Beech, I remember. Later on, they got this jet. This story is way off point, but Ron and Baker were—I guess they’d been in New Hampshire, and I’m not sure whether this was the same year—but it was Baker and Ron and Lonnie and a reporter named Rick Myer from the Los Angeles Times. They were flying from New Hampshire down here to Washington and they lost an engine. Lonnie was pretty concerned about it; Baker being a pilot got up and went up front to see if he could help Lonnie out with communications or anything while he was concerned with his. So they went into Wilmington or somewhere, I’ve forgotten where it was, but they circled the field two or three times getting clearance to land or get the runway they wanted for the wind conditions or something. McMahan was knocking down Jack Daniels at a pretty good pace there at one point. Lonnie said, “We’ve got to go around the field one more time.” McMahan said, “You can’t go around one more time, we don’t have any more Jack Daniels!”

DW: Talk about the relationship between Baker and Lonnie Strunk as you observed it in these intimate circumstances, flying in small planes.

RA: The only way I could describe it, my observation, it was more like a father-son relationship or an uncle and a favorite nephew. I think Lonnie Strunk loves Howard Baker, undoubtedly with good reason, because—I’ve never really asked Lonnie to tell me the story—but as I gathered, surmised, from McMahan and others that Lonnie was just a poor little barefoot kid down there around Huntsville. Baker just took a liking to him, taught him to fly, and took care of him, and whatever Lonnie has accomplished is largely through Howard Baker. I’m sure there have been times when Howard probably wished that Lonnie would restrain himself a little more, because there was a time when Lonnie took great delight in entertaining the visiting press and that sort of stuff.

DW: How would he do that?

RA: Oh, Lonnie liked to be even more the country boy than he really was. One night at the—I guess it was on this first when I went down there for the, it had to have been when I went down there for that 4th of July thing during Watergate—because there were a lot of reporters around, Nashville press, television types. We had a big table together back in the back room down at Tobe’s Restaurant.

DW: This is the press, the press room?

RA: Yes. Lonnie sat at the head of the table and regaled all the city people with East Tennessee stories. Everybody loved Lonnie.
DW: Would he make observations about Baker under these circumstances?

RA: I can’t remember any specific stories or anything like that, but he could be mildly, not disrespectful, but he could joke about Baker and that sort of thing.

DW: Talk about how Baker performed when he was out campaigning in Iowa—his style, that sort of thing. Was he a good campaigner?

RA: He was a really good one-on-one campaigner. Baker was the kind of guy who could walk up to a farmer or a laborer, a blue-collar person, and put them totally at ease. He’s a really terribly down to earth, folksy, unpretentious kind of guy. As a speaker, I didn’t think he was—I was a little disappointed in him; I didn’t think he was as effective as I had thought he would be, having watched him in the Watergate hearings and that sort of thing. So far as his presidential campaign was concerned, he never really found his message. He was always in a difficult predicament politically, the Republican party being controlled by the more conservative element of the party. He always had to treat the right wing of the Republican party very, very gingerly. He had a problem of being too popular with the Democrats. I can remember in 1976, particularly, when Jimmy Carter was running, talking to Democrats, they’d say “God, I wish Howard Baker would change parties. I wish Howard Baker was running as a Democrat, he could get the Democratic nomination.”

DW: Do you recall seeing any indications that Baker’s support of the Canal treaties hurt him in places like Iowa with rank and file Republicans?

RA: Oh, I’m sure it did. I’m sure it did. There’s one story about Baker in the Panama Canal treaties—it looked like, it was possible that the deciding vote on whether the treaty survived or not was going to depend on Henry Bellmon, a Republican senator and former governor of Oklahoma. President Carter tried two or three times to get Bellmon to come down to the White House and discuss it with him, and Bellmon wouldn’t even—nobody knew what Henry Bellmon was going to do. Henry Bellmon and Baker were really good friends; Bellmon really admired Baker and the feeling was mutual. Baker knew that Bellmon was the kind of guy who, if you tried to twist his arm, it was going to backfire, so he just stayed away from him, didn’t bother him. Finally, the night before the vote, it still looked like it could go either way, depending on what Bellmon did. Bellmon later on told me that the before the vote, Baker finally called him—it was the first time he had called him—about the Panama Canal thing, and said “Henry, is there anything I can do to help you?” Then Bellmon said, “No.” The next day, as it turned out, a couple of other votes changed, or that they didn’t know they had, and it came around that Bellmon didn’t make the difference. But Bellmon walked in and voted for ratification of the treaties.

DW: Did this call make a difference?

RA: No, I don’t think it did; I was telling the story because it reflected the depth of Baker’s concern, but it also reflected how well he knew Bellmon. He knew that, even as good a friends as they were, that he might not serve his own interest if he tried to push Bellmon at all.
DW: What kind of speeches did Baker give in Iowa?

RA: I should have gone back and looked, but I honest to God don’t remember. As I said, that’s the reason, I’m inclined to think in long retrospect that he hadn’t really sharpened the message, because I don’t remember what he said.

DW: Some people have said that out on the stump he was inclined to give speeches that were, in some sense, civic lessons.

RA: Yes, there was that tendency. Part of it was because of the thing I mentioned, the situation he was always in relative to the people in his party.

DW: Out there and in New Hampshire or wherever you observed him, was he an enthusiastic campaigner or a reluctant campaigner? Was he glad he was out there, or was he really wishing he was somewhere else?

RA: I don’t think Baker ever was one of these people who just really enjoyed hand shaking and back slapping and this sort of stuff, except maybe in Tennessee. In Tennessee he probably did. He was doing it because he wanted to be president, because he thought he could be a good president. I think it was work for him; I don’t think it was something that he did because he enjoyed it.

DW: But a deep-seated interest in being president was evident?

RA: Yes, yes. Tennessee, I always thought though, was a little bit of a different thing. One of the funny things about Baker, he’s always had this problem controlling his weight, because he loves to eat, he just loves to eat. When Cissy was running for Congress, I went down one time, joined up to travel with him for a day or two. I got down and hooked up with him, and the first thing he said was, “Are you going to be here to go with us to the Sequatchie County covered dish supper?” I’d hope to, I’d heard a lot about it, you know. It’s in the high school down there, people bring—you’ve never seen such loads of food in your life. It’s gotten to be legend over the years in political campaigns. So, sure enough, we went to the Sequatchie County covered dish supper; Baker was going to speak, so they let him—he went through the line first to get his plate there so he could get finished to speak. He got this huge plate, fried chicken and all this sort of stuff; McMahan and I were watching him, and so Ron said, “You watch him go back.” So Baker goes over and he knocks off this plate, and then he gets his camera and starts taking pictures of other people going through the line there at the covered dish supper. McMahan and I were watching; Baker would go over and he’d snap a picture or two of people in line and then he’d sneak in between a couple of people coming through and pick out a drumstick or something! This went on for 20 or 30 minutes; McMahan and I are in an uproar, laughing at this extra meal he had there on the sly.

DW: He thought nobody was watching!
RA: No, no.

DW: Did you go to New Hampshire with the campaign?

RA: I’m sure I did, but I don’t remember anything in particular that happened in New Hampshire.

DW: When you were out there traveling with Baker, in the plane going from place to place, what was happening? What did people talk about? What was Baker doing?

RA: Baker was always willing to talk about politics, but he seemed to be just as happy talking about Mother Ladd or photography or that sort of thing. Baker is a very social kind of animal. One time I was down in Huntsville, I’ve forgotten what the occasion was, we flew into the Huntsville Airport or maybe we drove over from Knoxville, I don’t remember. But I was going to go down to Tobe’s motel and Baker said, “Look, why don’t you come stay up at the house? I know you’re not supposed to—with your office and everything, you’re not supposed to do that—but Tobe’s is really not a very good place. If you want to come stay up at the guest house instead of staying down at Tobe’s I won’t ever say anything about it.” Having stayed at Tobe’s two or three times before, I said, “Well, I think I will—what the hell!” So I went up and stayed at the guest house; it turned out—I think it was just the day before or two days before—Reagan had been down there, so Baker took me down to the guest house and he gave me the opportunity to sleep in the bed that Ron and Nancy had slept in the night before.

DW: Was this the time Reagan went down after he became president?

RA: No, I think this was before. This was probably during the 1980 campaign, because I think Baker had Bush and Reagan and some others down to spend a weekend at the place.

DW: When you were alone or with a small group with Baker, how much could you get out of him about behind-the-scenes, political things that reporters are fascinated with? Was he pretty open and revealing and candid?

RA: No, when you got to talking about individuals, he was always very discreet. I remember one time on the plane asking him about Reagan, because I always suspected that politically he and Ronal Reagan were a lot more different than the public impression they gave. I don’t remember just exactly the context of the question, but I asked him what he thought about—I don’t remember what particular aspect of Reagan it was. He gave me the funniest answer, and I’ve always wondered—he said, “Well, I’ll tell you, I wouldn’t give you the same answer as a friend that I’d give you as a reporter, so I just don’t think I’m going to say.” I don’t remember specifically what I was asking him about, but I always thought that was a peculiar kind of answer.

DW: After the presidential campaign then, what was the nature of your association with him?
RA: I saw a fair amount of him; the chronology of this is dim now, but after the Panama Canal treaties, I also covered the debate over the SALT II treaty.

DW: Let’s talk about that just a bit. What was really going on in connection with SALT II in the positions that Baker came to take?

RA: I think for a long time there Baker went into it really not knowing where he was going to come out. In other words, I don't think he had a position on the treaty going in; it really was an educational sort of thing for him. I was really surprised at the time when he finally came down against ratification. I think it was on the verification question. I guess now, looking back in retrospect, I can understand his position better than I could at the time. I guess my feelings about it were colored by my own views about the treaty, which at the time I thought it should have been ratified. I think it was on the verification question. I guess now, looking back in retrospect, I can understand his position better than I could at the time. I guess my feelings about it were colored by my own views about the treaty, which at the time I thought it should have been ratified. I thought in the end he had basically taken a political position on it, that he had decided just in terms of somebody who still had presidential aspirations and leadership aspirations, that to support ratification was just not the politic thing for him at the time. And you never could really get him pinned down on it, because the verification matter at the time, capability and whatever, was all a very sensitive sort of thing, so it was easy enough for somebody who had been briefed by the CIA and the National Security Council to say, “I just can’t talk about that.” But there was a case of some listening post tracking sites in Iran having been lost and that sort of thing, which did raise legitimate questions about verification capability. And I think he felt like, too, that with the Panama Canal treaty debate he had stood up and he had demonstrated that he could rise above party politics and stand for principle, so I don’t think he felt like that politically he needed to go along with the ratification of the SALT treaty.

DW: How do you react to this: the Republicans in the Senate were genuinely concerned about Carter’s foreign and national security policies and, in addition, felt that this could be one of the strongest issues to use in the 1980 presidential campaign and that Baker, in part then, was reflecting a party point of view. But he was the leader of the party in the Senate, and this may have affected where he came out.

RA: Yes, I think that’s part of the question, yes.

DW: When you were covering that SALT story, what kind of access did you have to Baker? Could you go see him in his office?

RA: Yes, I don’t recall how many times I did, but my recollection is that I saw him more and talked to him more about the SALT treaty than I did the Panama Canal treaty or certainly the Watergate matter, because that was a very technically complicated sort of thing.

DW: Did he understand it? How was he on the technical side of issues?

RA: I think he was good, although that whole subject was one where the technocrats always tended to capture it. I always thought that people who dealt in arms control extensively engaged in an elitist kind of chit-chat, they liked to throw around terms and acronyms and what-not that would demonstrate their really inside and profound understanding of things
that ordinary people couldn’t understand. Baker understood as much as he needed to understand about the technical capabilities and about different launch vehicles, about different warheads and this sort of thing. But he really looked at it, though, as a political kind of problem; he didn’t get to look at it in the way that so many people, particularly staff people, do in totally technical terms.

DW: Do you know Alton Frye?

RA: I’ve known Alton Frye for a long, long time.

DW: He played some role in providing assistance to Baker in regard to SALT as well as other things. Do you have any knowledge as to how Alton was involved and what he was doing?

RA: I don’t know specifically what he was doing; I know that during that same period of time I would talk to Alton occasionally and he told me he was talking to Baker and giving Baker advice from time to time. Alton was somebody who was very good on that subject and had been involved working for Senator Brooke when Brooke came very close to blocking deployment of MERVs, which might have made the history of the arms race somewhat different. Alton was somebody who was one of the real insiders in that whole subject.

DW: When you were talking to Baker about the Panama Canal treaties and about SALT, was he a good source? Was he the journalist’s dream?

RA: The treaties were on the table, you knew what they were. What you really would liked to have had, what a journalist would have liked to have had from Baker during that process was his count on where the votes were and who they were—and that was one thing that you were never going to get. He was a good vote counter, although he was never like Allen Cranston, who took real pride in being able to tell you exactly what a vote was going to be and how every senator was going to vote.

DW: Before the fact?

RA: Yes, yes; Cranston liked to do that.

DW: But Baker would never tip his hand?

RA: No, he’d never tip his hand; he’d tell you in general terms, he’d talk about his confidence level, but he’d never get into really detailing votes.

DW: Baker seems to have an extremely high level of interest in intelligence and intelligence operations. Were you ever involved in anything in connection with Baker that touched on intelligence and intelligence work and how that system functions? There seems to be a fascination there.
RA: Yes, I think it did. The only thing where I ever touched on that with him, that I recall, had to do with the SALT II verification. But I do have the impression that you do that he had a certain fascination about that kind of thing.

DW: My impression is that there were only a very few members of the media representatives, particularly of the national media, that Baker could be said to be close to, that he was comfortable with, perhaps only a handful. Is that your impression?

RA: No, I guess I’m a little surprised by that. I always thought Baker, of most of the people I’ve known in politics, was more at ease with the press than almost any of them I can remember.

DW: At ease in general.

RA: Yes.

DW: Did he understand the media?

RA: I think he did, I think he did. Particularly when he was minority leader, I think he had a better press than almost anybody that I can remember. He was working in tandem with Bob Byrd, reporters always thought generally Baker was wonderful because Byrd was not easy to deal with, particularly, he had a lot of—he had some personal eccentricities that people had to accommodate. But Baker was accessible and he was reasonably open; the thing that the press appreciated about him was that McMahan and then later on Tommy Griscom had a good enough relationship with Baker that they could really be useful to people in the press. The could really tell you things about what was going on, where so many people in that position, you know, they are absolutely useless; they are so uncertain about their own relationship with their boss, concerned about their boss’s penchant for secrecy or something that they can’t tell you anything. But McMahan and Tommy Griscom both were just really valuable sources, not necessarily for little inside tid-bits about things, but being able to help the press understand about how the place worked up there. To understand the bigger picture of the legislative process.

DW: When McMahan was on Baker’s staff, he was clearly the person who was personally closest to Baker. When Tommy Griscom replaced McMahan, the same condition applied. Is it unusual for the press secretary to be at the same time the closest personal advisor to a figure such as Baker? How do you account for this?

RA: I don’t know. The way McMahan and Tommy operated was a little unusual, but you do see people in politics who—and there are a lot of them—with whom the press secretary is the closest aide. An awful lot of them. You even see presidents who are that way; you take Jimmy Carter, I don’t know that there was anybody in the White House who was closer to Jimmy Carter than Jody Powell.

DW: When Baker became majority leader—we’re past SALT now and Ronald Reagan’s in the White House—to what extent were you covering his activities?
RA: Not on a real day-to-day kind of basis; this gets into a period when I didn’t have a specific sort of assignment and I was traveling a lot.

DW: What sort of things were you writing about?

RA: I spent several years doing what was sort of an Americana beat, where I spent more time away from Washington than I did here. So during that period, my relationship with Baker was not really a close one at all. There’s one other story that I’ll tell you before I forget it, because it doesn’t fit into anything particularly. This was at the Republican convention in Dallas in 1984; Tom Griscom and I were going to go to lunch together, and this was—I guess it was the opening day of the convention, because Baker was going to be the main speaker that night. Tommy came by to pick me up at the Los Angeles Times workspace, and we were just going to go out. We started out and Baker happened along and said, “Where are you going?” “We’re going to lunch.” “Do you mind if I go with you?” “No, fine.” So we started down a hallway there and we came by the UPI photo place. Baker saw a bunch of cameras in there he wanted to look at so he stopped, and we killed about 20 minutes, I guess, while he’s talking to photographers and looking at their lenses and one thing and another. So then we start off again and we encountered Tom Johnson, who is the publisher of the Los Angeles Times. He said, “Where are you going?” “Well, we’re going to lunch.” “Do you mind if I go along?” “Fine.” So the four of us start out; finally after two or three more interruptions for Baker to talk to people we get to a limo—I don’t remember whether it was Tom’s or the Senator’s—but we go to the hotel in Dallas and we get out if the car and there’s John Connolly; Connolly said, “Where are you going?” “We’re going to lunch.” “Do you mind if I go?” So we wind up going up an escalator and this huge atrium there in the Hyatt Regency. Half of the convention delegates are around there having lunch, so people start coming around, we’re caught up in the middle of this for about three hours. It was fascinating for Griscom and me, and I guess for Tom Johnson, too, because Baker and Connolly free-wheeled there when they could between signing autographs and what-not. We sat there for about three hours and finally Baker went off to take a nap before his speech to the convention that night. That was just the thing about Baker, who was always laid back, relaxed, accommodating to whatever circumstances he found.

DW: What are your impressions about Baker as Republican leader in the Senate—in the minority, in the majority, in his handling that role?

RA: I thought—and I think that other people who covered the Senate would tell you something similar—I thought that Baker was really one of the most effective leaders that I could ever remember here. That was really his niche. I’m not sure, looking back at it, I’m not sure whether Baker would have been a good president at all, because I think his instinct was really to accommodate; when people disagreed about things, to say “Let’s get together and talk about this, see what we can work out.” Split the difference, however. I think that was really his instinct, personally, as a conciliator. I think he would have been a terrific secretary of state. But looking back at it, I wonder whether he would have been a good president at all. I just never saw in him a kind of guy who would take hold of something
and say, “Look, by good, it’s going to be this way. This is the way it’s going to be whether you like it or not.” The Democrats really appreciated that when he was majority leader, when he was minority leader, too. One of the things he did as majority leader was to bring some order, routine, to the Senate where people could understand that here on Thursday after such and such a time, on Thursday there won’t be any votes of any kind, where people could plan their own lives and their own activities, without being out of position when something important happened in the Senate. With Byrd, things were very often just chaotic; Byrd used chaos as leverage to accomplish what he wanted to accomplish. But Baker put people at ease. You might have heard the story about Bob Byrd’s office, it’s sort of indicative of the way Baker operates. When he became majority leader, he knew how much that majority leader’s office had become a part of Bob Byrd’s persona and his ego, so Baker volunteers to help Bob Byrd keep the office. I didn’t mean anything to him, the minority leader’s office is perfectly lavish enough. A little gesture like that, it did a lot to help his relationship, a relationship that could have been very difficult.

DW: Does Howard Baker have any enemies?

RA: Yes, I’m sure he does. I talked to people down in Tennessee—what’s that, it’s called the Big South Fork recreation area down there, and they were always some people around in the area down there who liked to think that Baker was going to make a financial killing on that, because he had some property down there. I’m sure there are.

DW: What about in Washington, in the Senate?

RA: In the Senate? I don’t know of any. I’m sure there are people—there are conservative Republicans, I know, who were exasperated that they thought that Baker was too much of an opportunist in dealing with the Democrats. Maybe not loyal enough to Ronald Reagan. I don’t know why they would think that, but I’m sure it exists.

DW: What’s the essential Baker? What makes him tick?

RA: That’s a tough question; I think that Baker is a person who is very comfortable with himself. That’s probably born of having grown up in a family that was of substantial means. He is somebody who has never felt particularly threatened; there’s not any paranoia or any aspect of particular suspicion about Baker. He basically is a very open sort of person. Because he is, that makes him fairly comfortable with his circumstances.

DW: Would you characterize him as or as having been an ambitious person? One of the things about Baker is that he never seemed to be driven in the way in which some politicians appear to be driven.

RA: Well, it’s not obvious, he doesn’t show it, but I think he is. You go back and look; one of the first stories I remember writing about Baker is when he ran for minority leader when he was a first-termer.

DW: He’d have been there two years.
RA: Yes. No, I think he is a very, very ambitious person. Some people who have known him for a long time down in Tennessee would tell you he started thinking about running for president the day he got to Washington. My own guess is that he never really thought about it until Watergate came along—but, no, I think he’s a very ambitious person. But he’s the kind of guy who’s not so obvious about it that he’s offensive.

DW: Are there any other things that come to mind that it would be well to talk about now?

RA: I don’t know; this may be too personal to get into—I don’t know what you’re going to do about it, but have you talked about the thing with Joy? About Joy’s problem?

DW: It has been brought up, and people have been rather candid about it, so if you’d like to comment on that situation and the effects it might have had on Baker’s political career, I’d be more than delighted.

RA: Yes. Back before the presidential campaign—this would have been in 1976, when he wanted to be on the ticket with Ford—McMahan and I one weekend were playing tennis and he was talking about the convention coming up and one thing and another. He said, “What are we doing to do about this story about Joy? How should we handle it? What should I do?” I said, “Well, everybody knows; she’s had her drinking problem, and it’s going to come out, one way or another at some point along the line. It seems to me that what you ought to do is get somebody you trust, who you know will do it right, and just sit down and talk to her, just lay it all out, talk about the whole thing, and just go ahead and do it rather than wait for it to dribble out.” I suggested it might be better if a woman reporter talked to her about it, and I suggested Marlene Cimons, a woman on the staff, should be somebody that they would want to consider about it. I don’t know, it drifted along, nothing ever came of it. We got out to the convention at Kansas City, and it still wasn’t done. So I went over to talk to Baker one morning and told him that Ron and I had had this conversation and that if he’d be willing for me to do it that I’d do it, I’d undertake to do it. It turned out that Marlene, who I had suggested, wasn’t at the convention. He still seemed not to know how he wanted to handle it, how to go about it; I think he was aware that Ron and I had talked about it. But then the story came out in the New York Daily News, I guess it was that very day or the next day.

DW: There was also Jack Anderson who brought it out on a piece he did on the Today show.

RA: That same day?

DW: I think so, yes.

RA: I didn’t remember that. I knew that Jim Lehart wrote it in the New York Daily News. But it was something—everybody around—

DW: Were you around the Baker operation when the word came out that it was going to be Dole and not Baker?
I had been over there; I know there was this very emotional press conference over there after it. I remember reading our story in the Los Angeles Times, I think Rick Myer probably went over and covered it. In 1976 I was covering the White House, so I would have been over at the Ford headquarters. I just didn’t go back over there, but I’ve read the stories. I know it was a really very emotional thing, more for the other people who were around there than it was for Baker himself.

Although he seemed to be—this seemed to be one of the few things, based on what people have said, that he had difficulty shaking off. Subsequent to that, in associations with him, did it ever come up?

It seems to me that one time—I can’t remember now whether I actually heard him say this or whether somebody repeated it to me—was that after that he said that was the last time that there would be a debate about the second spot on the ticket. He indicated that his ambition thereafter would be for something higher.

Let me ask you this question. Beyond his press people, I don’t know how far your observations go, but talk in general about Baker’s relations with his staff. How did he manage his staff operation?

You know that is the interesting thing about Baker; he was never a good constituent senator in terms of the mail being answered and that sort of thing. I don’t think it was that he was disinterested or thought that state issues were mundane or beneath him or anything else. His state office, from my experience, just never was terribly well organized. Jim Sasser has been a good friend over the years, and there have been times over the years when Republicans in Tennessee, if they wanted something done, would sometimes go to Sasser rather than Baker. Some of that was just because from fairly early on, Baker had a really heavy load, then the leadership role and one thing and another, but he didn’t have a reputation of being a great senator to take care of little tricky-tracky needs of constituents. And it may go to the way the office was organized; in a lot of Senate offices you have the administrative assistant or the chief of staff who by golly really runs the place and takes care of anything. But my experience, I don’t think the AA or the chief of staff in Baker’s office was a really dominant figure. It was like you said awhile ago, it was the press secretary who was always the one who really knew everything that was going on with Baker. He had, over the years, a lot of different people as AA. He had Fred Bernthal who is now over at the National Science Foundation, he had Lamar Alexander, he had any number—

Michael Adam, Hugh Branson.

Hugh, yes, I’d forgotten about Hugh. Then he had—what’s his name from Texas, his father’s was the Commerce—

Mossbacher.
RA: Yes, he had Robb Mossbacher. But it was always—and I guess Ralph Griffith might have been the AA at one time, at the very beginning.

DW: I think he was on the press side.

RA: Was he press before McMahan? OK. Doris Lovett, his personal secretary, who’s a confidential secretary, whatever you call it; Doris was very close to him and always knew everything that was going on in terms of the family and politics and everything else, but Doris didn’t have much contact with the press or anything. I’d gotten to know Doris because she—being down in Huntsville and stuff like that. I was doing a story one time about ginseng and it turned out that Doris is an expert on ginseng.

DW: Is that right! A good source. What about his management of his leadership staff? Were they pretty free, given a lot of discretion? Do you have any impressions about that?

RA: My impression is—and I never dealt very much with them—but my impression is they were on a lot shorter string than McMahan and Griscom were. It was just a matter of their doing really what their assignment was; McMahan and Griscom were the ones who were supposed to deal with the press, and the other people on the staff knew that and so they—unless it just happened to be a totally personal relationship with some reporter—they left that to the press people.

DW: Anything else that needs to be covered? I’m about out of questions.

RA: I think I’m probably about out of observations, too.

DW: Well, let’s bring this session to a halt then and once again, I’ll express my thanks.