
Interview with David Abshire

The interview was conducted by David Welborn in Washington, DC on July 9, 1993

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DW: First of all, Dr. Abshire, thank you for inviting us in this morning to talk a little bit about Senator Howard Baker. Before we get to Senator Baker, would you put on the record a bit of your rather impressive background and experience so readers of this in the future will have a context in which to take our conversation.

DA: I’ll start with roots. I’m a Chattanooga boy and, of course, Howard Baker is what we call East Tennessee, farther to the north. I went to Baylor School in Chattanooga and am still a trustee there; Howard went to McCallie, our competitor. They’ve got a Howard Baker Chair, as you know, at McCallie; I guess he is their most esteemed graduate. I knew Congressman Baker, his father; I had an uncle, Lupton Patton, from Chattanooga who was involved in Republican politics—not running for office but was state chairman, he and his wife. So I knew the East Tennessee crowd in my late teens; Carroll Reese and Howard Baker were the two East Tennessee congressmen, as you know very well, going back to the Civil War and the dust-up with Isham Harris and all of that—this was a very different political party of the state. So I met Howard Baker’s father before I met him as a late teenager, very different personality.

DW: Would you talk about that just a little bit?

DA: I think—now maybe this was my youth—but I think of Congressman Baker as much more self-contained, and I’ve always looked on Howard Baker as very effervescent. That could be a reflection of my youth but also it could be a reflection of changing times. Congressman Baker was elected in a different period of history, before we were into television and so forth, so it might also have reflected a cultural change. Of course, in those days going back to the 1930s, you had peculiar Tennessee politics with the unholy alliance with Crump and Carroll Reese and so forth. Estes Kefauver who was on the different side of the political picture nevertheless was very cooperative when it got down to practical things with that group. It was an interesting period. But that’s not my area of expertise; I just make that comment in passing. Carroll Reese was responsible for getting my appointment to West Point; it was through Democratic Senator Stewart, but it was really Carroll Reese that got it. When I got out of the army after the Korean War, I came to Washington before young Howard. I was finishing my doctoral dissertation on Senator David Keye, who was involved in the disputed election of 1876; I went to work on Capitol Hill while I was finishing that dissertation.¹ I came on the staff of the minority leader and then very quickly became the first staff director of the House Republican Policy Committee. In the attempt to overthrow Hallock, the young Republicans did a deal --

DW: Gerald Ford and Melvin Laird.

DA: John Rhodes, who is a little older, was in on that deal and benefited from it. But you see, Congressman Baker was in the Congress then; I didn’t have a lot of association with him because frankly my association tended to be with this younger group of Republicans. Now that I talk about this, more of it comes back, but I would have seen Congressman Baker during that period, not working intimately with him, but we knew each other and had a very cordial relationship. Then I left the Hill in 1961, briefly went to AEI and then with

¹ Hayes-Tilden Presidential Election Dispute of 1876
some people started this Center for Strategic International Studies, which was then a part of Georgetown University; it was called the Center for Strategic Studies. I went back into government service in May 1970 as assistant secretary of state, dealing with the Congress. I would have met Howard Baker before that, but that would have been when I really got to know him. When was he elected to the Senate?

DW: He was elected in November of 1966, then took office in January of 1967.

DA: Yes. I came in a very stormy period; the White House had antagonized relations with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

DW: What was the source of the antagonism?

DA: They didn’t communicate; they figured the Committee was lost, weren’t supporting the war effort, with one exception. When I came in and I went around and talked with each one of them and found they had a variety of views, but the White House had driven them into almost a solid block, Republicans and Democrats. We opened all of that up and got communications going. The two people that I worked very closely with initially were Senators Cooper and Church, because I worked out the compromise on the Cooper-Church amendment. Ten days after I came into office, troops were moved into Cambodia in that sweep; nobody on the Hill was talked to, the campuses were electrified. On Capitol Hill a range of amendments were introduced to limit operations; the one with the greatest force was the rather famous Cooper-Church amendment, which would write into the law the president’s statement of how many miles they were going to go in. It had a very controversial portion of that on air support; the administration’s principal opposition to the Cooper-Church amendment was the air support, because the joint chiefs of staffs figured that if they went along with that language that it would endanger our troops. So I worked out the compromise, and I really developed quite a friendship with both Senator Cooper and Frank Church, particularly with Senator Cooper. I remember John Cooper talking to me privately about Howard Baker and how he hoped he would be the next minority leader.

DW: Did Senator Cooper comment on the qualities he saw in Senator Baker that led him to that feeling?

DA: I don’t remember too well, but he felt that he had the presence, the imagination. It struck me because Howard was not that senior at that point. It was in a more hierarchical period—now people jump, but not back then. But he was the first senior Republican Senator that really went around pushing for Howard Baker.

DW: You may recall that Senator Baker as a very junior Senator had challenged Hugh Scott for the Republican leadership in 1969 and lost, of course, and then again in 1971. So he was obviously already thinking in leadership terms during that period. Did Senator Baker play any role in your going to the State Department?

DA: No. Bryce Harlow was a very wise head, broad-gaged individual, and felt the congressional relations had gotten so messed up. He knew me, he knew me from when I
had been on the Hill and he was in the White House with Eisenhower, and he made that suggestion.

DW: When did you really have the opportunity to observe Baker operating in the Senate at close range?

DA: Of course, I saw Howard in this initial period, 1970 and 1971, but I was not working intimately with him. Frankly, my coalition building depended on reaching out to Democrats—Hubert Humphrey or some of the young group; Sam Nunn and Bennett Johnson—I got very close to all of the freshmen. Bill Brock came in at that time, and we had all that freshman class down to the State Department in breakfasts because they were a new element. While I knew Howard well, he wasn’t one of the people in that early period that I was thrown with that much, because he was not as key to my legislative strategy—the Democrats were!

DW: Of course, it was later after you had left the State Department that he became a member of the Foreign Relations Committee.

DA: That’s right. When was that?

DW: About 1975.

DA: Yes, I left on January 6, 1973. I did work with him and Senator Inouye on a bill that they had to take the commercial functions out of the State Department and put them in Commerce. I wanted to talk them out of that. We instituted a program at the State Department of having each DCM, each Deputy Chief of Mission from around the world come back for real training in the commercial side, having a commercial advisor to each assistant secretary. So they stood down on the thing while I was in office, then later what we had gotten instituted sort of fell apart and they went ahead and moved on that. But that was one piece of legislation where I interfaced directly on them. Then when I had left the State Department to come back here to what was then called the Center for Strategic International Studies, I had contact with Howard in some of our work. But he was not intimately involved with us; he was involved, but he was not intimately involved with the Center in that period. Frankly, I got on our advisory board and so forth these people that built the coalitions, including Humphrey and some of that younger group; Nunn became so active with us in that period and still is. Howard then took over as leader. Jumping here to your Panama Canal treaties, I was in no way involved in those negotiations; I was out of government. I think that’s an extraordinary story, but I’ve got no insider information. The Carter administration failed, they completely failed; they were stalemated and it was Howard Baker and Bill Rogers—we call him Little Bill Rogers, not the Secretary of State but the one here in Washington—and Arlen Porter that really worked the agreement and saved it. I keep seeing things—when Warren Christopher came in, somebody said he saved it—it wasn’t in the hands of the State Department, they failed. That is an amazing period of history. I have this little Washington paper—but it’s not profound—that I wrote on Congress versus the president and foreign policy makers in which I’ve got a paragraph
on that. But there’s nothing unique in it, it’s in plenty of better sources. It was in the newspapers—you’ve been back through that, I’m sure. Bill Rogers is the best source.

DW: What position was Bill Rogers in then?

DA: He was back at Arlen Porter.

DW: How did he get involved in treaty discussions?

DA: He had been assistant secretary for Latin America and inter-American affairs. Later he came back in with Kissinger as under secretary. He’s a Democrat but came back in with Kissinger later. Bill is a public servant; he has always been involved with us in Latin American affairs, so he saw the treaty going down. Have you interviewed him?

DW: No, I have not. I will do that; this is the first time his name has come up in this context.

DA: Say I suggested it; it’s very important. My secretary can give you his address.

DW: Let me go back and ask you about a couple of things. Did the Church Committee begin its work on your watch in the State Department, or did that come afterwards?

DA: You’re talking about on intelligence?

DW: Yes, on intelligence.

DA: No, that was after. Howard was on that, wasn’t he?

DW: Yes, he was.

DA: No, that was after. I’m not your best source on that.

DW: What kind of relationship, if any, was there between Secretary Rogers and Senator Baker?

DA: There was a good relationship. Of course, once Howard became—when did Hugh Scott go?

DW: Senator Baker became the Republican leader in January of 1977. At the time Rogers was Secretary of State, Senator Baker was a junior Republican Senator, who was not then on the Foreign Relations Committee. There probably was at best nothing more than a casual relationship, but I thought I would ask anyway.

DA: I think that’s right; I don’t think it went beyond that. As I say, Rogers got very concerned on the Baker—it seems to me that it was Baker-Inouye—it was a subcommittee of the Commerce Committee to remove the commercial things. I had been frankly very successful in everything I had done with the Congress, so Rogers called me in and said, “Dave, you fix it. You’ve done this other stuff.” I said, “Mr. Secretary, I can’t fix it.” He
said, “Why is that?” I said, “We don’t have a good case, we’ve got a lousy case. The stuff I’ve been able to ‘fix,’ is where there has been a problem of communication and persuasion on a good case. The State Department has done a lousy job on the commercial side of their diplomacy.” He said, “Is there no way you can persuade them otherwise?” I said, “The only way we could persuade them otherwise is for you as secretary of state to decide that you are going to put in a program to upgrade the commercial cone to follow the British system.” So that was what we came up with, and we got Ken Rush, a CEO who is a very effective ambassador to Bonn—and a Tennessean, by the way, big Knoxville supporter, he wanted me to go down and be chancellor at the University there years ago. So we got him back from Bonn, and I took him up with Baker and Inouye and another Democratic Senator, and we sat up this program. This was very important to Rogers because he saw these assets being yanked out. By the way, one thing that happened after I left, it fell apart, the whole thing fell apart. It was in part because that we got in the ITT scandal in Chili; this enabled a lot of the foreign service to say, “That just goes to show that we should have nothing to do with American corporations.” They just lost interest over there, so Baker and Inouye moved, and I think appropriately, they had given them a chance to put that commercial. Let me move along, I’m concerned about my time. There are other parts of your story that I want to make my mark on. You don’t have it on here, but I overlapped with Howard Baker briefly in the White House. I was brought back as ambassador to NATO to arrive back in the first week of January; it was when Reagan went to the hospital, really a low point in the presidency. I was the Mr. Outside on the Iran Contra; Don Regan would have had a conflict of interest and he was in trouble image wise. He obviously didn’t want to give up his position as chief of staff. By the way, this is all in Lou Cannon’s book; all that story is in there very accurately. As a second independent channel to the president, I was Mr. Clean. Of course, from the very beginning, this was handled the opposite of Watergate. There has been this book written that you must have in your bibliography, I was interviewed on it, The Influence of the Watergate Experience on Iran Contra—I’ve forgotten the exact title. It was profound; Michael La Dean in his absurd book, he used to work for us years ago here, always had a vivid imagination, said that Baker and Abshire in their respective positions and times in the White House during this period were so influenced by the Watergate experience that they went overboard to be cooperative with the investigating committees, making everything available. The reason this is an absurd position to criticize that: what is your other option? Obstruction of justice and impeachment? Not very attractive. Once you started down that line, you would have ended up in that situation. Of course, what Reagan did when he called me in Brussel—I didn’t want to come back due to this and I also need to get back to the Center—but he said, “I want everything to get out.” Think—that Richard Nixon done that the first weekend of the Watergate break-in, he would have served his second term! We all had the advantage; whatever may have been Ronald Reagan’s failing in memory or naivete on some things, he was naïve enough to say, “Get everything out,” and that was right naivete. First, it was honest; second, it was due process; third, any other course would have been disastrous. I only looked at the La Dean book, but you ought to look at it. My commitment was three months only. I don’t need to re-recite Lou Cannon, because it’s so accurate in chronology and everything. There was a big conflict and when Don moved out and was so badly hurt because he hung on and wouldn’t take the initiative on that. I remember George Bush was trying to get hold of Howard down in Florida and get this thing announced. Then it was
announced without Don knowing it; it was a set-up for that, the way he was going. Had we gone into the following week without a change on chief of staff, it would have been very bad with Reagan’s first press conference coming up. So I overlapped a very short period with Howard; he was the ideal chief of staff. I was in on this—that upper right is myself and Don Regan, you can see he is looking at me very intently, with the president; down here, Howard has arrived. His ability to deal with the president was so able.

DW: Can you elaborate on that just a bit? That’s relevant for the Senate experience, too.

DA: To begin with, he had a lot of respect for him. With Iran-Contra and Reagonomics, we had been in a period when it was popular to ridicule him. That has to be put now into the perspective that when this president was elected, Bill Clinton, he didn’t go to see Jimmy Carter to talk about how you run a presidency, he went to see Ronald Reagan. The first year was a model; not the substance, but they were going to model their first year after Reagan. Of course, they miserably failed to do that. But why did they reach out for Dave Gergin? With all of the shortcomings, the leadership there, one has to respect a certain ability at communication, and it’s not just Hollywood but an ability at communications, an ability with the political sense and how to reach the common man, the blue-collar worker, and the young. That coalition has totally fallen apart for Republicans. Howard respected those qualities and in our meetings with the president, the few that I overlapped on, he would present his view but he would say, “Mr. President, you’re the person who has the best sense of these things and the best aptitude for these things.” I never remember Don Regan saying that to the president, he was going to control it all! So Howard’s style there was good, and his style with the Hill was good. Of course, he and A. B. Culvahouse faced in a certain situation a less difficult situation than I had for my three months, because the presidency was questioned whether it would survive that period. But in a way a more difficult period because I came back with the advantage of being ambassador to NATO, I knew all of these key Democrats like Lee Hamilton very well. They also knew me not just through the years but as ambassador to NATO and they kept saying—the Democrats, Donnie Fussell, all of them—“The presidency must survive. We cannot have another loss of the presidency. What are the international ramifications?” So we had a very bipartisan period during those three months, with committee chairmen and with Inouye, who chaired one of the investigating committees, saying, “If you think we’re doing anything out of line, I want to know it.” Lee Hamilton offering to sit on his staff when they were talking out of line to the press. Now later, when they went into the public hearings and you got the Ollie North business and all of that, all of that broke down; that’s why I say that became a very, very difficult period. Reagan was going to survive, it wasn’t the bipartisan concern about the survival of the presidency; Reagan was going to survive, we were getting close to the political campaign, Ollie North—who doesn’t know how to tell the truth, they had a different honor code at Annapolis than at West Point, I guess—he nevertheless did this brilliant reversal up there and became the hero. The whole situation was polarized, it was a public circus. We can be thankful that we had Howard Baker during this period.

DW: Was he pretty forthright in the advice that he gave to President Reagan as to what he thought the president should do?
DA: Sure, sure. And they just totally opened things up; in Don Regan’s period he didn’t want to get outside advisors in, and we did break through that, that’s in the Cannon book. At this meeting where we did get an outside group in, Don Regan said, “You know after we get the Tower board report out and things behind us, then I will talk about my transition.” Senator Simpson said, “What date is that?”

DW: Can’t be too soon, right?

DA: He was still sort of in there. Howard was able to handle Mrs. Reagan—first ladies, even when they are not Hillary, are important—and the Hill. It’s a terrific debt of gratitude the country owes him.

DW: Let me ask you one more question, I know you are pressed for time. Of course, we could talk for days probably about that time in the White House and in the country. When you were ambassador to NATO, it was during that time when I think you overlapped as ambassador with Senator Baker’s service in the Senate, did you not?

DA: Yes, I went over there in the summer of 1983.

DW: Did you have occasion to work with Senator Baker during that year and a half that he had remaining in the Senate at that time? Did your paths cross?

DA: I spent a lot of time back in Washington because I handled all the Defense Department legislation that related to us; Cap Weinberger was not popular on the Hill. They let us just split this out and we sort of handled it from Brussels. When I was back with Lord Carrington or [Lunds], the respective secretary generals, we would always call on—let’s see Howard Passed from majority leader to minority --

DW: He became majority leader in 1981 and served in that position until he left the Senate in January of 1985.

DA: As majority leader.

DW: Right.

DA: So we would come back—I was just thinking, because he stayed in the minority leader’s office—

DW: He stayed in the same office.

DA: We were meeting there, that’s what threw me for a minute. I would always come back and we would meet with him and other senators. It was not intimate, my close friend Sam Nunn decided he’d withdraw troops, was going to help me out by sending a message to capitols, and the things I did to turn Nunn around—Howard was just not needed. My problem was not Republicans, it was Democrats. I saw him but I didn’t work legislative things with him like I did with a lot of others. Let me just quickly say that what Howard—
by the way, I should say that when Howard was younger, as a senator, our paths crossed in India. He was down there with Moonrock with young Robb Mossbacker. Robb was green behind the ears then. Bob Mossbacker’s son. You might interview young Robb.

DW: In intend to. What was going on in India?

DA: Sharing a dinner then. He was taking Moonrock around the world and presenting it because he had been on the committee and so forth. That would have been 1971 when I went to the trouble spots, that was 1971. But let me jump to what Howard does with us here at CSIS now, I see a good bit of him. He has co-chaired a U.S.-Japan leadership council, and Jimmy Carter and Gerry Ford had been involved in that. He is also a member of our international counselors group that Henry Kissinger, one of our senior counselors in part time residence, right around the corner, chairs on an ongoing basis. The Bakers were with us at the Venice meeting; he’s been at a range of those meetings. Those are the two things, and we worked together on some individual things that emerge.

DW: Could I ask you a question in this context that relates to other things. When Baker is at work in a meeting, how would you describe his style?

DA: He’s still a lawyer when you get down to pressing for the exact facts or the heart of a problem, as was evident at the famous Watergate hearings, but he’s got a keen, practical, political, and human sense and style. That warmth of personality has carried him far and enabled him to do certain things that others could not do or could not do so well.

DW: Is there anything that you would like to add in conclusion about Senator Baker?

DA: He was at a meeting we held on Capitol Hill a year ago, talking about executive legislative relations, and he was just terrific. I’ll see if by any chance we have that transcript.

DW: I think that would be very useful to me if you have it.

DA: It really would. On the way out, I’ll mention that. That would be really good if we could track that. I just saw him the other night, we were at a testimony for Bill Schrier. He’s a wonderful person; Joy was a cross, her health, that he had to bear. For somebody to have a spouse who is ill for a long period of time like that and bear such public responsibilities, and his devotion to her, very moving. He’s a great Tennessean. As you know, he took a terrific shellacking on the Panama Canal. It always amazed me the political impact of that; it was a very courageous thing he did. That’s why I think it’s so important for you to get that story of courage, a profile in courage, told. That’s what it is, a profile in courage.

DW: Thank you very much, Dr. Abshire.

DA: You bet.