
Interview with Hugh Branson

The interview was conducted by David Welborn in Knoxville, Tennessee on April 13, 1992

Audio cassette 38a
DW: This is a continuation of the interview with Hugh Branson. I'd like to go back to something that we touched on a little bit last time with the connection with the Watergate investigation, and that was the antics—if that's an appropriate word—of Senator Lowell Weicker of Connecticut. Did Baker attempt to deal with Weicker? Did he attempt to civilize him in some way or other? How did he react to what Weicker was doing?

HB: He was upset with his behavior. I know that he did have discussions with him; it's real reasonable to say that no one has any much control over Lowell Weicker. Wherever he is or whatever he is doing, he will do whatever he wants to do, so there is not much way to have discipline on him. What he specifically did, if I ever knew—well, I do remember, in general terms of knowing that he did talk with him—it's been so long ago, I couldn't possibly remember in detail there. A better source would be Senator Baker or Fred Thompson, and I know Fred had an enormous problem with him.

DW: Were there any problems with any of the other Republicans on the Committee?

HB: No, not at all.

DW: What about Baker's relations with the Democrats on the Committee in general? How would you describe those?

HB: I don't know of any problem he had with the Democrat members of the Committee. Baker—again, it's part of his honing the art of being a legislator and in mastering the process—never got into picky or picayunish behavioral patterns with anybody he dealt with and always, from the beginning, laid down a kind of genuine attitude that made it conducive for people to get along with him. As I say, later on when he had the opportunity with majorities and the White House to do things, he managed that much better. As a general characteristic and principle, he approached each situation he was in, each proposition he had to deal with within that situation, on what became a very evenhanded or even keel behavioral pattern, one, and two, structuring of what they were doing was always evenhanded and so on. For him to get into a fight or get into a row with somebody in a committee would be very unusual, and that may have occurred a time or two, but it was just stylistically—usually would not happen.

DW: What about his dealings with Dash? I assume that he did have a direct relationship with Dash and was in a position to at least try to work with him and contribute to shaping what
was going on at the staff level. Was Dash interested at all in what Baker had to say or what Baker's views were? What's your recollection of that relationship?

HB: There wasn't much of a relationship there; it would be fair to say—and I'll point out here, again, for anyone who reads this that Fred Thompson and Howard Baker themselves are a better authority for judging this stuff than I am—but it's my own impression, looking back over this length of time, that Sam Dash had little or no interest in what Baker thought or said or what the minority side thought or said, either. He had his own agenda, and he was fulfilling that very strenuously.

DW: We were talking some at the end of the interview last time about relations with the media during this period. What about Woodward and Bernstein? Were they around the office trying to find out stuff?

HB: No, they didn't need to come to the office to get it! They had Scott Armstrong there, who was supplying all of it to them. I would be rather certain that Sam Dash would supply it also and probably any number of other people there. No, there was no need for them to come around.

DW: Who was Scott Armstrong?

HB: Scott Armstrong was a staff person, on the Committee, who was put there at the suggestion of Bob Woodward and Sam Dash, I believe, and Scott Armstrong had been a classmate of Woodward someplace, and they were close personal friends and, of course, later became partners in writing books and in other enterprises.

DW: I recall now; I think he helped him on The Brethren, the book on the Supreme Court. I didn't realize he had been on the Committee.

HB: Yes. The last I heard of Scott Armstrong, he was heading some sort of a tax-exempt organization in Washington that catalogs or looks after conspiracies or something. He was a powerful figure on the staff and also did not take direction from anyone.

DW: How did Baker go about doing his Watergate work? What was the nature of his working relationship with Thompson and Liebengood? Was he talking to them all the time?
HB: Yes. And this was more of a legal undertaking than a legislative undertaking, and it was something that he had had some experience with in his life and was an area that he was comfortable working in and dealing with. He gave a lot of attention to what they were doing, and, as far as I know, had no conflicts with any of those people nor they with him. I don't recall any at all.

DW: Would you say he became really deeply immersed in the details of what was going on and what was being discovered and so on and so forth?

HB: Yes, he did. More so, greatly more so, than he did with other legislative responsibilities. I don't want to leave the impression with anyone that he shirked his duties, but when you have literally tens of thousands of issues to come before you in the Congress, you have to focus on what you can focus on. I've never had any problem with his doing that.

DW: From the Baker perspective, as you recall those days, what were the most significant points in the hearings and the investigation as it developed over those several months?

HB: The most significant thing that happened in the hearings was the subtlety of the growth of the feeding frenzy. Nobody is prepared for that, and it's like being attacked by gas—you don't see it, you don't feel it, and you don't smell it, and you don't taste it, until suddenly you are overcome with it. That, in retrospect, looking back to see what happened to everybody and how the momentum of this frenzy developed and ultimately consumed the Capitol and the Congress and the press and a lot of the country is the most significant one thing to look back and think about.

DW: From the Washington perspective, did it seem like at some point that just everything stopped except Watergate?

HB: Yes. There were some Sundays I would come downstairs and pick up the Washington Post and never look at it and throw it in the trash can, to deliver myself from one day of having to deal with that. The milestones within that context were the release of Jim McCord's letter to Judge Sirrica; that was a very significant milestone. It created more questions and created a bigger problem to deal with, and it didn't resolve anything, really. Even in looking back now, I know that Baker and Fred Thompson and the others who investigated that—in a far greater understanding of the details than I do—always were never comfortable with what they ever concluded about McCord. There were problems there that were left
unanswered. He didn't behave in the way the other people did; he did a lot of stuff and was investigated very thoroughly, and I don't think any conclusion was ever reached. There were questions about his competency in performing the break-in and taping doors and timing and all of that and "did he have another agenda?" or what happened there. These were things that were never really resolved. My own thought is that he was probably a medium-level bag man for the CIA, who had retired—and these people never fully retire, there's always a network out there they can access—and he was freelancing work and was probably misled into what he was doing, or the reason for what he was doing, and got caught and that he still had ties out there that he didn't disclose. But Howard Hunt was not a mid-level bag man; Howard Hunt was a significant figure in the CIA and obviously had long and broad relationships there. I'm certain that Hunt knew what he was doing. Exactly. I don't know that he has ever disclosed that to the satisfaction of people who have talked with him, but he certainly knew what he was doing. He may have been the only one who really knew what he was doing.

DW: So what you're saying is that the McCord letter gave a new push, a new momentum to the investigation, raised a whole bunch of questions as to really who he was and why he was there and why did he do what he did—that were never really resolved.

HB: Yes, and absolutely killed any strategy that the Republican side might have had for pursuing and investigation that didn't recognize culpability by the White House and the administration. But still, no one knew to what level or how it occurred. I remember, the moment that I heard or saw on television that morning—I think it was morning, maybe it was early afternoon—the release of the McCord letter, I immediately went down and found Baker. We had a little chat in which I told him I thought it was critical at this point that we fully take as an objective look at what we were doing as we could. And that until somebody could come clean with us or somebody could raise the confidence level there, that he would be better off pursuing the investigation and pursuing what he was doing in the best light he saw. Up to that point we were still waiting for somebody at the White House to do something. It was clear that the deadline—that John Dean killed that first opportunity for them to do something. I had many conversations with Bill Timmons and with Parlow and with Colson and some other people there, too, about getting rid of this mess. The truth was that, again, they were just paralyzed. But the McCord letter, that was a very, very significant milestone there.
Following on the advice you gave Baker, how did the McCord letter affect the strategy followed by the Republicans on the Committee?

The way it affected the strategy is that the McCord letter and the disclosures there of payments and so forth reduced our side's ability to do anything. We had been led to believe that nothing had occurred; in real terms of liability to the president, probably up to that time not much had. Nevertheless, when these things started dropping, it kills the confidence level, and you don't know what to do.

This is probably an oversimplification: was it that before the letter, the sense of it was that, "Nixon couldn't possibly have had any connection with this—at least we're going to operate on that assumption"—then after McCord the sense developed that, "Maybe the White House is more deeply involved in this than we previously thought." Is that a fair statement?

Nearly, but not quite. The needle didn't go over to saying the White House was more culpable than we thought, the needle stayed on center by saying, "We don't know what's there. This is an uncharted course; and we have no map, and we don't have an accurate compass."

Whereas before, you thought that there was one?

Yes. The other great significant thing—again, when they got into the investigation, when you turn on that subpoena machine, the whole world changes. Values change. The only big blow-out I ever had with Sam Dash occurred when Baker was out of the country. He had hundreds of subpoenas he wanted signed; under the Committee rules, both Baker and Ervin had to sign the subpoenas. Obviously, Ervin wasn't signing subpoenas, they were signing them on a machine, autopen. The girl in our office who was running the autopen allowed that a representative from Dash was there and had 300 subpoenas to get signed. My response to her was more like, "I'll cut your hand off if you dare sign one of those!" The motive there wasn't to throw a wrench into the machinery of what they were doing—I didn't know what they were doing. To me, signing a subpoena was a very serious matter, and I had never allowed the autopen to ever be used for signing anything that was official. Baker—I would not permit vouchers to be signed, anything—he had to look at it and sign it himself. Something as serious as a subpoena, I told them . . . then I had a blow-up with Dash, a conversation that didn't last very long, because he understood real clear that he was never going get anywhere with me, that the subpoenas would not be signed. After a day,
maybe, I reached Baker somewhere in Europe, I think he was even behind the Iron Curtain somewhere. I told him what had happened and that I thought that was a very serious business, and I didn't want to take the responsibility for signing 300 subpoenas that I knew nothing about. I thought that was something he ought to do, to which he agreed, absolutely, and suggested overwhelmingly that I had indeed made the correct decision; that would be something that would indeed have to wait until he returned. As I recall, I also did talk to Fred Thompson, who took my opinion, too, that subpoenas were not things that ought to be forged. But, as I say, you turn on the subpoena machine and you just get into everything. They got into uncovering the alleged spying of the Pentagon, on Henry Kissinger and the National Security Council, which was a big distraction and a big problem there. It was something that the White House didn't want to deal with and wanted to dismiss. It was not anything that the Democrats wanted to deal with because it didn't suit their mode of operations or their thought process. We thought that this was important because it showed how it created an environment in the White House in which they couldn't trust anyone and they were being badly abused. Which, of course, was the case. For the White House to do anything about that, they would have had to court martial Admiral Moore; it was just something that they didn't want to do. Further, too, it underlined the idea, the thought, that these people bug each other and they spy on them and they tap phones all the time. It was something that was going on all the time.

DW: Was that unsettling information for Baker?

HB: Yes, it was, very much. It was far more unsettling for him than it was for me, but he thought that was a very significant thing.

DW: Why was it unsettling? Was it that he was surprised? This was the kind of behavior he simply did not expect to see in a setting such as that?

HB: Yes, I think so, but I think even more so he connected that to a concept of intelligence community, if that's what you want to call it, and defense abrogating power to themselves and undermining the constitutional officers who are elected by people to make the policy. That was his great concern.

DW: Undermining civilian authority.
HB: Yes. Then, of course, the biggest development or the biggest milestone in the investigation was the disclosure of the taping system in the White House. That fairly changed everything.

DW: I've forgotten exactly what the setting was when Butterfield disclosed this initially. Was the first disclosure to staff or was it before the Committee itself?

HB: The first disclosure was to staff, I believe, on Friday or Saturday. It first came under questioning by Don Sanders, who was a minority staff committee member; Don told me that it was something that was stumbled upon and that he thought that Butterfield didn't have to answer the question or that it went way outside the parameters of whatever the questioning was for him to respond and that it was something that Butterfield wanted to say or wanted to do. Again, I don't know if that was correct or not, but then he disclosed the taping system, which was a voice activated system, that he had set up. From there and from that moment on, another line of inquiry and another line of concern that still here in 1992 has not been resolved. Alex Butterfield used to command the air base here in Knoxville. When he went to the FAA, he came down to me because Baker was on the Commerce Committee, to help him with the Committee through his confirmation. There was a question of his taking military retirement—he was willing to give up his military retirement. I remember I said, "Alex, that's just silly. The Democrats will bash you for that, but we can get that through. Don't fool with it." As I recall, he finally did anyway, but I helped him get through his Senate confirmation hearings. It's true that he had been a friend of Bob Haldeman's at UCLA, a student. As I've read subsequently, he was not really a close friend, I guess they were acquaintances there. Butterfield then had an Air Force career that was linked with intelligence. He had worked in the Pentagon in the Johnson administration with Joe Califano and Alexander Haig. He worked in the Johnson White House for Califano. I don't know when the exact timing was, but he left the White House and was back on an Air Force assignment in, I recall reading later, Australia, where he also had an intelligence assignment for the CIA. Then, allegedly, he wrote Haldeman and asked him to consider him for a White House staff position. In a book that I just read there was a comment that Rosemary Wood always said that she thought he was a CIA spy. All of which gets around to the question of trust and lack of trust and mistrust among these people. This grew during the Watergate investigation to either a great state of anxiety or paranoia, whichever was appropriate: are these people really telling you the truth, do they have other agendas and so forth.
DW: That was true for almost every one. What was Baker's reaction when he learned that there was this taping system in the White House? Was he surprised? Stunned? Irritated?

HB: Yes, he was surprised and stunned and thought that this was the White House ace in the hole to do in John Dean. I was not in Washington on that weekend but was in Tennessee on business. Over the weekend and over the Monday, I watched about 4:00 in the afternoon when Butterfield was on the stand. I recall very well, I was lying across the bed in the Alexander Hotel in Oak Ridge and watched this. When he disclosed that, something just utterly popped in my mind. What really occurred to me is, "This is the great source of where Bob Woodward is getting information." I had reason to believe that because back, as I mentioned earlier in one of our conversations, Baker had been earlier asked to go on the Supreme Court or if he would accept that. At that time, Baker's sister was married to Bill Wampler, who was a Congressman from southwest Virginia; they lived in northwest Washington next door to—guess, of all people—Joe Califano. Joe Califano, during that course of his life, was prone to rush the sun going over the yardarm to indulge in martinis. At a party at Baker's house, after the Supreme Court thing had occurred, I had a conversation with Mary Wampler—I remember it very well—in the hallway of their house on Woodland Drive. She said, "You know, my neighbor, Joe Califano, spoke to me," and this is literally true, "across the fence," there was a picket fence there, "on such-and-such date and said, 'Your brother is going to be offered a position on the Supreme Court.' And I said, 'Well, Joe, that's strange, I never heard anybody ever mention that. Why would you say that?'" She said, "He replied to me, 'I have a way of knowing a lot of things that go on in Washington that nobody else knows.'" So when this happened—bingo! In my mind, I thought we had really come upon something that was terribly significant. I go to the phone and as I'm watching on television there, I call and get Baker away from the hearing room to the back phone and I tell him this story. He said, "Well, of course, that is the source!" We were certain we had the source.

DW: Through the Pentagon, the thought was Califano had direct or indirect access to those tapes.

HB: Yes, yes. I caught the next plane, went back to Washington, and Baker still did go to the White House—the next day probably—went to the White House and I said, "Talk to the president about this." Whatever the occasion was, he took the president off, they got alone together, and he explained all of this. And he said, "Who knew about this?" The president insisted that absolutely no one knew. Only he and John Mitchell had ever discussed this; he said he was certain that was the case. He never discussed it with any domestic people—
DW: Talking about the existence of the system.

HB: No, no—this is about Baker's being offered the Supreme Court. He said, "Absolutely no one." He told him about this incident with Joe Califano; of course, the president couldn't believe it. He said, "Well, maybe John told Martha"—she was talking to everybody in the country then—"he's having this horrible time with her." Baker said, "No." If you recall the story I told about going down there and Martha coming down the steps and was absolutely dumbfounded when John Mitchell told her that Baker was being considered for the Supreme Court. So it wasn't Martha. They got Joe Califano down there with a subpoena in no time; it was like "Well, gosh, Howard—who, me? Why, I don't know anything about that, no. I may have said something to Mary, but just speculation." Well, there wasn't any speculation about that stuff. I believe until this day—and I believe that Baker will agree with me—that the source of the information came out of the White House, not from a romantic person or from Alexander Haig, either, for that matter, but came from second-level people who had a link to other political people. I'm not charging Joe Califano with this, but I'm laying down the circumstances. As we discussed earlier, as Bill Gullie, who was in charge of White House military at the time—while he knew nothing about the taping system that Butterfield had set up—indicated that there was great security problems there with the secret service and other people of delivering information from the Nixon White House. He felt to the Kennedys. There's the link between Califano and the Kennedys, and it could have come not from a single person but from a source, or it could have come from dealing with somebody taking the information off the tapes. It could have come as Gullie wrote in his book, they found bugs on phones everywhere. So it was hard to tell; it has always been my judgment that Deep Throat was just a construction to misdirect where the Washington Post and Bob Woodward was getting information. It came out of the White House, and it could not possibly have come from the list of suspects, I don't believe.

DW: You remarked earlier that when it was first learned that there was this taping system, it occurred to some that this might be a way to—I've forgotten how you phrased it exactly—to "deal with John Dean."

HB: Yes.

DW: Before this time, had Dean had testified to the committee—prior to the revelation about the tapes?
HB: Yes.

DW: What was Baker's reaction to Dean? Do you recall?

HB: I think Baker was very suspicious of Dean. He felt that he was a big part of the problem and there was never any solution to it. Dean, of course, in a sense turned state's evidence with the Democrats on the Committee and also with Lowell Weicker. Dean never had any contact, other than what was formal, with the Republican side. When I say formal, I mean when he was questioned or when he was giving testimony. Because of the frenzy that was occurring at the time, no one focused on Dean. The White House didn't focus on Dean. I do recall very clearly at the time, before he went to Camp David even, I know that Bill Timmons—who knew him better than anyone down there—really felt that he was the problem. It was amazing how he in fact did wriggle through and orchestrate all of those things, but when the fog is that heavy, it's hard to see.

DW: Even after 20 years there's still much that clouded. I should have checked this—and I did try but I didn't have a lot of time to spend on it—did that Committee ever issue a formal report?

HB: Yes.

DW: Because, at some point, what was going on in the House side with the impeachment matter began to take center stage.

HB: Yes, they did. I used to have a copy of it somewhere; it was several of those big, thick green books. I had a whole set of them.

DW: After the hearings ended, which I think was in August 1973—the hearings as a whole ended in February of 1974—but after that Watergate phase of the hearings was ended, do you recall what was going on in the Committee on Watergate? What was going on after the public hearings ended?

HB: Not much; again, some of those other people would be a better source for that than I. As I recall, not much; they were scrambling around. The next milestone was not what happened in the Watergate hearings but what happened in the House of Representatives in the
Judiciary Committee on the impeachment proceedings. That was the next big thing. Then, of course, after the president's resignation, that killed the momentum for anything else. I should have pointed out the firing of Archibald Cox was another big event.

DW: How did Baker react to that?

HB: I don't think that any of us were great fans of Archibald Cox. I guess the reaction to that was, again, bewilderment toward the process that had taken on such a life of its own, with such force and momentum.

DW: Let me go back and ask you a couple of questions that antedate that. When the Watergate hearings ended in August, do you recall what Baker's assessment was at the time as to whether Nixon could survive or not? In his view, did Nixon at that point seem to have a chance, or was he getting pessimistic about Nixon?

HB: Very pessimistic, yes. The House Judiciary Committee's impeachment proceedings verified the forecast I had made to Bryce Harlow in the Metropolitan Club months and months before, that things were on a downhill glide and that there was no turning around.

DW: Let me ask you about something else that happened around the time of the Cox firing, and that was the resignation of Agnew and the selection of Ford to replace him as vice president. First of all, what kind of relationship did Baker have with Agnew?

HB: Very good. It wasn't a close one, but his relationship with Agnew was probably as good as with anybody in the Senate or Congress. No problem there.

DW: What was his reaction to Agnew's resignation?

HB: Very sad about it and—

DW: He liked him?

HB: Yes, sure he liked him. And about what was happening to him as a person and in the process. I had been warned probably six weeks or a month or a long time before that ever happened that this was going to occur, before anybody else ever knew it, by Chuck Colson. It was a sad thing for Agnew and probably an unfair thing to Agnew, in the sense that he
was simply working in the political culture of Maryland that had existed for 150 years—whereas five years earlier, nobody would have thought that was a problem. As you know, his successor, Marvin Mandell, went to prison on real serious charges. Agnew was just accepting gifts; Mandell was rigging racetracks.

**DW:** Do you recall what Baker was doing in the run-up to the selection of Ford as vice president? Was he a player in regard to that question, "Who is going to succeed Agnew?"

**HB:** Yes, somewhat. We thought about that; he would like to have been selected, and at that time could have handled that OK. There were people who were telling Nixon that that would be a good thing—I guess. There was no organized effort there that I recall. I had no idea who he would select; as it turned out, he selected Gerry Ford, of course, who was really a very good person, very fine man.

**DW:** Do you know whether Baker was consulted by the White House in regard to what he thought about Ford or "would this be a good selection?" or anything like that?

**HB:** I'm sure that he was not.

**DW:** Did there ever come a time—I sound like I'm asking questions in one of these investigations—in which Baker concluded that Nixon just had to go? That he ought to resign?

**HB:** No, I don't think that he ever did that. Whether he concluded that in his own mind or not, there were two things that would have prevented or separated him from publicly doing that—and I recall no conversation with him to that effect either. Those two reasons, of course—one is that he had the responsibilities of an investigation with a congressional hearing to come to a conclusion that he had not come to or concluded; therefore, it certainly wouldn't be appropriate for him to conclude something before this process had finished. That's a legalism, but that is certainly very true, and it's just not his makeup—he wouldn't have done that. On the other hand, just in a personal way, he took no pleasure in getting on Nixon's case. He sensed himself a burden there that was weighty and uncomfortable and unpleasant, first, in doing this; there was a great sensitivity there in not being a part of anything to pile on.
DW: From roughly the first part of 1974 until the resignation took place, a period of several months, the hearings had ended or were in the process of winding down. Was Baker seeing Nixon at all in those final days or final weeks or final months?

HB: I don't think so.

DW: What kind of word, if anything, were you getting from the White House as to how Nixon personally felt about the way Baker had performed his responsibilities on the Committee? Did you ever get any feedback?

HB: No, we never got any feedback. We always had a very open relationship; as I mentioned before, I don't think we were ever considered the bad guys at the White House or the enemy at the White House. There was very a good relationship, as far as I know, that existed there between Baker and Al Haig and Fred Bushardt, Leonard Garment. Certainly I had a good relationship with Leonard Garment during that time.

DW: How did you come to know Garment? You've mentioned him several times.

HB: The first time I met Garment was in 1968 during the Nixon campaign. I came up with the idea—this should have gone in that first part, in helping in the Nixon campaign—to neutralize or to chase the Wallace vote—if that's the way you want to do it. So I came up with an idea and a concept to put together a package of country music commercials; I had already gotten preapproval from Roy Acuff and Tex Ritter. I knew something about the market at that time, and I proposed that we go out and place these in specific states like Oklahoma and Texas and most of the southeast. Not every place, I had selected the states; I think South Carolina was one, Tennessee was one, Oklahoma, Texas. Fringe states where I thought this would make a difference. Place them in wrestling shows and in gospel music shows, in that area. I worked this up with my old friend and long-time buddy, Sam Newman; Sam and I went to New York and presented this, and the person we presented it to was Leonard Garment. That's the first time I ever met him. He said, "That's terrific," and he called up Fred LaRue, I remember, and said to Fred, "This is a terrific idea, it needs to be done. Get Hugh the money immediately." Obviously, Len Garment and I got off to a wonderful relationship right there. Incidentally, Nixon carried every state we put that program in, against Wallace. Edged him.

DW: It made the difference.
HB: Yes, it did. I had another wonderful friend in Washington who was the staff director of the Republican Policy Committee. At that time, I believe that Frank Carlson was chairman of the Republican Policy Committee. If he wasn't chairman, he was on the Committee. Carlson—he was so senior—would have had to have been the chairman. Anyway, to follow and underpin this program against Wallace, I convinced my friend Fred Rhodes, who was also a big Baptist layperson and I believe Fred may even have been an ordained Baptist minister. Fred and I worked out a program to hit the Baptist ministers in selected states. He went out to Minneapolis and got the computer list from the Billy Graham organization, and we put together personal letters to hundreds and hundreds of Baptist ministers, signed by Frank Carlson, who was a very revered figure and was also a big religious Baptist person in the United States. All of things did contribute. Anyway, that's a long way to tell you how I first met Len Garment.

DW: I'm trying to summarize a point that you have made previously: at the time all was said and done, the hearings were over, even at the time Nixon resigned, in Baker's mind and in the mind of others there was still a whole lot of uncertainty as to what really had gone on and why.

HB: Of course. For example, no one had ever linked Nixon with the problem of spying on or breaking in the Democratic National Committee headquarters. No motive for that had ever been established. The only motive that was in the public record for that was either speculation or Howard Hunt's testimony that they were there to check possible campaign contributions from Castro. I don't think that ever had any plausibility with anyone. So, motive for doing it was never resolved. The peculiar behavior of McCord had never been resolved. Then there were all of these dozens—or if not dozens, at least many—incidents that were isolated, didn't make sense, maybe they were anomalies—the guy that McCord hired to listen and do the taping was some kind of a strange bird and McCord was involved in other stuff and they burned tapes—all stuff that nobody ever resolved, ever got real serious answers to. I know that during that time my own conclusions were that Nixon was a victim, again, of a re-election campaign which was being conducted at the time by lightweights. Two: John Mitchell, who should have been the authority, was totally distracted with personal problems and, was neither paying attention or functioning. You had people involved in that—Howard Hunt, who was a CIA operative; McCord, who was a CIA bag man—then you have a guy like Gordon Liddy, who is just an oddball who people like but nobody really wants to put up with him and they just shift around place to place to
place and give him imaginary things to do. Chuck Colson always believed—as far as I know, he still does—that there were several components of that. Hunt was working there, who had done some work for him, and Liddy had gotten into that and done work for Hunt. He felt that Hunt and Bob Mullin and Bob—the son of the Utah Senator—he had been there for years and years; finally he didn't run and was replaced by Jake Garn. It will come to mind, I'll remember it. Anyway, his son—those three were CIA operatives, but they were running a CIA front called the Mullin Company, which was allegedly a PR firm. That's one of those—

DW: Bennett. Son of Wallace Bennett.

HB: Yes, Bob Bennett. He felt that they had a special, particular interest, and they were trying to get information that would convince Howard Hughes to give them the Washington business that Bob Mayhew, his operative in Las Vegas, was giving to Larry O'Brian. So it was a commercial interest that they had. Liddy dreamed up the idea of spying on them and playing all kinds of tricks on the Democrats, which apparently nobody really took serious or ever thought about in a serious vein. Subsequently—and there have been allegations of John Dean doing that—anyway, I could be longwinded about all of this, but there were all of these things that had not been resolved. Here we were, after going through all of this, destruction of an administration, resignation of a president, and we hadn't progressed from square one. So that was a big problem. The Democrats probably felt quite good, because their motive and objective was to get rid of the president. So if they didn't resolve any of these problems, those were just details. But the resolution of the problems still remain. Then there was a great amount of competition and conflict in the media organization. Obviously, the Washington Post had no problem getting their media news; they certainly got it directly out of the Watergate Committee and I'm sure had been getting it directly out of the White House. Dan Thomasson of Scripps-Howard News wrote a piece on the anniversary of Watergate for the Scripps-Howard papers; Dan Thomasson is a very good friend of mine. He said, "Journalistically, Watergate was a story of leaks." He said everything was leaked. Of course, a lot was leaked to Dan; I helped leak a lot of stuff to Dan and helped a lot of other people leak a lot of stuff to Dan. It probably set a poor standard for journalism, because the news hole was so big, with so many people competing for news and with the process for news being dispensed through leaks, it meant that people were just grappling around for any piece of information, however irrelevant or minute or insignificant.
DW: Or even unsubstantiated.

HB: Or unsubstantiated—and going over and fitting it into that new hole that they had waiting—which, by that time, it means it had been transformed into something big and energetic. A process that continues to exist in national news gathering and dissemination and that I think is very bad; it's something that needs a real correctional course.

DW: What kind of toll did the Watergate experience take on Baker? Was it a stressful time for him?

HB: Certainly. It was a stressful time, on one hand; on the other hand, he had come from moderate obscurity to a national figure. That has elements of stress also, but there is that benefit you get from being a celebrity and being nationally known and being recognized in airplanes and famous restaurants.

DW: What effect, if any, did the experience have on Baker's basic views on politics and what politics were all about? Did it change his view of the political world at all?

HB: I don't know that it changed his view of the political world; it changed the political world that he viewed.

DW: Did it make him, for example, more cynical about politics?

HB: No, I don't think so. He held the view that political people have to be responsible and responsive and that with the closer press and media scrutiny those are adaptations that people are going to have to make. Remember that he came from a position of absolute obscurity in Huntsville, Tennessee, to being a national figure. This is stretching across a big, wide graph; when he started out gaining experience here, he was totally unknown. He was unknown in the next county. Both his experience and the development of media changed enormously in that short time. When we started out, my rules were that you treat media by the old John Wannamaker rule: the customer is always right. You just consider the media is always right; they're going to win in the end anyway, so be accommodating. That was easy to do when media was vastly smaller, when media itself was guided by rules of behavior and what they would do and what they wouldn't do. When Bill Bennett didn't write that story that occurred up in Byrdstown with the Pentecostal minister, he didn't do that to suppress news and he didn't do that to keep people from knowing something that they ought to have
known—he did it because he thought the fair thing was not to do it, it didn't amount to anything anyway—and that was responsibility. With Richard Nixon, the media and a lot of other people felt that anything they could do would be proper. Anything that would cause pain or anything that would cause him discomfort or anything that would cause him agony or disrupt or dismantle anything he was doing would be all right because he deserved the lowest and most contemptible reaction they could get him. That started carrying over to everybody else.

DW: Did you perceive Baker becoming less trustful of the media, being a little bit more wary and guarded in his relations with the media as a result of Watergate?

HB: No. By policy, from those early days, always be very truthful with these people, because once you're not truthful with them then you lose their trust and confidence and you don't ever gain it. Because of that, he got very good treatment by the media. Most people whoever dealt with him in the media never thought that he was lying to them or misdirecting them, so I don't think he ever suffered that way. Now, if he were in a position today where he had to be responsible for and enunciate national policy and he had to get into that quagmire, I don't know what he would do. The old rules we had wouldn't work today.

DW: Would you say that, all in all, he was a better politician at the end of the Watergate experience than he was at the start of the Watergate experience? Beyond national recognition, did this experience contribute to sharpening his political skills, or were they already formed by this time?

HB: No; the way I would characterize that, I would say that the Watergate experience provided a gap there in which, of course, he developed as a celebrity, but I think political skills and political management stopped there and went on hold until the end. I don't think that experience contributed anything to that. Because he was only dealing, really, with a handful of people and a big media, and nothing real productive was really going on.

DW: What effect, if any, do you think Baker's performance during Watergate had on his standing in the Senate? Did it change the way his colleagues saw him? Did he have a different status at the end than he did before?
HB: Yes, I think so. That was a small group of people who probably admired the way he managed the hearings. That was generally recognized, and I think his status was considerably enhanced.

DW: Did he ever fault his own performance on the Committee? Did he ever say—I don't mean from a ten-year retrospective but as this was happening—"Gee whiz, we really should have done this instead of that" or "I should have pursued another line of questioning" or "I should have phrased this question a little differently." Was he prone to review his own performance in that manner or at least with others?

HB: Again, Fred Thompson would be a better authority for you on that than I. As a general observation here, I would say that no, he is not one to agonize over performance or mis-performance. I'm sure there were times when he said, "I wish I had said" something or other, but it was not anything that he really dwelled on or caused him depression or modified his behavior.

DW: What was his reaction to the pardon? Do you recall?

HB: His reaction was probably a little bit surprised, but I think he felt that Ford took the correct position and that it was a courageous position.

DW: It cost him his own re-election, perhaps. Maybe, maybe not.

HB: I doubt it.

DW: Is there anything more about Watergate that needs to be mentioned?

HB: Oh, yes, there's a lot more—I wish I knew what it was! I can say for myself that the Watergate experience was really a tragedy. It was a defining time in my life that separated me from—that killed a certain virus I had before that had occurred.

DW: What was the precise nature of that virus?

HB: I was very aggressive and, you would hope, very resourceful and creative in political creation and development. I've never been able to really quite marshal my resources again in the same way.
DW: It just wasn't as much fun anymore?

HB: No. I've always had that lingering sense of experiencing and looking at and at least being of the periphery of a tragedy.

DW: That apparently is how a lot of the Kennedy people felt after the assassination. It just wasn't the same sort of world anymore; there just wasn't the same kind of energy, excitement, and enthusiasm that could be mustered. Something was really gone. I can understand that.

HB: I was personally tied to the Nixon administration and their politics and their campaigns and the people. That relationship worked very well for me, and it also worked very well for Howard Baker. We could not have asked for nor could we have possibly ever had a better relationship with the White House or with a president than we had with Nixon. I don't know how it would have been possible. We were not as demanding as people like Strom Thurmond and a lot of other people and tried to view whatever we were dealing with them on in fairness and never asked them to do things that would embarrass them or would be out of the question. If it would have embarrassed them, it obviously would have embarrassed us; so we always approached them with great moderation and always supported administration policies. Things were just easy there; you just called and it was given. I felt that I had put a lot of time and a lot of work into developing the relationships.

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