
Interview with James Cannon

The interview was conducted by David Welborn in Washington, DC on March 24, 1994

Audio cassette 26
DW: This is a continuation of the interview with Jim Cannon at his home in Georgetown. The date is March 24, 1994, and the interviewer is still David Welborn. Spring finally comes to Washington, and we’re delighted to be on Q Street. Let me begin by asking you, to what extent, if any, your responsibilities changed when Senator Baker became majority leader. You had said previously that when you went to work for Senator Baker in 1977, he told you that what he wanted you to do was to save his time and write speeches.

JC: No, find a speech writer

DW: Oh, find a speech writer.

JC: Find a speech writer, not to write speeches.

DW: All right.

JC: I’ve never written speeches for anybody. That’s a technique all by itself, and find him a good speech writer.

DW: Well, I’m glad to have that correction. But, in January of 81, when the Republicans became the majority party in the Senate, how did your job change, if it did?

JC: It changed, and we knew it was going to change the day of the election in 1980. I don’t know if anyone has ever told you this story or not, but it ought to be recorded.

DW: Okay.

JC: Of Howard Baker realizing that we had won the Senate. Did this ever get told to you?

DW: Is this about the call to Laxalt?

JC: Yes. That is on the record, then.

DW: Right. You told me that before.

JC: Early in the morning, he realized this, and we got there early, and we strategized what to do, and he figured that with Reagan elected, he might want to impose on the Senate leadership his friend Paul Laxalt. Baker felt there would be no other threat, but if Reagan put his energy behind Laxalt, then half a dozen new members were elected because of that, and that would be a real danger. So, anyway, he said, “Well, how do we find out if Laxalt wants to run?” And one of us, maybe me, told the senator, “Well, the quickest way to find out is to call him and ask him to nominate you. And if he is a candidate, he will obviously say, “I can’t do that, Howard.”” So Baker woke him up in Nevada where he had gone for election day and deliberately caught him early in the morning out there, before anybody else could have talked to him, and I think it must have been, of 6:00 o’clock in the morning in Nevada, and asked Paul about nominating him, and Paul said, “Sure, I’d be pleased to do that.” So Howard Baker, at that point, knew that he was going
to be the majority leader. Now, what next? To what extent Howard Baker and I discussed it, I can’t recall. A lot of times he would say something just kind of in passing. We communicated, I thought, very well, without a lot of excess words. He could say something like, “Well, we’re going to have to do something about this staff.” Well, we had a pretty good staff, as a matter of fact, but he realized that we had to be a lot better and had to get a lot better very fast. So, the first thing we did beginning then and there was to think about how we would organize a majority leader’s staff. We had all the elements of it in the minority, and fortuitously, Baker, for at least a year or a year and a half before that, had been organizing these special teams with a conservative Republican and a liberal Republican – a mixed spectrum on every team – to address certain issues. These would be social issues; it would be defense issues, et cetera. So he had the pattern of them working together. He had been having regular meetings of the ranking members, so they could all get together and become cohesive. By design or by simple political prescience, I don’t know which, Howard Baker had anticipated that we might win. I don’t think he thought we were going to win, but he had done everything organized in case we should win. So he had to really think about mobilizing his members who were suddenly going to be his chairmen of committees. And not a single Republican senator had ever been part of the majority, except Strom Thurmond, and he had been part of the majority when he was a Democrat. Otherwise, not a single Republican senator had ever been part of the majority in the Senate. So, we were confident that we would know how to do it. I remember that Howard, Senator Baker, called up Bob Dole, who was obviously in line to be chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, and cheerily said, “Well, Bob, are you ready to take over as the chairman of the finance committee?” And Dole said, “Well, first, who’s going to tell Russell Long?” So they chuckled about that, and went on, and frankly, that was jest, but it was quite serious, because it was perfectly obvious that the Democrats had been in power for so long that a guy like Russell Long – he might just naturally expect that he was going to stay in power, even though he was in the minority. But it all worked out fine. Dole and Long were good friends and worked together, and Long and Baker were good friends. And it worked. But my concern was that we were going to need a strengthened staff and very, very quickly. Fortunately we had a lot of people more or less in place and ready to take over. Ron McMahan was leaving as press secretary to go back to Tennessee and run the paper. But Tommy Griscom was well qualified and had the smarts and the moxie to do that job. Howard Liebengood, who had been his counsel, was going to become sergeant-at-arms, which was a job he really wanted. It was a good political job; he was captain of the police force, head of a lot of other things having to do with the operation of the staff of the Senate. So Howard was well fitted with that because these were jobs he would know how to handle. Bill Hildenbrand at first was – I’m not sure how to describe his reaction. He was stunned. I think he was more stunned than anybody that we’d actually won. And his first reaction – Bill was still drinking in those days, rather heavily. His first reaction was, “I’m not going to do it. I’m not going to force Stan Kimmit, the secretary of the Senate, out.” And he suggested that Howard Baker keep him on. And Howard Baker said, “We can’t possibly do that. We won the Senate. My members are not going to tolerate keeping on a Democratic secretary of the Senate.” So Bill was persuaded to calm down, and accept the responsibilities of his job. Which were considerable. Not that Bill didn’t know how to do it. He’d been there for a long time; he knew how to do it. He had
Howard Greene as his deputy, who was a marvelously able guy. So we had the makings of a staff. We brought in some others. We elevated Jim Range, as I recall, to be a roving staff person. He knew how to work well with the committees. We brought in Dan Crippen to be an economic advisor. And we were able, really, to upgrade the staff very quickly. We arranged to get some more people in, some more space there in Baker’s office. But Baker realized that his first responsibility would be to deal with Bob Byrd. Baker knew the rules and the procedures, and all of that. But he didn’t know them like Byrd did. And he knew Bob Byrd could be a difficult person on his best days and could be a mean son-of-a-bitch on his worst days, so Baker really had to bone up on the process of what was involved in running the Senate. I believe we put Bob Dove, as I recall, in as parliamentarian, and got the other guy out who was quite partisan. So there are all of these things to be done. Howard Baker never said, in effect, that I can remember, “Let’s do this, that, and so forth.” But I felt and I knew that we had a formidable task and that we had to have really good staff support. Baker elected not to try to have an array of substantive advisors on defense and all of that. Deliberately, he said, “Look. I’m going to have to depend on the chairmen for that. I’m not going to be able to take an independent position. My responsibility is to bring accord.” And in effect, he was saying, “I can’t have any personal opinions. I’ve got to find the middle ground that these chairmen and ranking Democratic members and their own members can agree on and help work that out and get it through the Senate.” So we didn’t really increase our numbers by more than three or four people, but what we did do was to increase the quality of our people and the focus of what the staff did. So basically, and this is a long answer to your question, but basically, my responsibility when we took over was to – the first responsibility was to upgrade the staff. The second responsibility that I had, I think, was, in effect, to be available and to talk to and listen to a senator when Senator Baker was, just at that moment, not available, whether it was on the floor or whatever. So Hildenbrand and I, and McMahan and later Tommy Griscom as well, had the privilege of sitting in the back room where there was a bar and where, if Senator Goldwater wanted to stop in for a visit or John Tower wanted to stop in for a glass of wine, prop his feet up, he could do it. So I spent a lot of day-to-day time in the back, talking to various senators, listening to them, and you know, they might say, “I know Howard’s busy, but here’s what I want to talk to him about. Would you explain it to him and ask him to give me a call.” And that was that sort of thing.

DW: What kinds of things would they want to talk about?

JC: Legislation. Everything from when we were going to get out that week to “what are we going to do about some esoteric part of defense,” to “how can we handle this problem of waste management” or whatever. It was the full range of activities. But a lot of it is really quite personal – people saying, “You know. I’ve got a speech. I’ve just got to get home to Oregon on Friday. Could you ask Howard to be sure to arrange things so that I can catch a such-and-such plane?” A lot of it was procedural and personal, and a lot of it was substantive as well.

DW: Let me go back to the matter of staff for a moment. I’ve been told that there was a notion incorporated in the thinking that you had previously described that the leadership, or

Senator Baker’s office, ought to develop a special relationship with committee staff – without by-passing committee chairmen, and in a sense use committee staff as a complement to leadership staff.

JC: That was something we thought about, as I alluded to. It did work to some extent. For example, Jim Range and Crippen worked very closely on the budget with Steve Bell and I believe Carol Cox may have still been there. And others who worked on these issues. There was a lot of that, but basically, that was more informational than negotiating. I can’t think of a single time – it probably happened, but I just don’t know or think of a single time when, say, Jim Range would have negotiated something with the staff of the committee that dealt with the environment, when he would have negotiated a serious point with them. Basically that was done by Baker and the chairmen. Range might come in and alert him and say, “This is what these boys want to do over there.” So he’d give him an advance notice of something they wanted to do. But basically, Howard Baker made the deals himself.

DW: You and Hildenbrand were clearly the senior people in Baker’s operation. Would you two get involved in negotiations on legislative matters?

JC: Bill probably did. I don’t think I ever did. I can’t remember any case when I ever did. Because, among other things, I was trying to look out for the political process. Much of my responsibility was to look to the larger political interests of Senator Baker. Obviously we had a Republican president, so he wasn’t going to run against him for president. But we had a lot going on. We had our Republican Majority Fund. We were trying quietly to recruit good candidates to run for senate. We were dealing with the White House. I spent a fair amount of time just dealing informally, and mostly informationally, with Duberstein and sometimes with Jim Baker and others at the White House. Max Friedersdorf was in; I knew him well. And I knew a lot of these people. And I could sit down with them and kind of go over it. So then, once I got it clearly in my mind, I said, “Well, let me go down and get Senator Baker off the floor for a minute, and you can tell him.” And that saved a lot of his time. But I guess at least 50 percent of my efforts were just plainly political in the sense of paying some attention to the concerns and egos of senators and of other people who might be involved, whether it was somebody in the House – Bob Michel who needed to talk to him about something, or whatever – but basically, that’s what we did. To go back to your question, it was our concept that we would work with committee staff, and that they by extension would be our staff. And it did work, to some extent. But as a practical matter, the extension – Howard Baker wouldn’t say it this way, because it would be presumptuous – but Baker made the committee chairmen his staff.

DW: Elaborate on that.

JC: I mean, if he wanted it to work it out – Howard Baker rarely talked to any staff person. Domenici might come in with a budget problem and bring a couple of his staff people in there. They might be able to make a presentation. But Howard Baker basically negotiated senator to senator. So that if John Tower needed to negotiate something on
defense, everything was worked out as best it could be at a lower lever, but the real deal was made when John Tower came in and sat down with Howard Baker and said, “This is what we’ve got. This is what we’ve got to do. We’re four votes short. I think we can get Cohen if we do this.” And Howard Baker would say, “Well, how about we do this? I’ll call this one and you call that one. Let’s see if we can get them in here and work it all out.” And we’d expedite that.

DW: While the transition was going on, you had 16 brand new faces on the Republican side of the aisle.

JC: Right.

DW: How did you go about incorporating these people into the process?

JC: Bill Hildenbrand did a lot of that, because he got them in for a training or familiarization session. And then we tried to get them in personally. We tried to make sure that they had committee assignments that they felt comfortable with – that they were taken care of. We had a lot of new faces, but Baker had at the same time – Baker had campaigned for a lot of them, and so they were not strangers to us entirely. I remember Dan Quayle, he had campaigned for, for example. And he came back saying, “That young man’s a great candidate, and I think he’s going to win. And he’s going to be a good senator.” And Quayle was a good senator. Same with Nickels. Baker went out to Oklahoma and campaigned for him. Can’t remember about Georgia. But most of them he had campaigned for. So they were kind of natural allies. And they looked to Baker as their – not just their leader, but their friend and their mentor. And that’s what he did.

DW: Senator Baker seemed to develop a special relationship with Tommy Griscom.

JC: Well, I think it was. Baker has, well he had a special relationship with Ron McMahan, too. I don’t know about any of his other press secretaries, but Baker knows the importance of the press. He knows the importance of getting good press. Baker knows how good he is on television, and so every press secretary that he had, those two that I worked with, anyway, had immediate access to him, and Baker would give them a quick answer. “Do you want to do this show on Sunday?” It wouldn’t take long. Baker would say, “Well, what do you think? I gotta go down to Tennessee or something. Can we do it from there?” So Baker always had a special relationship with his press secretary, because he’s very good at it himself. And what he used his press secretary for was an extension of his own kind of leadership and qualities. Tommy, really, more than McMahan – McMahan had extraordinary personal relations, good relations, with some of the older folks, and the younger folks, on the Hill. But Tommy went a step further. Tommy had good personal relations, but Tommy was a better briefer on substance than McMahan was. And he made considerable use of that. There’d be reporters on the Hill, one of them working for the Washington Post, for example, who wouldn’t understand what was happening on the floor. Well, you’d hear Tommy telling her what was happening on the Floor. She’s sitting there taking notes. And basically Tommy was dictating the story in the Washington Post by telling her what the hell was happening. She had no
understanding of it, so she wrote it down and put it in the paper. Tommy was very good. Tommy is a very smart guy. He’s got a lot of nerve and a lot of guts and a lot of pizzazz, and he’s also had a physical quality that Baker appreciated. They are almost exactly the same size. So Tommy could walk up on the podium to check it out and see if the lectern was too high for Baker, so we could just do it automatically. McMahan was as tall as I am, and we couldn’t do that because we were a few inches taller than Baker. So there was that kind of special affinity. Also, Tommy was younger than McMahan, and he’s about the age of Baker’s own son, and I think Baker took a very strong fatherly interest in him and his development. Tommy’s good.

DW: Someone told me the other day, in regard to Griscom – someone in the press corps at the time that all of a sudden here comes this 12-year-old, the press secretary said, and after a while they found out he was actually 22.

JC: Yes. He did look young. He was young. But it didn’t take long for the press to understand the shift – I mean a guy like Phil Jones of CBS. Earlier Phil would have gone to McMahan; McMahan would take him over to see Baker. Phil did not have a choice. If he really needed to see the senator, well they’d set up a camera. But if he just needed to know what was going on, Tommy would tell him. And Tommy was very good. He was accurate. He understood it. He has a quick understanding, and he’s articulate enough to tell them what they need to know in press terms so they can write their story and still have it come out favorable for Howard Baker.

DW: Have you read Jim Miller’s book, Running in Place, I think is the title, about a week largely devoted to Baker’s operations?

JC: Jim Miller used to work for us as a speech writer. Yes, I think I looked at it. I don’t remember it very well.

DW: I was just wondering if you thought it was accurate.

JC: I didn’t think it was much of a book. I’m not sure why anybody paid him to write that book. I thought it had no depth.

DW: Let me ask you about the regular meetings Senator Baker had as majority leader. First of all, he had the daily staff meetings.

JC: Right.

DW: What were those like? What went on there?

JC: Basically, Howard Baker would sit down and usually Hildenbrand and Howard Greene would lead off and tell him what was coming up that day and what the problems were and what they had to face. So basically it was, “What’s on our plate for today? What’s the menu for today? What do we have to do?” Then Baker would issue a few instructions. If some of us had some other comment – Tommy would always weigh in on the press
situation and the travel situations. Tommy was in charge of press and travel, which is a very good arrangement. And mostly I just sat back and listened. If there was something I thought needed to be done, I might speak privately to Senator Baker about it later. But since these were basically legislative sessions – and I had decided early on that we had all the talent we really needed. We’ve got Hildenbrand who has been here 100 years, and we’ve got Greene who knows more about this place than I ever will. We’ve got Liebengood, who has his fingers on the pulse of a lot of people out there and a lot of the senators, and so on. And we’ve got our parliamentarian. And since 75 percent of our business was in dealing with legislation, I thought, “Well, I’m not going to even try to learn all of these procedural things that are so important. These guys already know it. They can do it better than I can. So what’s the point! I’ll go do something else.” And that’s why I focused mostly on political work and personal relations with senators.

DW: The weekly meetings of the chamber. Did you sit in on those? And what were they like?

JC: Yes. Well, we had a full room, and basically that was “show and tell” with each chairman telling what they had coming up, and what he needed in terms of time on the floor, or whatever. It was a good round robin session. It usually lasted too long. The more interesting meetings were the – I think they were weekly lunches – I’m not sure what day – Monday or Wednesday – Tuesday was the big policy luncheon. But Baker had Stevens and the vice president, Bush, and Laxalt.

DW: Tower.

JC: Tower was often there, but I think Tower was a kind of regular there – oh yes, he was Policy Committee Chairman. We had everybody in there. Baker had them in there for lunch. And that was really a tough talking session, where they got down to good, tough, private conversation about what we need to do, what can we do, and how are we going to make this happen. And I felt that Baker – Bush never seemed particularly interested in it. He came, and he was respectful, and he might make an observation, but he was more of an observer than a real activist in the meetings. But there were spirited discussions and straight talk, polite, but straight talk, about what we were doing. I thought that was Baker’s idea, and he made – part of the reason for them was to make Laxalt an honorary member of the leadership. But this was enormously valuable, because Laxalt could say things to Reagan that nobody else would say. They could have said them but they wouldn’t.

DW: Talk a little bit about the Laxalt-Baker relationship.

JC: They were friends. I got there in 77, and they were friends then. And I knew Laxalt a lot better than I’d known Baker. I’d known Laxalt when he was governor of Nevada. And had high regard for him, even though we were philosophically not close. But I had a high regard for his ability, and I felt that he was enormously valuable as an anchor on the right for Howard Baker. When Howard Baker supported the Panama Canal treaties under Carter, and actually got them passed, they wouldn’t have been passed without him – Laxalt, who felt so strongly about the subject – it was Reagan’s principal issue in 1976,
as a matter of fact – Laxalt kind of – not that they had a falling out personally; they just had such a profound difference on this issue. In 78, when Baker was running, he asked Laxalt to come to some place in Tennessee, Memphis say, and speak at a fund raiser for him. And Laxalt very politely said, “Howard, I can’t do that. If I do that, we’re going to be asked questions about our differences on the Panama Canal – it’s just going to heighten the issue. But also, I lose credibility with my own people who feel so strongly about this, if I go in there and support you in this active a way in the campaign. You know I’m for you, but if I go in there and make a speech for you, that’s going to be a problem for me. It’s going to be a problem for you as well, so I think we just better not do it.” Once Baker won that race, then they gradually resumed their friendship. I know that Baker would figure out some way to go play tennis – Laxalt is a very good tennis player. He could have been a pro. Baker could not have been a pro; he’s an OK tennis player. But at any rate, they would play tennis or something like that and have a talk, and Baker restored that relationship with Laxalt’s enthusiasm, so that by the 80 campaign – of course, Baker ran briefly there, but once Howard Baker was asked by Reagan to come out for him just before Pennsylvania, and Baker did – once that happened – it was an interesting thing. Baker came out and we went up to Pennsylvania to campaign for Reagan. It was interesting that the Reagan people thought that Baker could make a difference in Pennsylvania. Actually he didn’t; Bush had that primary sewed up, and won it. Once it was over, people would say, “Well, there goes Howard Baker’s chance to be vice president.” Well, the relationship between Laxalt and Baker continued to improve, and Laxalt made sure that Baker’s name was on the list to be considered for vice president. And at one point – I guess it must have been three or four weeks before the convention of 1980 – obviously Reagan already had it locked up, Baker sent word through Laxalt that he really did not want to be considered for vice president. I guess to make certain of it, Reagan called Baker personally, and I was in the office when he called. And Baker said, no, he really did not want to be vice president, that he thought he had a chance to win the Senate, and what he really wanted to do if he won the Senate was be Senate majority leader, and said, “Ron, I can help you a lot more if I’m Senate majority leader that I can as vice president, and I appreciate it very much, but I really don’t want to be considered.” I think Laxalt respected Baker’s position on that. And Baker stuck with it and made no bones about it. Once he told Reagan, he told the press that he had taken himself out of consideration. So all through that 80 campaign, once Baker got out and began supporting Reagan, Laxalt and Baker resumed and improved their relationship, so that by the time the election came through, it was the most natural thing in the world for Baker to ask Laxalt to nominate him and for Laxalt to agree. And their relationship continued to be very close throughout the time they were both in the Senate together.

DW: How was Laxalt a help to Baker?

JC: He could call Ronald Reagan and say something to Reagan that nobody else could. I remember when we couldn’t get an increase in the debt ceiling, one time, and – you know, at some point, if you don’t get an increase, you have to shut down the government. And it’s always a scare game, and we felt that, you know, it’s just going through it again, but we’ll get the votes in the final analysis after everybody makes his political points.
But we had to have Reagan’s help to talk to some of our own conservatives. Baker and Laxalt went into the back room, and I guess Hildenbrand and I were sitting there. And Baker said, “Well, Paul, would you just call the president now. It’s time to get some of these conservative senators to support the increase, or we really are going to have to shut down the government.” And Paul said, “Fine.” And he said, “Well, let me talk to him privately.” And he went in the back room and was gone 8-10 minutes, I suppose, and came out with this huge grin on his face, kind of shaking his head and saying, “Ronald Reagan can’t wait to shut down the federal government.” And he did. We did. He shut it down for two or three days. So that’s the sort of thing he could do. He was the perfect back channel to the White House. And also, Paul Laxalt was so close to Nancy Reagan, that the care and feeding, the care and attention – the attention to Nancy Reagan was one of the most vital things that happened in the Reagan Administration. And Laxalt had that relationship. He transferred a lot of that to Howard Baker. The real reason, I think, that Howard Baker became chief of staff was that Laxalt suggested it to Nancy Reagan.

DW: I suppose that Laxalt would also be helpful by telling the president that he really ought to listen to what Howard was saying?

JC: I’m sure he did. But we were not ever in any doubt about that. From the very first meeting they had, right after the election, Ronald Reagan always seemed willing to listen. And that was who Ronald Reagan is. This is an actor. This is an actor who listens to direction. Now people kind of joke about this, but I saw it when Baker was the majority leader and I saw it when Baker went into the White House and I was there for a few weeks. Ronald Reagan – you can’t tell him to do something that’s naturally against his instincts or beliefs. But if you say to him, “Here’s what we need to do, Mr. President, and this is what we would like you to go out and say,” he’s very attentive; he gets the lines right, and he will go out and deliver those lines better than you ever thought he could do it. Now that is really the closeness of Reagan and Baker that began very early. And it also was assisted by Jim Baker, who was as chief of staff the principal guy who would come up to the Hill and make the deals. And Baker and Baker were good deal-makers. And again and again, they just brought it off.

DW: Was that a comfortable relationship?

JC: Baker – Baker? Oh yes, very comfortable. As a matter of fact, they have a great respect for each other. They’re both very practical men.

DW: I don’t know if this is true, but it’s been implied that there were particular sensitivities between Baker and the Baker people – perhaps more the Baker people – and Bush and Bush people, going back to the presidential campaigns –

JC: Yes. I think there was more friction between Howard Baker and George Bush than there was between Baker and Baker.

DW: This is perhaps too broad a question, but can you elaborate on the way in which they interacted? When they would talk and what they would talk about?
 JC: Who?

 DW: Howard Baker and Jim Baker.

 JC: Oh, Baker and Baker. Well, they would talk on the phone in the morning, and they would talk on the phone in the midday, and they’d talk on the phone in the afternoon, and as often as not, Jim Baker would get in his staff car and come up there and say, “Howard, this is – can we work this out this way? Let’s do it right now. Get them in here right now and let’s do it right now.” So, Jim Baker is a trader. He’s a good trader, a good negotiator, and so is Howard Baker. So they’d just get them in there and figure out what to do and Jim Baker would say, “Well, let me talk to the President.” And he’d go in the back room and call him up and say, “It’s a deal. We got it.”

 DW: So if something needed to be negotiated, [then you got them in there, and you get Baker and Baker].

 JC: Yes. You get John Tower in there. “We only can get $98 billion for defense. Can you live with that?” And Tower says, “I don’t like it. Can you get me $98.5?” And they’d run the traps again, and “No, you get maybe $98.3.” “Well, we’ll settle for that.” So you do it in an hour.

 DW: There were some Republican senators who had, from time to time, and perhaps for a period of time, problems in their relations with the White House.

 JC: Yes.

 DW: I understand that there was a period of time, as one person put it, that the White House was at war with Senator Packwood.

 JC: [WHO was] Packwood then, Commerce?

 DW: Yes, Commerce.

 JC: The Commerce chairman.

 DW: And expressed himself saying that, in effect, [that within certain circles _____ ], that he thought that there were adjustments needed in the basic directions ______. Now this was described to me by a Packwood person.

 JC: Yes.

 DW: The question is, when these kinds of problems arose in the relationship between the White House and a Republican senator, would Senator Baker be drawn in?
JC: Oh yes. He did indeed. He’d have to. He’d hear from Jim Baker what the problem was, or he’d hear, more likely, from Packwood, who would say, “Jesus, Howard, they want to do this, and we can’t do it, I can’t get the votes for that.” So Baker again was the negotiator. He was the guy who could find the middle ground, and where they could agree, get them together. More often than not, he did.

DW: The formal leadership was almost unchanged in the four years Senator Baker was majority leader, except for the Campaign Committee, which Packwood chaired from 81-83.

JC: Right.

I: And Senator Lugar challenged him in 1983 and beat him. What was going on there? Do you have any recollections of that?

JC: Packwood did a good job as committee chairman. Basically what Packwood did was figure out how to raise money. Raise money in dimensions that nobody had raised it before. And money certainly helped. Money certainly helped in 1980. We had to have a lot of money to help these candidates, and I think we had three or four newcomers who won by less than a percentage point. I think Mattingly, for example, may have been one of them. So this is critical. Packwood had – no question about it – his chairmanship had helped to win majority control of the Senate. So he had a lot of power. I’m not really recalling why Lugar took his place. I’m not sure when Packwood was running for re-election in that period, but usually if a senator was running himself, he was not the chairman of the Campaign Committee.

DW: That was not the case in this instance.

JC: That was not the case. Okay. I don’t really know the answer to that. I think Lugar probably was looking for a leadership _____.

DW: You have a Policy Committee and you have a Conference, each of which has staff.

JC: Right.

DW: What were the nature of the relationships between Baker’s staff and the Conference staff and the Policy Committee staff? Did they function as --

JC: Not much. No, not at all. They were – the conference – let’s see, who chaired that?

DW: McClure.

JC: McClure? They tended to be rather conservative, I think. They did, yes.

DW: Margo Carlisle was staff director.
JC: Margo Carlisle. But they were much more to the right, philosophically. And – was that conference or policy?

DW: No, that was conference. Tower chaired the Policy Committee.

JC: Conference, yes – policy was rather different, I think – can’t remember --

DW: Tower was chairman, and Dick Thompson was staff director.

JC: Right. And before that, Max Friedersdorf was in.

DW: [That’s right].

JC: The truth is that there’s a lot, in my judgment, there’s not a lot of work for either of those committees to do. They do have small staffs, and in fact, they do put out a lot of paper, analysis of bills, et cetera, and send them around. I never thought they earned their keep, personally. I didn’t think they did any particular damage, but I didn’t think they were very – I didn’t think they made much difference in the legislation, and still don’t.

DW: Some people talk about the staff loosely associated with the conference and the Policy Committee and the Steering Committee during that period of time. They were generally conservative in character, and very anxious to promote conservative causes, particularly on the social issues. Were they a source of problems for the leadership?

JC: Not particularly. Because Ronald Reagan was president. Nobody – nobody – not McClure, not anybody else, is going to challenge Ronald Reagan on a conservative issue. If Ronald Reagan wanted to – I mean they might grumble about it. They might grumble about him making the Veterans Affairs a department, but they were not going to do anything about it. I mean, he owned the conservative mantle. So they were actually less important. Now that I think about it, less important – the policy and conference staff – less important after Reagan came into office than they were when Carter was in office, where you could have some cohesion about position.

DW: Let me go back to the weekly chairmen’s meeting for just a moment. What did Senator Baker get out of those meetings? What did he want to get out of them?

JC: What he wanted to get out of them was a sense of cohesiveness – a sense of organization – of bringing everybody together – of having everybody feel he knew what everybody else was doing – what the other chairmen were doing. Howard Baker probably didn’t get as much out of it as the committee chairmen did, in just kind of sitting there and listening to each other, and having the right to bring up whatever the hell they wanted to bring up about anything. So the answer to your question is, Howard Baker probably didn’t get much out of them. But we hoped that the committee chairmen would.

DW: What is your sense of the way in which the committee chairmen generally viewed their role in relation to Senator Baker? You said a moment ago --
JC: Each one is a baron in his own realm, of course. But he can’t get anything done – I don’t care what it is, if it’s a tax bill or anything – he cannot get it done until Howard Baker is ready to put it on the floor. The real power that a Senate majority leader had is to judge what’s going to come on the floor and when. That’s what he does. And so every committee chairman knows that he needs Howard Baker more than Howard Baker needs him. So there was a hell of a lot of respect by the committee chairmen. They never came in and said, “Howard, I want you to do this whether you like it or not.” It just wasn’t the way things worked.

DW: Could Senator Baker get the chairmen to do things they didn’t want to do?

JC: Uh, yes, within some limits. Yes.

DW: What about the relationships among other members of the formal leadership and Senator Baker? How did they tend to view their role in relation to his role? Did they see him as the leader, or --

JC: Oh, yes – no, no, no. He was the leader. He was the leader. He was the boss of them all, and they recognized it. Because he has the power to say what is going to be done on the floor of the Senate. That is an enormous power. And not just with his committee chairmen, but in the whole damn government.

DW: The Policy Committee sponsored a policy luncheon.

JC: Right. Tuesday noon.

DW: Tuesday noon. How important were those as far as what Senator Baker was he was trying to do?

JC: Again, it was a part of making each member part of the whole. Now this is all members, now, not just the committee chairmen. So every Republican senator could sit in and hear what Howard Baker’s thinking about for the next few days, or next week we may try to take up this, and the like. So they had a sense of knowing what was going on. All members lived, to one extent or another, by knowledge, by information about what’s going on, so there was that. That was an opportunity also. If one of them had a complaint against the way things were going, he could stand up and say it, or he could say, “You know, Howard --" Actually, John Tower was the Policy Committee chairman then, wasn’t he?

DW: Well, the Policy Committee ran the luncheon _____.

JC: Yes, he chaired that luncheon. But he would call on – he would give a little report himself, and call on the other leaders to give him some inkling of what they were doing. And there’d usually be – Howard Baker would have talked to somebody at the White House that morning, and he would give them little nuggets of information. But basically
it was a bonding operation. It was the way to build bonds and keep the bonds firm, and make sure everybody was connected with everybody else.

DW: It is said, and it’s obviously true, that information is power. And based upon my understanding of the way things worked on the Republican side of the aisle during the four years Senator Baker was majority leader and my understanding of him, it seems to me that, at any given time, Senator Baker knew more about what was going on in the Senate than any other individual – by far.

JC: By far. Not only did he know, but he controlled. He controlled what could happen on the floor tonight, next week, and so on. So he knew – he had to know more than any other senator by far, and so this was part of his power. Howard Baker used to say, “A leader must never be surprised.” And I think that’s essential to being a leader. He must never have somebody come in and say, “Do you know what that chairman is about to do?” That chairman has got to tell him himself what he is about to do. So even if it’s bad news, by and large, a Dole, or any chairman of a committee would say, “Howard, we’ve got a problem over here, and this is what’s happening. I just want you to know about it.” But Howard Baker said, “I must never be surprised.”

DW: He had so many channels of information flowing in to him.

JC: He must, that’s right. He must. I don’t know if you’re aware of it, and I’ll take a minute to plug this book over here. The book I wrote. I addressed for a bit, because Ford was leader, what a leader does. And I have copies --

DW: You mean that book?

JC: I went back and did a bit on the history of the leadership, and there’s a quote in there from Howard Baker, to the effect that, “All I need to know I learned in the third grade” or whatever it is – how to count. And that’s true. What he must do is be able to count the votes on any issue. Right down to what time we adjourn. He must know he always has those votes. So the knowledge is the first thing that he must have. And in order to have that he must have really the most extraordinary memory power. You’re dealing with 99 people in the Senate – and odds and ends of people in the House, whether it was Tip O’Neill, who was the speaker while he was there. And he and Tip had a wonderful relationship. This huge outsize guy, and this short, benign leader of the Senate were really quite good friends. And then Baker had to carry also in his mind what the president wanted to do, what Jim Baker wanted to do, what the problems were down there at the White House, and move it all along in his mind, and at the same time keep that flow of information directed to the purpose of moving the president’s program. There’s no question in my mind that Ronald Reagan looked as good as a president in his first term because of Howard Baker and the majority he led in the Senate.

DW: Senator Baker must have not only a phenomenal memory but tremendous powers of concentration.
JC:  He does. That’s right. That’s right.

DW: And that mind must have [been focused all day long].

JC: Howard Baker does not give you the impression that he is a deep thinker, just talking to him. But he is. He not only has this great memory, but Howard Baker is as articulate on order as anybody I’ve ever known. As you know, he was a good trial lawyer in Tennessee before he was elected to the Senate. But it’s this ability to stand on his feet and articulate the problem, condense it, make it sound reasonable, make his position sound reasonable, and bring people to his side that made him not just a leader but, in my mind, a great leader.