
Interview with James Cannon

The interview was conducted by David Welborn in Washington, DC on November 10, 1992

Audio cassette 64
DW: Washington D.C., the date is November 10, 1992 and the interviewer is David Welborn. First of all Mr. Cannon, thanks so much for finding some time for this conversation. We appreciate it. Let me begin by asking you to put on the record a bit of biographical information.

JC: All right. I’m Jim Cannon. Just before I went to work for Senator Baker I had worked for President Ford for two years as his assistant for domestic policy. Before that I had worked for Governor Nelson Rockefeller for five years. Before that, for fourteen years, I was a news-writer and editor at Newsweek, and before that, I was a writer at Time for two years. Before that, I worked for the Baltimore Sun as a reporter and editor for five years. Before that, I worked for a couple of small upstate New York newspapers. Before that, basically, I was in World War II for a little over five years. I went in as an ROTC officer in the summer of 1941 and was in the service during the war until about February or March 1946. That, in essence, is my background. I got to know Senator Baker somewhat when I worked for President Ford. I suppose the first time I ever saw him was when Governor Nelson Rockefeller became chairman of the Water Quality Commission, which was, I always thought, a very interesting idea, which may have been Senator Baker’s idea, but I didn’t know him very well at the time. Basically, Congress passed legislation to clean up the country’s waters and to say, in effect, that every moving stream in the country ought to be clean enough to drink. Having done that, they then set up a commission to find out if that was realistic. It was a marvelous group. It included four members of the House and Senate, Senator Baker and Jim Buckley were the Republicans in the Senate, and four members of the House, two Democrats, two Republicans, and then six civilians of various degrees of expertise: environmental affairs and engineering and other disciplines. President Nixon asked Governor Rockefeller to be chairman of it. It was an excellent enterprise, because it had the realities of outside governance, so to speak, a governor and people working on water quality problems, and it had eight members of the House and Senate, who were senior members of the public works committee and therefore in a position to do something. Jennings Randolph and Ed Muskie were the Democrats for the Senate. I worked just a bit, more observed, Governor Rockefeller’s operation there, and I thought this was a marvelous enterprise for bringing together objective or mission or goal and reality. I came to find out later that it was, at least in part, Senator Baker’s idea to create this. So that’s the first time I ever met Senator Baker and came to have a high regard for him.

DW: Did you observe the meetings of this group?

JC: Some of them, not all.

DW: Do you remember anything about the way Baker handled himself in these meetings that struck you? Would you characterize him as playing a leadership role?

JC: Yes. From the first time I ever observed Senator Baker, and then later when I got to know him better, he had a marvelous capacity to think on his feet or in the
conference room: to think, to explore, to ask a question, or make a point without offending others, and in a way to lead the group to a possible solution. I thought this was a man who knew a great deal about the technical aspects of it. I found out later that he does have a considerable scientific bent. He had an interest in the job, the details, he understood that, but he had a marvelous ability to thread his way between mission and technicality and between the preconceived notions of this person and that person to try to reach down the middle a good result in this operation. He was objective, he was fair, [and] he was considerate. There was always a bit of humor in what he said. So far as I can remember, he never offended anybody else in the operation.

DW: Did you develop any insights during that period in regard to his working relationship with Senator Muskie?

JC: I could see that he and Senator Muskie were close friends, associates, and could think together about how we would do this. Not only was there a close affinity between he and Muskie, I thought it was even closer between he and Jennings Randolph, who was the chairman then of the Senate Public Works Committee or whatever its title was. I also noted that Jim Buckley listened very closely to what Howard Baker had to say. That’s a considerable thing all by itself, because Jim Buckley is one of the smartest guys I’ve ever come across in politics. To a man, all of these other senior people, including Governor Rockefeller and the other civilian appointees, paid a lot of attention to Senator Baker.

DW: What is your sense of the Rockefeller-Baker relationship over the years? Did they know one another [prior to this time]?

JC: I think this is probably the first time they ever got to know one another. I found it very friendly, very amiable. They were from two different worlds. Senator Baker from Tennessee, of course, and very much a down-to-earth person in the mountaineer sense, I always thought, but with a great leavening of good humor. One of the things that always interested me, not only about Senator Baker but every person I ever met from the mountain part of East Tennessee, was a shrewdness. I always had difficulty putting my finger on it, but whether it was Senator Baker himself, or say, Ron McMahan or Lonnie Strunk, or any of these other people I came across there, there was an uncommon shrewdness.

DW: How was that manifest?

JC: They understood very quickly what was happening. They saw through the words and the persiflage of whatever was going on to the heart of the matter and could see it quickly. I never quite figured it out, but I never saw any of these people, those three in particular I would use as an example, I never saw them fooled. I never saw them duped. It was not suspicion, it was just an awareness of what people were doing. If it’s appropriate, let me just mention how I came to go to work for Senator Baker. I had one experience with him in the White House that I remember very
well. As I said, I was assistant to the president for domestic policy, which meant I had to worry about some of the things that were going on on the Hill, to some extent, and I remember there was one particular issue that related to some lost nuclear material, which may or may not have been taken by a foreign power. I always thought that Senator Baker, who came in to talk to President Ford about it, was enormously calm, measured, considerate, and unflappable about this. As I say, it was one of the few times I saw him when I was working in the White House. I did not sit in on the meeting myself, but I was aware of it and had talked to the president before about it. But, at any rate, I liked the man, and I remember at the time that I was surprised, as I found out later, almost everybody is surprised that Senator Baker is not very tall. Somehow, when you see him on television and you know about this man, he is such an able guy, he is such a giant of a person in terms of ability, his capacity to articulate, to bring people together, that you just naturally expect to see a very tall man. I was surprised at this when I saw him on those few occasions at the White House. When President Ford was defeated, I was going back to New York where I had spent most of my adult life. A month or so after I was out of office, I got a call, as I recall, it was from Cliff White, he said, “You’re going to get a call from Howard Baker. He’s interested in having somebody come up and help him as minority leader. I think you ought to talk to him.” I said, “Okay, I’ll go talk to him.” I had not at that point settled on anything in New York.

DW: Was this before the first of the year?

JC: No, it was probably about March of 1977. I’d gone out of the office, stayed to the last day, gone down to Florida for a few weeks, and was exploring some things when I got this call. I went up to see Senator Baker, not really enthusiastic about working in a legislative body. I think because I had covered a lot of politics in the House and the Senate and so on over time I had not had a very strong sense that the legislative part of the government was as productive or as wieldy as the executive department. So I had a tilt toward the executive department, and I didn’t think I was going to be very interested in this. I went up and talked to him. I liked him, we had a good talk. It was not very long, but he overcame my reluctance by saying the magic words. He told me that he was interested in having someone come up and help him organize and manage the constructive opposition to President Carter. Those were magic words to me, because I was quite angry at President Carter. I felt that he had been elected over my friend President Ford by a lot of misleading promises, promises he was not going to be able to deliver. I thought then, “This is such an opportunity.” I had been a political buff for a long time, and I thought this was such an opportunity that I would do it for nothing! Fortunately, I didn’t have to do that. It was a good staff job, really, whatever was going to be the title, it was going to be de facto chief of staff. He did not have that large of a staff. I also was aware that Senator Baker, either in the front or the back of his mind, was likely to be a candidate for president in 1980. This presented a bit of a, not a problem, but something that I had to take care of, which was that I felt a strong obligation to President Ford to Nelson Rockefeller, and I had, during the Ford administration, become good friends with George Bush. So I, in turn, either talked to or went to see
each of the three. I told Senator Baker this, that I would want to clear this with
them, and he said, “Fine,” he understood that. So I talked to each one of them in
turn and they said in one way or another, “Howard’s a great guy,” at least Ford and
Rockefeller did, “Howard Baker is a great guy, and I think you ought to do it.” I
called George Bush and he was a bit reluctant, but he didn’t have anything else
going on at that point. I told Senator Baker that I had talked to each of the three and
what they had told me and I was ready to come and work and help him manage this
constructive opposition, and so did.

DW: What do you think led Baker to you? How _____?

JC: I don’t know exactly, Cliff White _____. To take this drastic step, I remember that
Ed Mies, among others, said, “Well, the governor doesn’t want to scare anybody.
He doesn’t think it’s necessary,” and so on. But it would have been the perfect
opportunity for Ronald Regan to govern almost by decree for the first three months
and get this spending back in order before anybody has a chance to catch his breath.
But Howard Baker couldn’t persuade him. Nevertheless, it was at that season that
we realized we were going to be working together and could be working together,
and while Baker has described this revelation on January 20th when he’s sitting
there listening to Ronald Reagan make his inaugural address, the truth is Howard
Baker had already knew and decided that the purpose of the Republican majority
was to help this Republican president make some changes in the government.
Howard Baker recognized that before anybody.

DW: Was there any disagreement at that meeting? Were there contrary views expressed?

JC: No, no, not at all. Howard Baker was the leader, we were so delighted to have a
Republican majority, nobody had ever been in the majority before. We were going
to be able to run the Senate, that was raw power, and we were just delighted. We
acknowledged that we had the Senate because Ronald Reagan had run so well that
in two or three states members had come in by a scant one percent, otherwise we
would not have had the majority. We gave full credit to Ronald Reagan for helping
us win that.

DW: Let’s talk a little bit at this point about Baker’s own presidential campaign in 1980.
When did he decide that he was going to make the effort?

JC: I think he had decided after 76 that he was going to make the effort. We began a lot
of exploratory talks about it. I guess right after he was re-elected by such a good
margin in early 79. In fact, I think he told McMahan right after he was elected in
1978 that he wanted to make a Lincoln Day tour in 1979. He wanted to start out in
Springfield, Illinois and wanted to go to New Hampshire and six or eight other
states. McMahan put together a tour for him, and we went on this tour in Lonnie’s

DW: Sandy who?
JC:  Sandy McMahan later, Sandy Mullenix she was then. She was an aide to Joy, but most importantly she was the scheduler, and Ron was the press secretary. We went to Brooklyn, we went to Springfield, Illinois. It was a good, quick little tour, and Baker did very well at it. We got the campaign going fairly well. The real problem with Baker’s 1980 campaign was that we never had a manager. We ended up with Don Sundquist. Don’s a very bright, capable guy, and he had some Republican credentials, and there was Tim Ryan and some others, but they did not have the kind of experience to run a national campaign. A part of the problem was, and this had happened before, Howard Baker knew more about campaigning than they did. They didn’t really understand this. I probably had as much experience, I’ll put it this way, I had more experience than anybody in the national campaign. I had worked in the Ford campaign, and I had, as a journalist, seen a hell of a lot of campaigns and understood the process pretty well. Senator Baker really didn’t want to make the personal commitment of time that you had to make, that others were willing to make, and more importantly it was very clear from the beginning that there was no way he was going to be a serious campaigner and the minority leader at the same time. If he had had the perfect guys as backup, it might have happened, but he had Ted Stevens, and Ted Stevens is an interesting, able, intelligent, hard-working man, but he is by nature contentious. People would not accept the fact that he was there sitting in for Baker. Baker would be out on a trip somewhere, and Jesse Helms would call and say, “Howard, there’s something going on here. I know it’s important to you, but you better get on back here,” and so on. He really, time and time again, was inhibited from spending time or thought on the campaign because of his obligations back in the Senate. There was just no way he could do it. We did marginally well in New Hampshire and so on, but we clearly were not going anywhere. Money would have been difficult. The first big loss, we thought we had Maine sewed up and George Bush beat us there. That really knocked us, we never really recovered from that. It got down to just before Illinois. We were reasonably solvent, we were in debt but not hopelessly insolvent, and the question was whether we were going to stay on the ballot in Illinois. We were going to have to borrow a million dollars, as I recall, and Howard Baker asked the right questions. This guy knows how to ask the right question. He said, “What’s that going to get me?” “Well, Howard, the polls suggest, Ronald Reagan’s home state, etc. Bush, [you’ve got a lot] of work there,” and so on. And somebody was still in then from Illinois. The answer was, “You may come in third, more likely fourth.” Baker said to Doug Bailey or whoever was making this argument, “Why am I going to borrow a million dollars to come in fourth in Illinois?” And that was the end of the campaign.

DW:  What was your personal role in the campaign?

JC:  My person role, by agreement between Senator Baker and I, was very low-key. I think he felt that I had some experience, but I also had some baggage. I had identification with two people who are anathema to the right, to both Ford and Rockefeller, so I know I could be there as an adviser and helper, but I could not take
a prominent role in the campaign and did not really want to because I felt either that I would want to be in charge of the campaign, which Baker didn’t offer to me, or I really don’t want to have much to do with it. So we worked it out that I would be the anchor person at the Senate and would be free to spend some time on the campaign, but basically I would be more of a senior adviser than have a line participation in the campaign. I never really went out during the campaign and pushed. When he made his decision to get out, then it was obvious that he was going to be a prize catch. Then it was a month or so later, Baker intended to stay out of the contest through the campaign, but Ronald Reagan called him and asked him to join him before the Pennsylvania primary.

DW: Was Baker previously disposed to do that?

JC: No, no, not at all, but Reagan put it pretty bluntly: he said, “Howard, I appreciate that you want to make your decision later, but I need you now,” and Baker said, “Then I’ll do it.”

DW: Was he in any sense torn between Reagan and Bush?

JC: Yes, because Bush was a very good and close friend of his. But by that time, Baker was certain that Ronald Reagan was going to win; he said, “Look, it’s in the fates, it’s in the cards, it’s Ronald Reagan’s turn. The Republican party decided a long time ago, it’s Ronald Reagan’s turn and nothing’s going to change that.”

DW: By the way, did you make that trip to New England after he announced his candidacy in the fall of 1979? The one that ended up at the Maine caucus?

JC: Yes, I did.

DW: What was the mood as you recall it?

JC: Ebullient! We thought we were going somewhere. We thought if we got a good start with a win in Maine, we’d go somewhere. It was a tragic disappointment that we lost so badly there. We had rented this 727 and hauled all these reporters up there, and then we lost our ass. This is the kind of guy Howard Baker is. There was nothing to do but give Jack Germond and all these reporters time to write their stories. I think it was a Saturday, Saturday afternoon. And so we held the plane for two or three hours and sat on the plane waiting while all these guys wrote their stories about how badly Baker had lost. It was pretty dispiriting when we got back.

DW: Adding insult to injury.

JC: But that’s just the kind of guy he is, he wasn’t going to take off and leave them there.

DW: What went wrong, other than the management problem that you mentioned.
JC: I can’t remember the name of this guy from Colorado who was in charge of Maine, but he did just about everything wrong that you could. He bragged about how we were going to win. He raised expectations beyond what we could have probably achieved. We had some good people, we had Cohen, but Bush as a native of Maine, and he had worked like hell and he had a hell of a lot of draw. He just ambushed us, that’s all. He had more strength than we did, and we didn’t know it.

DW: Some people have suggested that the Reagan people supported Bush there in an effort to knock Baker out.

JC: I think Bush just whipped our ass. Open and shut case. I don’t think Reagan’s people did anything devious, we just blew it.

DW: How did Baker’s endorsement of Reagan affect his subsequent relationship with Bush?

JC: It scarred it, no question about that, it scarred it. Baker felt that “Ronald Reagan is the best candidate. He’s going to win, he says he needs me to come out, I’m the minority leader of the Senate, I’m the Republican leader in the Senate. It’s time to make a move, I’m going to do it.” He didn’t hesitate.

DW: Was that wound healed over time?

JC: I’m not sure, you’d have to ask George Bush that question. My impression is that wounds inflicted on George Bush never heal. He has a long memory.

DW: It has been suggested by others who have worked with him that Baker tends to compartmentalize people: “Gold is the procedure guy.”

JC: I think that’s true. Many of these guys do. They slot you and you tend to stay in that slot. Unless you break out of it. Let me tell you two cases where they’ve broken out of it. One is Lamar. He thought of Lamar as a very good legislative assistant or whatever the hell he was, but when Lamar won political standing on his own, he had a wholly different view of Lamar. Baker would earlier say he didn’t think much of the job of governor anyway, but after Lamar got it, he though it was a very credible performance by him. That’s the quickest example I can think of where you can move out of your slot with Baker.

DW: How do you think Baker saw you?

JC: I never really asked him, but I think he saw me as a kind of all-purpose guy who could get some things done, who understood policy, who was not trying to upstage him, though that was a problem, particularly at first, because a lot of people resented my coming in at the top. Mike Adams was one of them, and I know that he was trying to tell Senator Baker that “this new guy, Cannon, he thinks he’s the
senator and not you.” Since Senator Baker was, like all people, sensitive to that, he was aware that people were telling this. As a practical thing, when I was first in the White House and Howard Baker would come, I called him Howard, but a few weeks after I got to the Senate I realized that was a mistake, so from then on and to this day he’s Senator Baker to me. Another one who escaped that was A.B., once A.B. made partner to O’Melvin and Meyers and was obviously a hell of a fine corporate lawyer, A.B. escaped this slotting.

DW: That’s A.B. Culvahouse.

JC: Yes, that’s right.

DW: Some people I’ve spoken to have described your role as a political strategist at the macro level, or in similar terms. The source of that kind of advice as opposed to advice in regard to this particular piece of legislation and whether it’s good or bad.

JC: Certainly I never him advice on a particular piece of legislation or Senate procedure. That’s not wildly inaccurate, I suppose, except that Senator Baker is a very good macro politician himself. For example, he understood television far better than I did. What I understood that could have been useful to him was the enormously complicated process of the Republican nominating process. But, once we got Sundquist and company in there, there was no way that I could kind of convey through them into the process whatever I might have been able to bring to the process. I did then, and I think I could still with a years’ study, could still understand the enormously involved sequential process of the primaries and the convention states in getting the nomination. I studied it, I did it as a journalist, starting in 56 when I was working at Newsweek. We set out to understand this process. By 60, we had it down. An editor I had then raised the question with me, “If a politician can count the delegates, why can’t we?” So in 1956 we started the process. By 1960 we had it down pat. Newsweek published the delegate count before the Democratic convention, and we were exactly right on Kennedy’s count and only one and a half delegates off on Johnson’s count, before the fact. We at Newsweek invented the delegate count, which was later picked up by everybody else. So I understood the process. I worked on it in 64. I worked on it with Cliff White, as a journalist and he was the master strategist, when he was running Goldwater’s campaign. I understood it in 68 when I was involved in the Newsweek _____. I understood the process better than anybody around. I had far more experience than anybody. But there was nobody who was going to make use of my knowledge to execute it, because Sundquist and company simply did not, one, have the expertise to manage a campaign and two, and far more importantly, Howard Baker didn’t have any confidence that they knew how to do it. He was running his own campaign _____. I don’t think I contributed a dime’s worth of difference to 1980. Except, when Senator Baker raised this question about going on in Illinois, I supported him in the sense that I said, “Senator Baker, suppose you spend that million dollars and come in third or fourth, where do you go next and how much do
you have to spend? What good does it do you when we are already are not getting coverage because you are so far back in the count?”

DW: I recall sometime in 1980, I think this was after Baker dropped out of the campaign, I was talking to a local Republican politician named Tom Jensen who had been the Republican leader in the Tennessee House of Representatives. He was among the group of Tennessee volunteers who rushed off to New Hampshire to try to save Baker’s candidacy. We were chatting about the effort and he said, “You know, there was no organization. Baker’s problems in politics have always been,” in his view, “a lack of appreciation for grassroots organization. He is simply of the view that he can go on television and go directly to the people this way and be successful.” Which he had done in Tennessee. Do you think there’s something to that?

JC: Yes, I think there’s a lot to that. Senator Baker won by a very good television campaign in Tennessee and by the force of his own personality in Tennessee and won very well, he won handily. After his first loss in 64, he won in 66, won in 72, won in 78, so there’s no question about it. He could win Tennessee. If Senator Baker had said to me at some point, “I’m putting you in charge of the campaign, win or lose, and I’m going to back you up on it,” then I might have been able to push it farther along than it got. But the ultimate judgment, and I would always defer to Senator Baker because he’s as prescient as they get on politics, he said it didn’t make any difference what anybody did in 1980, it was Ronald Reagan’s turn. Events were going to make him the nominee, no matter what else happened. And I think that’s true. He saw that quite early.

DW: So the result came as no real surprise to him.

JC: No; I don’t think there’s any question about it. In fact, maybe McMahan’s memory is better than mine about this, McMahan and I and Rob Mossbacher went up with Senator Baker to Pennsylvania where he was going to endorse Ronald Reagan. We met him up there. We met him in midday, whatever it was, and campaigned with him all afternoon and so on. There was some kind of event that night, but we didn’t need to go to that, we had already made the commitment. So the four of us had dinner together in a hotel. Howard Baker had now been campaigning with this guy for three or four hours in a variety of audiences. We sat down to dinner in a private suite there, and Senator Baker said, “Well, boys, I’ll tell you what. This man doesn’t know a lot about what he wants to do, he has three or four good ideas, but I will tell you I have never seen anybody communicate better with a political audience than this guy. He is going to be the nominee and he is going to win. He’s going to be the next president,” and Baker was exactly right. Baker’s not 100 percent right in all of his predictions, but in sensing a man and his appeal and his merit as a campaigner and his connection with an audience, I don’t know anybody better that Howard Baker.
DW: This is just to wrap up the presidential politics aspect, which would then lead us to a natural stopping point for this session. Do you think when Baker left the Senate in 84, he was pretty clearly intending to run for the presidency in 88, for the presidency?

JC: I think he still wanted to be president. He had realized there was no way he could stay in the Senate and run for president. He had concluded you had to be unemployed, as he would say from time to time, to run for president. He also felt he had done 80 or 90 percent of all the useful things he was ever going to do in the Senate. He wanted to be in private life again. Out of personal consideration, he wanted to spend more time with Joy and the children; he wanted to spend a lot more time in Tennessee than he was able to do. I think he wanted to be president, and he had every intention of running. In fact, I’m quite sure of that. What stopped him in his tracks in 88 was what stopped so many of them: the incredible, towering, Himalayan tower of a problem of raising money. It’s Mount Everest, climbing up Mount Everest in your bare feet, to raise all that money. At a point in the proceedings there, Ted Welch said, “Howard, I think we can raise five million dollars, but I don’t know how we’re going to raise any more. I’m not sure we can raise any more.” We had done a budget, Grisco and I, or whoever was around --

DW: When would this have been?

JC: This would have been weeks before, January of 87, something like that. There was no way, Ted said, that you’re going to raise all that money. I had laid out a rough budget and said, “You can’t win unless you get all the money. You can’t win in 88 or any other year, unless you raise the maximum money.” So I think Howard Baker was sobered, if that’s the right word, by the realization that his best fund raiser, Ted Welch, said, “Howard, I don’t think we can raise the money.”

DW: This was before he became chief of staff?

JC: Weeks before.

DW: Just weeks before.

JC: Weeks before. Actually he had decided to run. He was going to run anyway. He was going to put his name out there and start getting the word to his friends and senators and so forth. He kind of impulsively decided, almost like, “What the hell, I’ll run anyway.” Literally, it was only two or three days later, I think he said this in the office, “Well, I’m going to go on down and talk to the family,” he had his family down in Florida at their apartment for the weekend, when the first call came about his becoming chief of staff.

DW: That’s an interesting conjunction of events.

JC: And I think it was sheer, raw coincidence. I don’t think it was anything else.
DW: It’s 4:15 now, so why don’t we stop at this point. It’s been a very interesting and useful conversation.

END OF INTERVIEW (SIDE A)