
Interview with Margo Carlisle

The interview was conducted by David Welborn in Washington DC on March 2, 1991

Audio cassette 24
First, Mrs. Carlisle, thank you so much for inviting me to visit the Senate along with President Clinton and Vice President Gore this afternoon. It’s an honor.

It’s my pleasure.

Let’s begin by getting a bit of personal background on the record. When did you come to work in the Senate?


Who were you working for at that time?

I was working for Senator Jim McClure of Idaho, then the junior senator to Frank Church.

Had you been involved in political things previously?

I had worked for the Republican National Committee and for a couple of presidential campaigns, but not extensively.

Never any doubt about your partisan sympathies?

I have always been a Republican.

What were your responsibilities when you first came to work for Senator McClure?

I was first hired as a speech writer. After that, it went a little farther and it went into legislative work. After I did that for several years, he then asked me to become the staff director of the Senate Steering Committee, which was a group of conservative senators that met to jointly affect the legislative process in a way that they felt they couldn’t do singly and severally. After that, in 1981, I became the staff director of the Senate Republican Conference when Senator McClure was elected the chairman, which as you know is the number three position in the Republican leadership.

And Senator McClure left the Senate when?

He left the Senate the last time – he would have run two years ago, had he run for a fourth term.

Then you joined the staff of Senator Cochran of Mississippi?

Well, it isn’t quite that easy. Actually, I was Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs in the Pentagon during the second Reagan administration. Then after that, I stayed a little bit longer into the Bush administration because of the Tower lag. Turned down a job in the administration of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency,
spent a year and a half or so at the Heritage Foundation, and was asked by Senator Cochran to become his chief of staff in January of 1991.

DW: I see. Let’s talk a little bit about the Steering Committee. Was this organization formed after you came to work for Senator McClure?

MC: No – yes, after I came to work for Senator McClure, yes.

DW: And who were the principles in its formation?

MC: The principles in its formation I would say were chiefly senators Carl Curtis and Jim McClure; Curtis was a Republican from Nebraska, the junior senator to Roman Hruska.

DW: And who were some of the other major figures in the work of the Steering Committee during that early period?

MC: I have to answer that question carefully, because I was instructed at the time that the only people I could identify – and as far as I know, these instructions remain in effect today, to my successors, there have been only two – the only people who are identified as belonging to the Steering Committee are the chairman and anybody else who chooses to identify himself. The chairman – so perhaps the best thing to do is to say that Senator Curtis was the first chairman, and Senator Curtis, interestingly, left the chairmanship in order to become the Conference chairman. He felt that if he took a leadership position, he should not also run the Steering Committee, so Senator McClure, who had been vice chairman of the Steering Committee then became its chairman. Senator Curtis retired thereafter, leaving that seat open. Senator McClure ran for it, was elected chairman of the Conference, subsequent to which Senator Helms became chairman of the Steering Committee. I’d have to check to see exactly how many years Senator Helms served, but he stepped down and it may be now four years ago and Senator Malcolm Wallop is the current chairman of the Steering Committee.

DW: Have its role and the functions it performs changed much over the years?

MC: Not significantly. There have been some changes, but it’s essentially – it began when senators – I remember one, I think it was Senator Curtis, who went to the floor and said to one of his colleagues, “I don’t know why – I didn’t realize you were going to offer that amendment; I wish our staffs had been working together on it. I have an amendment which is similar, yours is better, I would like to have supported yours,” and so forth. So that led them into a conversation about the fact that they were doing a lot of work which they thought was duplicative, and they thought, “If we had some pooled staff, we could more easily not do again what the other one is doing and perhaps spend the extra time doing something more productive.” So then they discovered that while staff could be pooled in the House, it was, for some unknown arcane historical reason, illegal to do so in the Senate. Of course, the laws which bind the Senate are simply a matter of its own rules; ultimately they had that changed and so now it is legal to pool staff, and that’s how
they pay the Steering Committee staff. They’re simply the staff members of people who are members of the Steering Committee.

DW: When you were staff director of the Steering Committee, how many staff members were there?

MC: There were maybe – the largest number we ever had at one time might have been five or six. We always had a great number of interns, and we’d get them free, usually. That would come in a number of different ways; a lot of the colleges and universities would give the students credit for working wherever they could find a job, so they were delighted with the opportunity to get a job working inside the Senate and get credit for it in their – probably in their political science courses. Other times, senators simply had too many interns from their home states, and they could not find space for them to sit or work for them to do, and we always had work for them to do. We were lucky enough, in those days – when we had these annexes, there’s a whole bunch of buildings that were torn down that, over now where there are some parking lots and where the police have a building. The Monocle is about the only private enterprise left in the middle of that block.

DW: I’ve been in some of those annexes; they were really warrens.

MC: They were not, in most cases, very lovely, you’re right. But nevertheless, they could house a lot of interns. And did.

DW: Where was your office?

MC: In different places; probably the one I spent the most time in was in the building which now houses the police – and probably has a name, but it escaped me long ago – on the fourth or fifth floor; we had a couple of large rooms up there, we had a lot of space.

DW: How often did the Steering Committee meet?

MC: Weekly. At least that was the regular meeting; they could meet more often or less often. And that’s weekly in session.

DW: Do I remember correctly that it was a luncheon meeting?

MC: It didn’t start as a luncheon meeting; it is one now.

DW: And there was an alternative, I recall further, perhaps intended to be a counterveiling force called the Wednesday Club?

MC: That isn’t exactly true. It is not an alternative, because there are some members who are members of both and many who are members of neither. The Wednesday Club actually was formed first and formed in the House by Senator Matthias, then Representative Matthias, who brought the tradition across the Hill with him. That’s how it got here, and
it is the older organization. It differs in that it is not an organization with a political agenda nor does it have staff, offices, or anything of the sort. It’s a luncheon group.

DW: What was the political agenda of the Steering Committee during the years of the Carter presidency?

MC: The Steering Committee had different aims and they were largely the result of the legislative interests of the senators who were members. There was a great deal of interests; some of the interests were regional, some were economic. It would just depend on what the “hot button” issues, you might say, were. I’ll give you a couple of examples. Senator Paul Laxalt was very interested in disposing of a strange bill called the Common Situs Picketing Bill. The Common Situs Picketing Bill was about as odd as its name, and what it would do, what – its purpose was to foment sympathetic strikes. If you had a large construction project which had 12 unions doing lathing and carpentering or bricklaying and wiring and all of these things that need to be done when you build buildings, if one of these unions had a grievance with its management, of course they can, will, and always be able to go out on strike, but this would have shut down the whole process, including stopping from work people who had no grievance with anybody and had no connection with the matter at hand. This would have been ruinous for business and ruinous for – it would have cost jobs and it would also have been problematical for anybody whose life depended on getting the stuff done. So Senator Laxalt decided to make that a Steering Committee project, and he talks about this freely, so there’s no reason not to. And he engaged his fellow Steering Committee members and he undertook to filibuster the bill. He did that very successfully; the interesting thing was that – at that point, actually, it was during the Ford presidency, and nobody had heard of the bill and the bill was going to pass – it was in the days of the strong unions, everybody expected it to fly through and be signed. But, lo and behold, it didn’t fly through, and people began to say – which was precisely the purpose of the filibuster – “What is this thing? What does it do?” The more it was scrutinized, the less wise it seemed, and the press, of course, began to write about it. At first, their only interest is, “What’s gumming up the Senate?” And then they took a look and said, “Oh, this is what’s gumming up the Senate. Well, what do we think of this?” The Washington Post ended up its research by writing a strong editorial in opposition to the Common Situs Picketing Bill. And there were some nice cartoons, one of which showed a lot of people walking around with their placards and billboards which said on them, “Common Situs Nunc” – we don’t know why, they never translated it – the name of the bill – but what do we know? So, in any event, the bill still passed, but by a very much smaller margin than had originally been anticipated and it was vetoed by Gerry Ford, and we sustained the veto. It was a good political success; it was a model operation for the way the Steering Committee intended to work. Laxalt also went to the business community and he went to various unions that he thought might listen to him – there were apparently some – and he said, “This is going to be the effect of this bill, and so please weigh in if you like it, and weigh in if you don’t. We want to hear from you.” Apparently, there were some persuasive contacts made at that time.

DW: Do you have any other examples that you can tell me of the Steering Committee at work?
MC: I think that serves as a good prototype, that’s probably the one I can think of that is the clearest and best.

DW: Beyond stopping, or attempting to stop, objectionable legislation, did the group continue to coordinate amendment activity and that kind of thing?

MC: Oh, yes. That was – I picked something that was rather dramatic because I think it’s more interesting, but sure, it also served as a communications mode. If a senator had something he wanted – it also replaced caucuses; you don’t have to have so much regionalism because people who are interested in a particular – whether it’s a matter related to riparian rights or property law or something of that sort – he has an instant forum where he can describe the fact that he has an amendment that does whatever it does, and he can acquire and use such support as is available there. Occasionally, some research would be generated by Steering Committee members; somebody would say, “I think if I knew more about this, I’d be inclined to do this, or the other, or maybe I wouldn’t,” and then the Steering Committee would make sure that research was done and made available to the member in question.

DW: Correct me if I’m wrong on this, but it seems as though the Steering Committee was doing at least some of the same types of things that the Policy Committee was doing at the time.

MC: Not much.

DW: How would you contrast the two.

MC: Well, the Policy Committee, first of all, was required to churn through every piece of legislation that came through. The Steering Committee had no intention of trying to read every bill or to act as a gateway for all the legislation. There was – it wouldn’t have been possible for a staff of that size, nor were they compelled to do that. Instead, the Policy Committee also does hosts of things, I mean, they do record-vote analyses and they do all kinds of things that have nothing to do with the Steering Committee types of things at all. They put together weekly briefings on the legislative schedule, things of that sort. To a great degree, they’re keeping the trains running, and the Steering Committee wasn’t interested in keeping the trains running.

DW: The Steering Committee, would it be correct to say, was more interested in the design of the train?

MC: Much more, much more. We never – they never, the Steering Committee members never [bought] the notion that more legislation was better.

DW: I should have asked this a moment ago – could anyone, could any Republican Senator be a member of the Steering Committee?
MC: That’s an interesting question; it probably sorted itself out so that that’s what happened. It was an organization that was put together by conservatives for conservative-minded people. You didn’t have to be Republican, and they worked very well with conservative Democrats. Whether the conservative Democrats called themselves members or were members – it’s a hard question to answer. You may think I’m fudging this, but I’m not. It’s an interesting situation. I had, when I ran the Steering Committee, members of the Steering Committee who did not contribute to its support. I had people who were not members of the steering committee who did contribute to its support. So it was not exactly easy sometimes to say, even if I had been told to say who was a member – although since I was told not to, that made my life a little easier. But you could be a member if you were a Democrat; you could join in with the Steering Committee if they were engaged in a specific legislative undertaking that you liked and get up and walk away when anything else came up. And they were content to run it that way; it had no rules at all. So the question – if Senator Javits had said, “I want to be a full-fledged member of the Steering Committee,” I think somebody like Laxalt would have said, “Jack, I don’t think you’d be very happy there. But if you want to come in and help us do thus and such, that’s fine.”

DW: That’s interesting. At the staff level, what were the ties, if any, or patterns of interaction between you and the Steering Committee staff, let us lay, and the Policy Committee staff? What was that relationship like?

MC: It was very friendly. I’m trying to think who was the Policy Committee staff director in the early times, and I can’t – in 1980, 1978 – about 1978, Dick Thompson became the Policy staff director, and that was when John Tower was the chairman of the Policy Committee. Now Dick Thompson had been Senator McClure’s AA, and he’s the one who hired me to work for Jim McClure in the first place, so our relationship was obviously very close. But we worked together whenever possible.

DW: What about with Baker’s staff?

MC: We had very cordial relations with Baker’s staff.

DW: Who do you remember working with perhaps most frequently? Who were the prime contacts?

MC: Well, we worked with Baker’s staff – you know what, it’s very hard to remember, because –

DW: It’s been a while.

MC: Not only that, but it’s – by 1981, you see, I was running the Conference, so I tend to think of my Baker contacts as the people I was working with at that point, who were people like Jim Range and Tommy Griscom and so on.
DW: Do you have any sense – I won’t ask whether he was a member or not a member or whether he contributed or didn’t contribute – but did you develop any sense, say during the time he was minority leader, as to Baker’s attitude toward the Steering Committee?

MC: No. I don’t really. He was a person who, as you know, he’s a very steady person and a very friendly person, and I – no, I wouldn’t be able to analyze that.

DW: Let’s talk a little bit about leadership selection in 1977. Were you surprised that Baker ran for and then was selected leader?

MC: Oh, no, because he already tried once and failed, so it was clear that he wanted to do it; nobody was surprised.

DW: What do you recall about the politics of the situation involving the Baker-Griffin contest and the way people lined up?

MC: I have very dim memories of that; I’m not your best witness on that. Those things are usually popularity contests. Not always, but usually, and I think there’s no question that Howard Baker was much better liked than Senator Griffin. That isn’t to say he wasn’t well liked; he, of course, as you know, had been the whip, and he was well liked. He wouldn’t have been there if he hadn’t been; he was very bright and people respected him. But they liked – they loved Howard Baker.

DW: Stevens was elected whip, and McClure was elected chairman of the Conference. Did McClure ever consider running for leader himself?

MC: He did run.

DW: Oh, that’s right.

MC: But that was much later.

DW: But I mean at that time.

MC: Oh, no.

DW: And is the newly elected leader, in this case Baker, expected to exercise or to have a special say in the outcome of the other leadership positions?

MC: No. It can’t possibly be, because there’s only a minute and a half between one and the other. Even a Lyndon Johnson couldn’t break an arm in a minute and a half. And Howard Baker, as you well know, was not an arm breaker. No, it’s just not possible. No. It’s just physically impossible. Now, Howard Baker running for leader for the fourth time, could certainly have – and clearly going to be elected or something – could weigh in heavily. They don’t do much of that, though.
DW: Why do people on the Republican side seek leadership positions anyway?

MC: That’s a nice question, and if you have 12 hours…it’s different every time. It’s different, it’s so – it’s a terribly interesting question, and some – in some cases, it’s a requirement which comes from deep inside themselves. In other cases, they see a clear and present danger out there, and they’re usually not silly enough to think that they alone can ameliorate it, but they want to try. Some people are – Shakespeare say it best, “They have it thrust upon them” by their colleagues. There are a whole host of – it’s never the same twice, really. Sometimes you wonder, you say, “How can you possibly have thought that X would have considered this?” And usually those people lose. I don’t know, that’s an interesting question, though.

DW: I’m puzzled about the consequences of winning and losing. I’ve asked other people, basically in the context of Baker having tried twice before and losing, in 1969 and 1971, and in trying again, what does losing a leadership contest mean?

MC: It all depends on how you do it. That question doesn’t mean a lot, and it should – so it’s a sensible one to ask – but it doesn’t. It isn’t what you actually do around here, which often affects things, it’s how you do it. And I’ll give you an example. It isn’t related to Howard Baker, but it applies. Paul Laxalt could do something that would make another man highly unpopular, like run a filibuster, because at absolute minimum you’ve changed that man’s dinner time and usually quite a bit more than that. And to be able to do that a couple of times and to come out more popular than you went in says a lot about your personality and the way you do things. You can be a charming and gracious and attractive and generous loser, and people are going to like you better than if you win. And, as I say, I think it’s a popularity contest most of the time. That talks about why people vote, not why they run. But the way Howard Baker did things was such that not only were people not threatened by him but they came out liking him the better for it. So it didn’t matter what he did, he was always going to be better liked. And I think maybe, originally, there is a feeling, just as there is with the presidency, you saw it working with Bush, “Let so and so go first, he’s been here longer, he’s more senior,” Bush has baid his dues, he sat in that silly vice presidential chair for eight years, now he ought to have his shot.” I personally think Dole would have been a better president that Bush, but that’s what the American public – that’s what the Republican party thought. I think when Howard Baker first ran, they said, “Now wait, there are other people ahead of you here.” But it wasn’t at any time a rejection of Howard Baker; it was sort of, “your time isn’t yet.” But they were – nobody ever took amiss that he ran – maybe Hugh Scott did, but he didn’t tell anybody.

DW: McClure became Conference chairman in 1981?

MC: Yes.

DW: Up to that time, what was the relationship between Baker and McClure like? How did they react to one another?
MC: It was very friendly. Of course, you almost never see anything but. The relationships between senators are such that they are rarely special friends. I seem to be doing a lot of talking about Paul Laxalt, but he wouldn’t mind and he serves as a good example. He and Jake Garn were special friends; Jim McClure and Jim Buckley were special friends. We don’t have time to analyze why that happens in the world, and sometimes it’s because it’s utterly accidental. They have [side-by-side] desks and they have to talk to each other and they get so they enjoy it. There are a few cases where one is aware of the fact that people very much dislike another senator. Senator Stevens is well known to have disliked Mike Gravell and he doesn’t care who knows it. But, by and large, any two senators are friendly, and some a little more than others. I would put McClure and Baker into the more than others. I know McClure was very fond of him.

DW: Were they basically on the same political wavelength?

MC: Most of the time, yes.

DW: What was your reaction when McClure asked you to run the Conference staff?

MC: Salute – aye, aye.

DW: How was the Conference, as an ongoing operation, set up and staffed?

MC: There was no template whatever. The Conference – that’s another long and interesting history. The Conference had originally been the Senate – the Republican’s only organized feature. The Conference chairman had been the Republican leader; the floor leader was a subsidiary of the Conference chairman. The Policy Committee was, as it still is, a subcommittee of the Conference. The Conference is the equivalent of the Democrat’s Caucus. And it is the body of all elected Republican senators. And everything else was subsidiary.

DW: Could I interrupt at one point there – is the chairman of the Policy Committee then under the authority of the Conference chairman?

MC: Nobody is under the authority of anybody in the Senate.

DW: Well, I mean –

MC: No, that’ll be the answer they’ll give you fast if you ask any of them that question.

DW: So Tower didn’t have to consult with McClure about anything that he wanted the Policy Committee to do?

MC: Unless he wanted it to become formal Republican policy, at which point the Conference must convene and vote to make it so. And the Policy Committee chairman cannot
convene the Conference; it can only be done by the Conference chairman or by the request of five Republican Senators, in writing.

DW: Well, we were talking about – I got you off the track, you were talking about organization and staffing.

MC: But there wasn’t anything – when Carl Curtis had been Conference chairman, most of the payroll – and it had only clerk hire in its budget, it didn’t have anything else – and that was expended almost 100 percent on the photographers, the grip and grin people, the stills. This is a funny little addition to history, but they were very good. And the Democrats didn’t have anything that good. I don’t know whether it was Senator Byrd or not, but someone said that they wanted to make the Republican photographers the Senate photographers. I don’t know what the stick would have been, but the carrot was that we still got the services of [those] people and it freed up the Conference clerk hire. Now that all happened under Curtis and just as Curtis was leaving. So I don’t really know the details of it, but I know the result. Packwood had, for a short time, been the Conference chairman, and Packwood used the Conference staff to do occasional pieces of research that he thought would be helpful. Largely, they planned and set up those retreats that he began on the Eastern Shore. Those were considered very helpful to the Senate. I got no instructions from Senator McClure to do those again; he didn’t – in fact, he preferred not to do them because when he came in, they also came into the majority, and he felt that those conferences were appropriate things for the minority but that perhaps they weren’t needed anymore. If he thought they were needed, he could always change and do one. So we really had no mission; Senator Packwood’s staff, when I took over, had all resigned, with one or two exceptions who were leaving and hadn’t gone yet kind of thing. I think I prevailed on one or two to stay, but by and large they were gone. We were also in an anomalous position in that we didn’t – by that time the Conference had decreased in its sway; the Policy Committee, I assume due to strong leadership, had kind of taken over the party leadership on the staff level, and the Conference was in a peculiar position of having its staff mixed into the same rooms with the Policy Committee, which were technically the Policy rooms. They were also scattered around in some of these annex places. The Conference had a fairly big clerk hire budget, which had taken care of all of these photographers. Absolutely nothing else; there was nothing for supplies. You couldn’t buy a pencil. We were dependent upon the largesse of the Policy Committee if you wanted so much as a notepad or an eraser. So it was my original task to straighten that out, to take the Conference staff, to find it a home, to arrange a sensible support mechanism for it, and to give it a mission. So what I did was – by that time, of course, we had taken over the Senate and, as coincidence would have it, the Hart Building was just about finished. So I went to Joe DiGenova, who was the staff director of the Rules Committee and who worked for Senator Matthias for whom I have a deep and abiding affection and respect, and I said, “Joe, I can’t live like this. I’ve got to sort this out and this is the moment.” He said, “I agree.” So as these things got done, we were assigned space and equipment and so on, just the same way as everyone else. It was square footage, and they have some kind of formula and you’ll have to go ask the architect if you’re interested in knowing what it is. But you’re given so much square footage per employee. So I kind of had to guess how many employees we would have, and that was
very much curtailed by the – and determined – by the clerk hire budget. That was wasn’t
hard to do. So I said, “Joe, I expect it’s going to be about [thus], and I’ve got these
people over in annexes and spread all over the place.” He said, “We’ll fix it. Like
everybody else, you’ll be put in a regular space.” The Democrats already had such an
arrangement, so they weren’t going to complain, and so that’s how we got housed in the
Hart Building. What I did then was I decided that we didn’t want to duplicate what the
Policy Committee was doing, for several reasons: one, they were doing it well; two,
duplicative activity is silly, and three, it’s a recipe for disaster if you have two people
who, unlike Dick Thompson and myself, don’t get along very well. So it seemed to me
we would end that. Senator McClure didn’t want to do retreats, and so I put the
Conference in the communications business.

DW: What did that involve?

MC: You don’t have time to hear about that today. But I’ll tell you what I’ll do, if you would
like it. I’ll arrange for you to have a tour of the Conference so you can see what it does.
We have a television studio, we do graphics works for the senators, we support them in
the visual, aural, and televised aspects of their legislative duties.

DW: Did that, as it turned out, become the central mission of the Conference during that time?

MC: Oh, yes. And it still is. My successors have improved upon it, and technology has
jumped forward several generations.

DW: How large a staff did you have?

MC: I’d have to look, I don’t know – 20 something.

DW: You also did the Policy luncheons, did you not?

MC: No – well, there’s nothing to doing those. All you have to do is – the restaurant staff
does most of the work. The Policy lunches are technically run by the chairman of the
Policy Committee. And the Policy – during most of the Baker years, if not all – it was
John Tower, you see, who presided over those lunches. But the agenda comes out of the
legislative schedule. So there is no – nobody has any preparation to do for it.

DW: That’s interesting, because I’ve been told by – firmly – by people who ought to know,
people who were attending these, not senators but some staff people, that the lunches
were Conference operations and the Conference chairman presided. But it was a Policy
Committee function and Tower presided?

MC: The Conference doesn’t have lunches and never has had lunches.

DW: Well, I’m just saying that I’ve simply been told by people.
MC: The regular Tuesday lunch they told you was run by the Conference? I don’t know who they are, but –

DW: I’m glad to have it straightened out.

MC: I’ll tell you, if you want the definitive – the person, the only person who’s been around here longer than I have and who has attended all of these meetings as I have, is Howard Greene. So talk to Howard, and he will support what I’ve told you.

DW: I’m not questioning you, it’s simply –

MC: I understand that, but I just am surprised that anybody would be so mixed up.

DW: What was the connection between what you and the Conference staff were doing and Baker’s leadership operation?

MC: We served all the Republican senators, and they were serving Howard Baker, which was quite right. That’s their mission, just as Walt Riker works for Dole; Walt Riker doesn’t work for Thad Cochran or Senator Smith or Slade Gorton.

DW: Talk about your relations with the Baker staff and what was involved there?

MC: When I was at the Conference, our relationship with the Baker staff was really – on the operational leverl it was really minimal, because the Baker staff was doing everything they could have and should have done for Baker. The Conference staff would have done anything that Senator Baker needed, except the leader had a very good press operation of his own and he’s probably the one senator who never uses the Conference. Because he just doesn’t need it. In order to know what I’m talking about, you really ought to go over there and take a look at that operation. I’ll give you the name of the person you need to talk to. You don’t want all of this junk in your – I hope you’re editing appropriately. But if you go take a look at that and you see what they do – well, occasionally we would do some charts for Senator Baker. These big beautiful colored things you see that he can hold up on the floor and talk about the budget or whatever he had in mind. So we would do some things like that and so on the mechanical level, and I would see, because I did attend the Tuesday lunches, I would see – at that point, it would be Jim Cannon and Jim Range – and deal with them and talk to them about the major, sort of overall, direction of things. The leader, whoever it is, somebody who doesn’t really need the service, the day-to-day services of the Conference, as much as somebody who doesn’t have his own.

DW: Do you recall any of the Tuesday lunches as being especially memorable?

MC: No, I really don’t.

DW: What would a typical lunch be like?
MC: Senator Tower – there was a head table where the leader – behind which the leader sat – I’m interested to note that the Democrats do that differently. You get involved in minutiae when you work around here long enough – the Democrats have their lunch with a series of little round tables of eight, kind of like a little party, and ours looked like a meeting. There’s a head table and at the center is the Policy Committee person, who doesn’t do a lot of talking but he is technically the person who opens and shuts the meeting, and then the majority leader is on his right and the Conference chairman on his left, and the Conference secretary and the president pro [temp] or the person who would be – I don’t know what you call Senator Thurmond – he’s the person who would be the president pro [temp] if we owned the place. The Campaign Committee chairman, who is now Senator Gramm, those people sit up facing the rest of the troops, who sit at two tables coming down from this. It’s kind of like a T with two legs or a pie. The staff would sit at the bottom of one of those two legs. The only difference I notice between then and now is that there’s a lot less concern about where people sit. And that had nothing to do with Senator Baker, and I don’t know what it did have to do with. Again, the lunches generally dealt with the legislative agenda. Clearly, right before elections, the report of the senator in charge of the Campaign Committee was the most interesting thing we had to listen to. That’s generally what the agenda was about.

DW: For the most part, would it actually be Baker’s meeting?

MC: No. It could have been, and it would be – if he had anything particular that he wanted – the leader always has the opportunity to affect the agenda whatever way he wants. But Senator Baker didn’t, most of the time, have a reason – every once in a while, he would get up and say, “Now, we have some problems to straighten out on this issue that’s coming up on the floor. There are a bunch of people who want to do this and another bunch who want to do that and some other people.” He always made a joke, and he would always make it kind of fun to hear him and to be there. He would say, “Who knows what so and so is going to do?” And then there would be a general laugh, you see, pick somebody who was all steamed up over something. And he would do different things. He might say we could have small meetings on the part of people who are interested in this, and if you’re not interested, you don’t want to sit here at the Policy lunch while we go on and on about a piece of legislation. Or we can have a conference and decide how to do it that way; that’s rather more serious and formal. Or we can wait until we see what we think the Democrats are going to do. He would go into some of the organizing possibilities, and people would talk it over, and he would decide from that what he thought would be most comfortable and sensible a way to deal with the question. But it was very informal.

DW: Was it the kind of meeting where Senator A might say, “I’m seriously considering offering this amendment,” or somebody says, “I understand that Democrat Senator B is thinking about filibustering,” and then there would be general conversation as to what do we do, what ought we to do, that kind of thing?

MC: Yes, that’s exactly the kind of thing.
DW: How often were conferences held?

MC: They are not scheduled at any given time, so it’s very hard to answer that. Maybe you’d wind up with one a month, but I’m just guessing. You might have three in a week and then none for six weeks.

DW: Is there a record of those any place?

MC: Of some of them, there is. The ones where there were elections and things of that sort, but they are very closely held. They don’t let them go anywhere, because – I don’t know why – that I can understand, though, because they are not talking on the record, and that’s the way they want it. Sometimes they say things that they wouldn’t want in the newspapers and neither, frankly, would some of the Democrats. They want to be able to say what they want. There are records kept of the policy lunches, and those are not stenographic recordings, they are just notes taken by the staff director of the Policy Committee. You can talk to him about those, but those are kept under wraps, too.

DW: So they are under the control of the Policy Committee still?

MC: Yes.

DW: Senator McClure was chairman of the Energy Committee and chairman of the Conference, so in two senses he’s part of the leadership. How did he view his role in the leadership?

MC: I don’t know exactly how to answer that; tell me more specifically what you’re looking for.

DW: What did he consider to be his mission as a member of the leadership? What were his purposes?

MC: I think the same as all the other leaders, to carry out whatever he sensed that his colleagues wanted done by him and with his organization. Indeed, what he did with the Conference was very well received by his colleagues, and they wound up asking him to do more of the same with respect to the various media services that he was providing. I think that was probably the principal thing, but you can ask him that. I don’t think he was messianic about it, but I don’t think they ever are; I don’t think they’d be elected if they were.

DW: Did you ever attend any of the leadership meetings at Baker’s office?


DW: What do you recall about those? What were they like?
MC: They weren’t distinctly different from the policy lunch, I don’t think, or _____ the same sort of thing on a closer – a little more efficient, because there are fewer people in the meetings. The ones I attended, I think were mainly aimed at specific legislative matters and strategy.

DW: Did you ever attend the staff meetings Baker held each morning?

MC: No.

DW: What was your personal relationship like with Baker?

MC: Oh, I thought – I was very fond of him; as I say, my first experience with him had to do with his rescue of my daughter’s puppy. I knew that he was going to be a good senator when he came to Washington after he was elected. I like him very much; he had a wonderful sense of humor. I remember asking him one day, he had a tie on that looked as if it had little fishing flies, dry flies, and it was during that business about the citrus crops and I asked him if his tie, if those were medflies on his tie. He enjoyed that; he pretended to be very cross with me for asking that, but I know that he was not. It was a very good relationship. It was interesting because the last time I had anything to do with him on a working basis – I’ve seen him socially since – I was in the Pentagon and he was chief of staff at the White House and I would occasionally come over with Frank Carlucci to deal with, again, a legislative matter but always at that point on defense-related matters. It was very comfortable, because I knew what he was like.

DW: Was anything distinctive about his style as a legislator?

MC: He knew how to make things work; he got along with people extraordinarily well. I think he probably got several extra miles a week out of people because they liked him. They wanted to do what he wanted done. He didn’t, as I say, break arms, he wasn’t Lyndon Johnson, but he was effective in his way.

DW: One thing that I and others puzzle over is as follows. On the Democratic side the leader holds a lot of things in his hand that are in several hands on the Republican side. There’s much more centralization, at least formally, on the Democratic side than on the Republican side.

MC: That’s the polite way of saying it. That reflects the difference in their views of government.

DW: Expand on that for a moment.

MC: Well, I think that central to the Democrat’s notion of government is that government is good; a strong government is good, a big government is good, and this is – because I can’t elaborate at length – it’s a bit facile, but by and large, decisions made for you are better made by the government than you can make them for yourself. Republicans, traditionally and normally, think that small government is good, that the individual’s
decisions about his own life, happiness, money, whatever, education, are better made by him. And if they can’t be made by him, they are best made closer to home. If you can’t make them yourself, they should be done by the local community, by the county, by the city, only then by the state, and as a last resort by the federal government. It’s a traditionally Augustinian view of government; that the requirement for government is a result of the fall as contrasted with the Ptolemist, which is that government is the natural condition – to be governed is a natural condition to mankind. There’s a very deep-seated and divided difference between the Republicans and Democrats on that issue. Not every single one, to be sure, but as a party, and that central – I like facetiously to refer to the habits of House as fascist – and it’s not too facetious actually – but it’s a Democrat way of running things, from the top down, it’s a pyramid. It would have been quite comfortable to Ptolemy. And Republicans don’t like that, they want power divided.

DW: At the time Baker was leader, particularly majority leader, what was the reality of power on the Republican side? How was it divided among Baker, others in the formal positions of leadership, and committee chairmen?

MC: The same way it is now and was before.

DW: Where does this leave the leader, then?

MC: The floor leader, as he was once called, is still a much, much stronger person than was originally envisaged when the Senate Republicans organized themselves. Originally, as I said, the Conference chairman – and this bears some more looking into – the Conference chairman was the Republican leader and these other people were relatively low down the totem pole. But the strong floor leader emerged; there was some – and I should look back at this myself, I should know this – but there was – and I don’t know who it was – but there was a Conference chairman a good long time ago who apparently was very weak and turned everything over to the floor leader and it never went back again. That’s in the fogs of history, but nothing has changed since. A little bit more attention, perhaps, is paid to the Campaign Committee chairman, I think increasingly.

DW: To what extent was there a tendency on the part of a McClure, a Tower, a Dominici, a Dole, when Baker was leader, to defer to Baker?

MC: It depends on what? They are never going to defer to any other senator on a matter of policy related to their state or of policy related to their convictions, but then nobody really expects that. There is a tendency to try to accommodate the leader when a question comes up. Here is the debt ceiling bill – this is one we’ve been over and over and over – and there is a – when Republicans are in the majority, there’s always the tendency to ask, “Please don’t clutter up the debt ceiling legislation,” which is a must-pass if anything is, “with whatever it is you may want to do,” whether it’s a matter of regional interest or grand policy or a scheme to redo the budget process or reorganize committees or do foreign policy or whatever it may be. People always think of attaching whatever it may be that they most want to do to the debt ceiling bills, which we still have to pass, unlike the House. But the leader is usually tasked with getting those amendments off, and he
has to try to figure out how to accommodate these people. Because he’s not going to be leader if he doesn’t, and he’s going to say to Senator So-and-so, “This bill on riparian rights is a fine bill, and I’ll do everything I can to help you get it up,” or, if we’re in the minority, to get it on something else as an amendment. And there is a definite tendency to try to defer to the leader when he wants to do that. Always has been. I don’t see any difference with Baker or anybody else.

DW:  So the leader’s influence is more in the realm of process than substance.


DW:  Do you have any sense of Baker’s relationship with Byrd? Did you develop any impressions about that?

MC:  I think it was good, I think, heaven knows, but if someone had a bad relationship with Byrd, it wouldn’t take long to find out. I think it was good. That’s all I know.

END OF TAPE