
Interview with Jimmy Carter

The interview was conducted in Atlanta, Georgia by David Welborn on December 11, 1996

Audio cassette 23
DW: This is an interview with President Carter at the Carter Presidential Center in Atlanta. The date is December the 11, 1996. President Carter, thank you very much for your generous offer of time this morning to talk a little bit about Howard Baker.

JC: Oh, it’s a pleasure to talk about Howard, [who is] as you know is a good friend.

DW: At this time twenty years ago, you were well into transition work prior to assuming the office of President, and Senator Baker was considering whether he would make a third effort to be elected as Republican leader in the Senate. As it turns out, he decided to try and we know what the results [of that] were. At that time were you acquainted with Senator Baker?

JC: Well I knew about him as a neighbor in Tennessee, obviously, and when my campaign was launched, I got about eighty-five percent of the votes in Georgia and [I] came in second best in Tennessee, so I felt very close to that state, and Senator Baker let me know, and his wife Joy did, too, that she voted for me –

DW: Is that right?

JC: Which always has made me very close to the Baker family, but I knew about Howard and was gratified that he would be the Republican with whom I would dealing, since he was a southerner and a neighbor, but I didn’t know anything really about how we might get along at [that] early stage. We had a long series of meetings though, during the transition phase, one I remember particularly at the Woodrow Wilson Center when Howard Baker was there, and I had ten major items on my agenda that I wanted to pursue in foreign policy, and one was Mid East peace, another one was relations with China, and so forth. And, I remember that Howard Baker was quite aggressive in asking me, “How far do you want to go with these matters?” And as a relatively naïve newcomer to the Washington scene, I outlined what I wanted to accomplish and after the meeting was over, Senator Baker, you know, expressed his general approval, although he recognized that some of the items were, would be quite controversial. So that was my first real encounter with Senator Baker.

DW: Do you recall that he asked tough questions?

JC: Yes he did ask tough questions, particularly about China and particularly about the Panama Canal treaties, if I remember correctly.

DW: Did he indicate to you, at that time, what kind of role he had in mind for himself as the Republican leader in dealing with you and your administration, especially in foreign policy area?

JC: No, not then, although his stature and his status in the Senate was well understood, and, I was to find, in the future, that my relationship with him was better than it was with some of the Democratic leaders, and this was a relationship that prevailed throughout my four years in the White House.
DW: Reading between the lines of Keeping Faith, I got the impression that the attitudes of Speaker O’Neill and Senator Byrd on dealing [with] Republicans perhaps posed some kind of constraint on you and the way in which you could deal with Republicans and Republican leadership in Congress. Is that a fair statement?

JC: Well, I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t say it imposed a restraint. My eagerness to deal harmoniously with the Republicans was contrary to the attitude of the speaker, in particular, and to some rest of degree with Senator Byrd. Byrd wanted me to look upon him as the preeminent, almost the exclusive voice of the Senate. And, Tip O’Neill, very liberal, was concerned about some of the attitudes and policies that I took to the White House concerning stringent budget decisions, strong defense, matters of that kind. My first promise, for instance, was to reorganize the federal government, and I had made campaign statements all over the nation that I was going to get the same kind of government reorganization bill through the House and Senate that had been done previously, that is, that I would propose changes in the federal government structure that would go into effect automatically unless the House and Senate didn’t vote them down, kind of a reverse veto arrangement. When I was in the White House, I couldn’t get a Democrat to introduce the bill, and so I turned to the Republicans to help me with it, which they did, and the bill passed and I think there were seventeen proposals that I made during the following four years, none of which were ever vetoed by the House and Senate. So that was the, that was, that happened within the first couple of weeks when I was in the White House. I saw that I would have to turn to what I would say were enlightened Republicans, who were not only compatible with me on basic philosophy on budget matters and government organization, but who were also, I think, wanted to kind of show that even as a minority group, they had some influence in the White House.

DW: I don’t want to put words in your mouth, but did you consider Senator Baker to be one of those enlightened Republicans?

JC: Yes, I did. Not only then, but all the way through the four years. My respect for him grew, and my, as my knowledge of him grew. When I was in a difficult position on the Panama Canal Treaties, on SALT II, on normalization of relations with China and so forth, I had a, usually an easy feeling, well, confident feeling, that when I met with Senator Baker just one-on-one in the Oval Office that the results of my meeting would be successful.

DW: Successful in what sense?

JC: In the sense that he would tell me the actual facts about how the votes would shape up in the Senate. He would give me good advice on what modifications I [might] have to make in my original thoughts or proposals, and almost invariably, Howard Baker supported my position. I would say it was very difficult for him on Panama Canal treaties, for instance. It was very difficult for him to pledge his support for SALT II. All the way through the Mid East peace process Baker was with me. I remember one time, I think it was when he said he would help me with SALT II, he said if I make one more right decision I won’t be
reelected in Tennessee.

DW: Of course, he wasn’t able to go so far as to support you on SALT II as it, as it turned out.

JC: Well that never did come to a vote –

DW: Right.

JC: – but what we decided when the Soviets went into Afghanistan was not to bring the SALT II treaty to a, to a conclusion. Of course, I didn’t get the SALT II agreement until mid-79, June of 79, but, but Baker was supportive of the concept but he wasn’t willing publically to endorse the SALT II treaty. And, and it was a five year treaty. That was the agreement. When the Soviets went into Afghanistan, I decided not to bring the treaty to a vote in the Senate. But Brezhnev and I both agreed that we would implement all the terms of the SALT II treaty, and we did so, and the SALT II treaty went [a] good bit beyond the five year time frame for it without being ratified officially by the Senate.

DW: Obviously one of the things I am interested in is how two men with their own partisan obligations, you, a Democratic president and, Senator Baker, a Republican Senate leader, work together and sometimes in opposition on important questions. Early on there was some, some relatively sharp partisan differences that surfaced in the relationship between the White House and the Congress over certain appointments, the Sorenson appointment for example, and then there was [the] campaign finance reform and labor law reform, and I was curious as to, in which Senator Baker was associated or aligned with those in opposition to what you were, you were asking or proposing. How does such partisan disputes affect a relationship such as that between you and Senator Baker?

JC: Well the Sorenson appointment was, the Sorenson appointment clarified before inauguration day, and there was an overwhelming adverse reaction in the Senate to Ted Sorenson as [a] head of CIA, without my knowing it, or being aware of it at the time I asked him to take that position, he had made some comments concerning Cuba and other things that never could have withstood Senate hearings. So it wasn’t just, I didn’t look on that as a partisan thing because the conservative Democrats, including Senator Nunn and Senator Talmadge came to me also and said this is a suggestion that you’ve made that is not going to go through. So I talked to Ted Sorenson about it and he withdrew his name, not wanting to face the Senate hearings and the adverse publicity. Well, you know, I never did have any feeling that Baker’s disagreement with me on issues was predicated on a partisan confrontation, and I think in retrospect I had a lot more differences with Tip O’Neill and with Bob Byrd than I did with Howard Baker, and I’ve said this many times, not just here or talking to you about Senator Baker. And when he did disagree with me it was never, there was never any subterfuge about it. He had, I think he would agree, that he had a feeling that any time he wanted to come to the Oval Office and discuss matters with me about the Senate, he was certainly free to do so. On a few occasions, Senator Byrd got quite angry about this. And it was difficult for Frank Moore, who was handling my congressional affairs, to put down those, those fires, and I would have to invite Senator Byrd and maybe his wife to come out to the White House for a supper and talk to
him, and reassure him that my primary relationship with the Senate was through the Democratic majority leader, but Senator Byrd was very jealous of his prerogative, and looked upon my personal friendship with Howard Baker and the ease with which he and I related as a challenge to Senator Byrd’s preeminence.

DW: You know, it just occurred to me in preparing for this interview, [and] I should have realized this some time ago, but that discussions or treatments of your presidency the first couple of years tend to emphasize the, your role as the outsider without Washington experience, and the same for Frank Moore, in regard to congressional relations. But what people don’t tend to take into account is that you were dealing with an entirely new set of congressional leaders. All of these people were new in their positions as well, and perhaps they had something to learn about it.

JC: Well all of us had something to learn, but I didn’t, I think I underestimated the natural human inclination on the part of these new leaders to protect their turf. I think had they been there [for] twenty years, they would have been much more accommodating, much more sure of themselves, and much less sensitive about any challenge to their positions, whatever it might be, either speaker, majority leader, whatever. I presume you’ve talked to Frank Moore who –

DW: Yes I have.

JC: – would have vivid memories [BACKGROUND NOISE]. That is [good].

DW: This is an aside of sorts, but do you recall what your sense of, sense was at the time of the relationship between Baker and Byrd in running the Senate and in the conduct of Senate business?

JC: Well that would be a question that others could answer better than I, and people who know Senator Byrd, I think would be unanimous in knowing that was an extremely proud man, a very ambitious man who had come from an abject poverty-stricken childhood as an orphan, had struggled upward through the maelstrom of West Virginia politics successfully, and probably knew as much, or more, about the inner workings of the Senate than any other person alive today, at least, and had hammered out his role as a, as a whip, first of all, challenging I think Senator Kennedy, who was at his utmost popularity, and then moving on to majority leader. Senator Byrd was extremely sensitive about his role, and, and I don’t know how he and Baker related when they got together in Byrd’s private office to talk about setting an agenda and so forth, but as far as I was concerned, I’ve already described that, I need not belabor that, and I’m not really critical of Senator Byrd. I understand his attitude, but, but he did not want me to deal with Senator Byrd or anyone else in the Senate, even individual Democratic senators, without his either knowing about it or approving of it. And he, and he let me know that, most often through Frank Moore. I mean he would say, he would raise hell with Frank Moore, but when he was in the Oval Office with me, Senator Byrd was properly deferential to an incumbent president.
In *Keeping Faith*, you quote a diary entry of January 16, 78, in regard to a meeting with Senator Baker and he told you a couple of things in that meeting, according to the entry, that he would support you on the Panama Canal treaties, and, also that Republicans would make an issue of SALT II, and, you note in the entry that Baker also said that he would like to work closely with you as his father-in-law, Senator Dirksen, had worked with other presidents, and I think he probably had Johnson particularly –

He did, yes.

Did that, did he elaborate on what, do you recall whether he elaborated at that time on what “working closely” meant to him and the kind of relationship he had in mind?

No, I don’t remember many specifics at that time, but, but I put that quote which is, which was dictated that day, I never modified the, the entries in my diary. As soon as Senator Baker left my office, I picked up [a] tape recorder and spoke into the tape recorder, and then when the tape recorder, tape was full, I threw it in the out-basket and my secretary typed it up, and I’ve never modified a word in my diary, so it is just as

So you pass, PASSED the [BACKGROUND NOISE] test?

Exactly, yes, and no one, very few, no one’s ever seen that diary except Steve. I don’t think anybody else has ever seen my diary. It’s six thousand pages of diary notes, and someday, you know, [it] will probably be published in some fashion. But I interpreted that entry to encapsulate my relationship with Baker, [that when], that he wanted to be supportive whenever possible. He had to represent the basic philosophy or attitudes of the Republican party. There would be times, maybe, when even partisan issues would deliberately be raised in anticipation of a congressional election or something of that kind. His personal opinions might sometimes be different from those of the party forum, or caucus. He would let me know about that, but his responsibility as minority leader was to represent the collective or majority view of the members of the Republican party in the Senate, but his overall commitment was to be as supportive and as, and as free with his advice and counsel and information as Dirksen had been with Johnson.

Did Baker’s presidential candidacy have any impact on the way in which you two worked together?

No, I don’t think so. I hardly remember that, you know. My problem was with Kennedy’s presidential candidacy, and when he saw that I was vulnerable after the hostages were taken, and even a few months earlier, he launched a major campaign against me, and in, I think in November or December of 79, he was three-to-one ahead of me in the public opinion polls. And I felt that Senator Byrd was helping, helping Kennedy. So my overwhelming recollection of presidential campaign was, is related to my own. Not, not, I didn’t pay any attention much to Republican opposition, and eventually in all the primaries that were held, I defeated Kennedy more than two-to-one, but in spite of the fact that the hostages were being held and that the global inflation rate was high and so
forth, I still beat Kennedy pretty badly. So, I don’t know how to answer that question.

DW: Okay. Another related question that you might, might elicit the same response, do you recall how you, to the extent you’ve looked at the Republican field, how you sized up Senator Baker as a prospective Republican candidate in 1980?

JC: Well, if I could have chosen someone to represent the Republican party with [the] prospect of victory, I would have chosen Howard Baker, you know, who represented a basic philosophy toward government and toward American life that was more compatible with my own. And I can’t recall at this moment any Republican candidate that I think would have best represented my own attitude toward important issues then, than Baker. Who would have been the most formidable opponent of mine, I can’t say. I presume that Ronald Reagan, looking at history, would certainly be the answer, but whether my own political advisors at time thought that Reagan would be more formidable than Baker, I don’t know. So I would presume that naturally the Democratic partisan leaders would have been hoping for the most vulnerable Republican to be chosen. It turned out that Reagan was very formidable, and as you know, Reagan almost knocked off Gerald Ford who was an incumbent Republican president in the convention of 1976.

DC: [Yes]. In the, in regard to the canal treaties, how would you characterize the path Senator Baker took to support the treaties? Did he have to be persuaded, or was this, in your view, an entirely independent judgment he arrived at?

JC: I think both. He could answer that question better than I, but, my recollection is that Baker knew that those treaties should be consummated, but that his commitment was predicated to a great degree on whether the ratification had a chance. You know, why should he alienate the right wing of the Republican party in a fruitless vote, and it became obvious to a lot of people toward the end of the worst political confrontation I have ever experienced in my life, it was more difficult to get that treaty ratified than it was to get elected president, but it became obvious toward the end of that struggle that every vote was going to count, but that we did have a chance to get the two-thirds there. And, I think that was the two things that Baker was considering: “Should I vote for what I know is right and lose and alienate the Republicans who might give me the nomination for president, or should I vote right?” And I think that this was a very courageous thing for him to do, finally to vote for the treaties because, I still get, if you look at my mail this month, I’ll get at least three letters every month, still, almost twenty years later, condemning me for the Panama Canal Treaties. I talked to Senator Sam Nunn yesterday. It was the most difficult thing that he ever did was to vote for the Panama Canal Treaties. [That very well have cost] Senator Talmadge’s reelection, don’t know, but Baker showed extreme courage politically to support the canal treaties.

DW: In addition to his own vote, in your estimation, did he bring other votes with him?

JC: I think yes. I think if Baker had announced, for instance, “I cannot support the Panama Canal Treaties,” it would have been doomed. There is no doubt about that, because a lot of the senators were equivocal. As I pointed out in the book, of the senators that voted for
it, that were up for election, only seven of them came back the next January. The attrition rate was horrendous. And it was a predictable thing. I mean the pressures on the senators to vote against the Panama Canal treaties was almost incomprehensible now, looking back on it. They really, even the ones who had safe seats, they thought, four years later were defeated because they voted for the treaties.

**DW:** Well I know that Senator Baker was apprehensive about the, perhaps unduly, about the effect that it would have not only on his presidential ambitions, but on his campaign for reelection in 78 in Tennessee, and it was an issue.

**JC:** Sure it was an issue.

**DW:** But it turns out that he had no major difficulties.

**JC:** Well one of the, I think one of the things to be egocentric about it, egotistical about it, is that I was very popular in Tennessee, you know, and, even when I didn’t enjoy great popularity on a nationwide basis, I mean, I think a lot of the Tennesseans were still, overwhelming had voted for me, I don’t remember the exact vote, but it was way up, high, and, and so, I think Senator Baker’s support of me as a first southern president was not unpopular in Tennessee, so [it] kind of took that edge off. The damage done to Senator Baker, which was clear at the time, to him I’m sure more than I, more than to me, was his prospects of being nominated in a conservative Republican primary, or at a conservative Republican convention. That was a tough thing for him, because the ones who were against the treaties were fervent and I think we probably had a majority of American people who said, “Okay, I think [it’s] a good idea.” They didn’t care much one way or the other, though, for the intensity of [their] opposition was overwhelming.

**DW:** Do you recall your visit to Tennessee in the fall of 78, an obligatory visit in which you appeared with Jane Eskind who was –

**JC:** Yes –

**DW:** – Senator Baker’s –

**JC:** – I do.

**DW:** – opponent in that campaign?

**JC:** Yes, I do.

**DW:** She tells it that, we interviewed her a couple of weeks ago in Nashville, and she tells an interesting story that she and Frank Moore still chuckle about when, not knowing she was not supposed to, at some point she grabbed your arm and raised it up. Do you recall anything about that?

**JC:** No, I don’t recall that.
DW: That, the campaign staff had said, you know, trying to draw a subtle line at what this trip meant.

JC: My heart [BACKGROUND NOISE].

DW: Keep hands off [BACKGROUND NOISE], but she got enthusiastic and, so, she still laughs about that. Did you ever try to marshal your forces and bring Senator Baker around on SALT II?

JC: I didn’t think it was necessary. I mean, I don’t know what his recollection is, but my recollection is that he told me it was a good treaty, but that he didn’t think the Republicans could support it, and he advised me to talk to Ford and Nixon, which I did. Both of them supported the SALT II treaty, and, I never did try to convince Baker to support it, to repeat what I said earlier in our interview, because it became a moot question. There was no way, after Christmas holiday season in 1979 for us to even consider ratification of the treaties because the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan.

DW: What is your overall assessment of Baker as Senate Republican leader and leader of the opposition during your presidency?

JC: From a selfish point of view, I could not have asked for a more cooperative and helpful and enlightened and competent leader. He, when he couldn’t support my position, he told me the truth, or when I asked him for advice about the general tone of attitude in the Senate, he shared his frank opinions with me. He helped me deal, sometimes successfully, with Senator Bob Byrd, and I think he gave me good advice in an overall fashion on matters that I had to address as president. I never had a feeling that he was antagonistic toward me or that he was misleading me in any way, and I respected him as a partisan leader.

DW: And at the same time, he seemed to be rather effective in helping to position the Republicans, through what, the Senate Republicans were doing, to contest the 80 election.

JC: Yah, well of course, I mean, that was inevitable, and that was, I would have, I would have thought much less of him had he failed to do so. He was a Republican. I was a Democrat. And that partisan distinction, particularly as election years rolled around was legitimately an overwhelming issue, particularly on, even on domestic and international affairs that would have a detectable or predictable impact on the election outcome. I mean, I could understand that. I was a politician, too.

DW: What do you have to say about his performance as Majority Leader during those four years of Reagan’s first term, and of his move to the White House and services as Chief of Staff?

JC: [Well] I don’t really know much about it, and I’d rather not say something
[INAUDIBLE] that I don’t know. When I was defeated in 80 and came home, I deliberately removed myself from the Washington scene. I wasn’t welcome by Reagan or his administration. And, I had no role to play up there. I was, I came home deeply in debt, financially. I wrote this book and I sold my business to pay off my debts, and I just really didn’t play any role in it. I stayed aloof and rarely went to Washington. But my impression was that Senator Baker continued to be a very good and strong leader, now in a majority position, and I think this opinion of mine was obviously mirrored by the incumbent president who asked him to move into the White House at a top level, but what went on within the Washington –

DW:  Sure, I understand.

JC:   – scene, I don’t really know.

DW:  Do your paths cross at all these days?

JC:   Oh, on occasion, for a few months at least he was on the Gannett Board of Directors with Rosalyn, and Rosalyn saw him then, and I probably saw him a couple of times. He participated in a couple of events here at the Carter Center after I left the White House, but we don’t get the chance to see each other very often anymore. I am very happy with his new marriage.

DW:  And I trust he is, as well.

JC:   Well I am sure he is. That is wonderful. I thought that was a great accomplishment for him.

DW:  President Carter, is there a tough question that I should have asked you that I haven’t asked you?

JC:   This will have to be the last one because Nancy said I’ve got another appointment.

DW:  Okay, all right. Is there anything that you would like to add, anything that you would like to, any comment you like to make before we conclude the interview?

JC:   No, I don’t think so. In a way, I wish I had some negative things to say about Senator Baker to balance off what I’ve already said, and I am very frank about what I, about my comments of other people, but in retrospect, except in the proposition that we were leaders in opposing political parties, I just don’t think that he could possibly have been, had a more gratifying relationship with me than he did, and I have no, I can’t think of anything that I could add to our conversation that would be negative about, about Senator Baker.

DW:  Well, thank you very much Mr. President.

JC:   Sure. Glad to do it.
DW: We appreciate it.

JC: Thank you.