
Interview with William Gribbin

The interview was conducted by David Welborn in Washington DC on January 7, 1998

Audio cassette 5b2
DW: This is a continuation of the interview with Bill Gribbin. The date is January 7, 1998, and a Happy New Year to you, sir.

WG: The same to both of you.

DW: And we are once again in the Majority Leader's Office in the United States Senate. In our previous conversation, at one point you said that during a certain period of time, when Senator Baker was the Minority Leader, some of his Republican colleagues would refer to him from time to time as "the Assistant Majority Leader."

WG: Very privately refer to him that way.

DW: Very privately. What I want to ask you about that is this. Was that just in reference to the position Senator Baker took on the Panama Canal Treaties or did it have a broader meaning than that?

WG: No, it was broader. It was broader, in that the conservative wing of the Party didn't want a whole lot of things done, and Senator Baker was always known as a deal maker....and I don't mean that in a pejorative sense. But sometimes you crack a deal to prevent something worse from happening, etc. In addition, there was a generational shift. That is now, I think, quite clear. The same kind of thing that happened in the House....a little later...as the young Turks took over....and regardless of ideology.....wanted to be more confrontational. Ideology is one thing....style is another. And a large part of this is stylistic. When you want leaders to be sort of in-the-face of the Democratic leadership, I'm afraid that wasn't Howard Baker style. Unless they crossed a certain line. Unless they were going to breach ____ and that sort of thing. Senator Dole, later, although he is not the subject of this conversation, had much the same problem.....with young Turks, if you want to call them that, wanting him to be more smash-'em-up. I'm referring to the kind of people who were disappointed in Dole's farewell speech here, when he spent all that time talking about how he had cooperated with the Democrats to accomplish things.... collaborated with George McGovern on nutrition programs, etc. So in a way.... ____ just a little....we went through a great generational change here....just look at the membership. How many of them are so much younger than I am. And there is a stylistic difference. So it was broader than Panama Canal.

DW: Could another part of it be Baker's generation's instinctive....reverence, perhaps, is too
strong a term....for the institution of the presidency, and an inclination to give deference to a
certain point to even a Democratic president?

WG: Oh yes, absolutely. Absolutely. That was a factor. That, of course, no longer exists either
way. The Democrats in Congress never suffered from that. But yes, it was a Republican
disease.....you might even call it Republican pathology. Which no longer exists. It was a
one-way respect, that's the problem. When you can think of the way Congressional
Democrats treated Ronald Reagan, for example. But there was some-thing to be said in the
old order that used to exist around here, for deference to the presidency. You even saw
some of that at the start of the Clinton Administration. Look how reluctant Congressional
Republicans were to say what they really felt about the health care boondoggle, until the
public sort of caught on and then Congressional Republicans came running after the
Republicans saying, "Yes, this guy is a liar, a fraud, a cheat," etc., which they never would
have said on their own. Never would have said on their own. In addition, there was...with
Baker and his generation... entirely apart from the presidency, a greater respect for the
system and a greater awareness that you'd better not run down the system too much....you'd
better not tear down the system verbally too much...because the system is all that stands
between you and some very nasty and unpleasant things out there....that you've got to keep
this machine running, because if it breaks down, you don't know what's going to produce
just produce legislation but produce social cohesion, etc. So there is something broader at
work here. Yes.

DW: And then also, just a footnote, Baker had immediately before him the example, which he
observed very, very closely, the kind of working relationship that his father-in-law, Everett
Dirksen, had with Lyndon Johnson.

WG: Yes, of course. Yes, of course. Yes. This was a long-standing pattern. I would add
another factor to it. And that is, the Republican minority mind-set. Remember, you were
dealing with people who had never been in the Majority, and frankly, did not believe they
would ever be in the Majority. Election night 1980 came as a shock to an awful lot of
Republicans....not just Democrats, but Republicans. Just as some years later, in the House
in 1994....now the difference there is, in 1994 the Republican Majority there did not come
as a shock to what you might call "the Gingrich crowd...the new leadership." It came as a
shock to a lot of the old bulls, who never in their life thought they would be a committee
chair. And they woke up in the morning and realized, "I'm going to be a committee
chair....what shall I do?" And so I don't mean that to be too pejorative, but that was a factor,
too. You were dealing with people who people like me could never convince that, "Yes, you could be a Majority...you could actually own this place. You can run this place." Now, how alien that sounds here, because now you've got a whole generation of senators here who think, "Couldn't be any other way, could it. We're on top. We're going to stay here." They'll find out, won't they.

**DW:** Do you remember where you were election night 1980?

**WG:** I was at the Policy Committee. I was at the Policy Committee with a lot of other people, watching the returns come in, and for whatever reasons, we were feeling confident about Reagan's election. No matter how close the polls made it. I think probably because most of us could not imagine Reagan losing. And we had high hopes for a lot of races. As they fell, and remember it was the left wing Democrats who were falling....we were not knocking off Southern conservatives....I remember very well the atmosphere there. It was very emphatic.

I remember, at one point, I don't know if it was when they announced that Frank Church had lost, or Culver, or one of them, and I looked at our interns. So many of us who are somewhat older were reacting very emphatically to this. Because, frankly...and I don't mean this to be nasty, but to be honest with you, so many of us...we hated those people....hated those people, not because they were Democrats or anything, but because of what they had done to the country. From our perspective, the great evil they had done, and from our perspective, the great evil they had knowingly done to this country. So frankly, yes, we hated those people....as bad people who had hurt our country...hurt the American family....hurt everything we loved and stood for. And so we reacted very emphatically. And I looked at our interns, who were looking at us like we were crazy. They were young folks...college kids who I realized at that point didn't begin to understand why we felt so strongly about this, and why we were so dedicated to getting rid of these people. A little epiphany on my part.

**DW:** Just to go back and clarify a matter. I think you made a reference to periodic meetings of the press secretaries of senators sponsored by the Policy Committee. Did I understand correctly?

**WG:** Well, we were doing AAs and [LEG] directors. I don't know at what point we started doing press secretaries, because I don't do press. I was never involved in all that.

**DW:** And I was just curious because this is the first time it had come up. Perhaps this came along post Baker.
WG: I don't know.

DW: I'll just have to check it out.

WG: I've stayed away from the media side.

DW: Talk a little bit about the [Roland] influence of the Steering Committee and its staff during the time Baker was the Leader.

WG: Enormous. The Steering Committee, though there's no secret about it, has been one of the best kept secrets of the Senate. I wonder how many political scientists in the country never heard of the Senate Steering Committee, because it's not an official committee. As a matter of fact, Robert C. Byrd....you may have heard about this incident....when he was Majority Leader....was storming on the Senate floor, "Who ...what is the Steering Committee? Who is this Margo Carlisle?" We still like to mock him for that. Had his staff been doing their work, they would have let him know who Margo Carlisle was and what the Steering Committee was. This goes a long way back and I assume you know the history of the Steering Committee...how it was formed, etc. The lesson to be learned from the Steering Committee, as from the old House Republican Study Committee that no longer exists...alas...and from the first one of these operations, the DSG, the Democratic Study Group of the House side, formed back in the 1960s by a small group of Democratic leftists who were dissatisfied that their party was not left enough. And from a very small cadre pooling their resources and discovering that a tiny group of people who cooperate and know what they want and know what they're going to do to get it, can have influence out of all proportion to their numbers when they are in a group of people who don't know what they want, etc. The Senate Steering Committee operated on much the same basis. The first time I attended a Steering Committee meeting was in 1975 in one of these hideaway rooms up here....they might have been called crevices...and there may have been 4 or 5 senators present. The Steering Committee today is most Republican senators. And the Steering Committee was "the little engine that could." By coordinating activities, a small group of people....frankly it came to have a weight in Republican circles out of all proportion to its numbers. First of all because it did things. They made a difference. They stood up to Democrats. And as time went by, my goodness, you looked around the Republican leadership and just about everybody was a Steering Committee member. You want to look through the Republican leadership now and see who came up through the Steering
Committee? It's very graphic. It is a very, very important part of what happened to the Senate in the last quarter century, and virtually unknown...even in the Senate, now, the Steering Committee is such a fact of life, with so many senators attending his luncheons, etc., that most staff...you know the turnover here...could not imagine what it was like for this small cadre of sort of fringies getting together and trying to get something done often despite the leadership.

DW: Well, I think at the time of the height of its influence, there were only about 12 or 13 members of the Steering Committee in the sense that there were only about 12 or 13 people who were actually ponying up money to support the operation. And my understanding is, a couple of the most important things that the Steering Committee did, at least in the 1970s, was to decide upon opposition strategy, including amendment strategy, to bills that were moving toward the floor. Is that correct?

WG: Yes. Absolutely. Death by amendment. Which frequently...go all the way back...sometimes when the Democrats discovered that senator so-and-so had 20 or 30 amendments, and sometimes they would be printed in the Record or go on an Appropriation bill, they'd deal. Basically you would think, well what would it take to _____ 1 or 2? What we probably would call a "gorilla strategy" here, and it often worked. The Steering Committee staff....I can think of one individual in particular who was very ingenious at coming up with dozens and scores of amendments, and save the taxpayers billions and billions and billions of dollars....you know, they and The Washington Post never knew it. The eccentric's story of how the media completely missed what was going on, or didn't care what was going on.

DW: It's interesting, in regard to the media. There is one very good piece on the Steering Committee, and I've forgotten who wrote it, that was published in CQ in about 1978, giving the history of it, current membership, etc.

WG: Have you talked to Margo Carlisle?

DW: I haven't talked to Margo.

WG: Have you talked to Jade West?

DW: Not yet.
WG: Are you going to talk to Jade West?

DW: Well, we're in negotiations.

WG: Yes. And the current staff director is Mike Solon, who used to be, for a while there, was our Staff Economist here. Before that was Phil Gramm's legislative director. Mike is married to a lovely lady named Carol Hornby Solon, who was one of the stalwarts over the old House Republican Study Committee....the counterpart to the Steering Committee. Way back in years and years and years gone by.

DW: How do you spell his last name?

WG: S-o-l-o-n. Mike Solon.

DW: How did the role of the Steering Committee change when Senator Baker became Majority Leader and the Republicans were in the Majority with a Republican in the White House?

WG: Well....obviously they were less oppositional, if you want to call it that. Steering Committee senators, like any other Republican senators, would be more reluctant to throw grenades at their own Leader. You talked before, that Baker had excellent personal relationships with most senators. And rather than surprise a Robert C. Byrd...instead of throwing grenades at Robert C. Byrd, they would be more likely to talk to Howard Baker about what their concerns were, and see if something could be worked out, and it would be very unusual for them to threaten to offer 20 amendments when Baker said, "Look, let's work out a time agreement. You get 2 amendments; they get 2 amendments." So yes, there would obviously be a shift. What wouldn't change would be the role of the Steering Committee as the engine of ideological advance. That would not change. Especially as members of the Steering Committee got into the leadership. And remember, the Steering Committee had excellent relationships with the Reagan White House. And with staff in the Reagan White House....a lot of staff in their ______, so that all sorts of Steering Committee concerns....everything from patronage to support for amendments, etc., could be worked out around Howard Baker. In 1981, when I was Deputy Director of Legislative Affairs for the White House, I was very attentive to the Steering Committee staff concerns....obviously. As a matter of fact, the first Congressional meeting Ronald Reagan had as President.....Max Friedersdorf asked me....we were talking about what we should do right off the bat, and I
told him the first 3 people Reagan should see were Jesse Helms, Jim McClure, who was Chairman of the Steering Committee, and I think Bill Armstrong. I'm not sure of that. And he did. That was apart from a meeting with Howard Baker. Those were the first Congressional meetings Reagan had to establish that close kind of bond....which continued. Know, that didn't mean that the Steering Committee was always in accord with the Administration. As a matter of fact, later that year when we were doing the economic package, and Bill Armstrong out of nowhere...offers an amendment to the economic package to index...to index the tax rates. OK? I don't know how Howard Baker felt about that. I suspect he probably didn't like it. I know how Don Regen, Secretary Regen, felt about it.....he was bananas over it. And Max Friedersdorf was set down by Jim Baker to talk Bill Armstrong out of this. Oh yeah! Just like taking the bike away from a Hell's Angel. Came back empty handed, you bet.

DW: Armstrong won on that.

WG: You bet he won. Yes. You bet he won. But that sort of thing happened all the time. I was always giving a heads-up to friendly offices...House and Senate...keeping in touch with nobodies like Newt Gingrich, etc. And that's just the natural pace of the way the City works.

DW: One more question about the Steering Committee. My impression is...and correct me if I'm wrong...that the staff of the Steering Committee stood ready to provide the same kind of assistance to the staff of Steering Committee members as the staff of the Policy Committee provided to all Republican senators.

WG: Yes, but that's too narrow. That's too narrow. From issue to issue the Steering Committee staff, if there was a senator who was sympathetic to a particular point of view, they could work with that senator. And in addition, there was an intimate working relationship between the Steering Committee staff and the Policy Committee staff. So much so that sometimes people couldn't tell us apart. You're talking about not only professional relationships, but very close personal relationships. All those years I was at Policy, in the 1980s, as well as 1977-78-79-80...Dick Thompson, who was our Staff Director at Policy in the late 1970s had been McClure's AA, when McClure was Chairman of the _____, Margo Carlisle is one of the people who helped me get sort of my feet on the ground here in the business, so that it really was a team, and yet the divisions that appear on paper are really very artificial. So often when there was gorilla activity on the floor, there was Policy Committee staff, there was Steering Committee staff, and Robert C. Byrd could dislike us all together.
DW: It wasn't just, "Who is that Margo Carlisle?" It was "And who are all the rest of these people giving us trouble?" Let me ask you a little bit more about the Policy Committee relations with Baker's staff. You said from time to time Jim Range would run things by you, to see how conservatives would react. Would these involve substantive matters, procedural matters, questions of scheduling?

WG: They really would be more substantive matters. No scheduling, but sort of above my pay grade. All very formal, of course. All very formal. And when Jim Cannon was here, and Jim Cannon and Max, of course, had very close working relationship with the White House, and so when Cannon was here...don't ask me for specifics, now, because memory fades, but we would be in meetings together, and wind up doing things vaguely together, especially things against the Carter Administration, where we had a united front....in general.

DW: Was there a degree of tension between Baker's own Leadership staff and the Policy Committee staff operation?

WG: Tension, no. If any kind of person...people you're talking about, like Dick Thompson, for example, and Cannon....you know...pros...there is no place for personal tension. Disagreements are one thing, but tension is something else. I'll give you an example. Back then, Baker and Henry Bellmon, the ranking Republican on the Budget Committee...former governor of Oklahoma...did the Baker-Bellmon Welfare Bill. OK? In response to the Carter Welfare Bill. The Carter Welfare Bill was a farce...a joke. The Baker-Bellmon Bill was terrible...terrible. I think Baker's folks knew how I felt about that, and we killed both of them. There was no compromise between the two of them. Both of them were exposed as just dreadful. They were basically the anti-thesis of everything we're doing now. And today I don't think either proposal could be taken seriously in the Congress. But you're talking about 1977-78-79....it was a different world. And I worked very, very hard, including writing newspaper articles for conservative publications, rallying the troops, etc. I worked very hard to kill both those things. That didn't in the least impair personal relationships. It would never occur to me to personalize any of that.

DW: Elaborate just a bit further as to how you went about with others, went about exposing what was really involved in these two pieces of legislation.

WG: Well, by virtue of our position at Policy, and personal reputations, we would have a certain
credibility with other staffers, and when you have a piece of legislation, you consider very flawed for the following reasons, you simplify what those reasons are; you explain this is in here....you might want your boss to know this is in here before you sign on to this as a co-sponsor....read this section, read this section, look at it, etc., etc. It was fairly easy to...again, because of personal credibility without outside organizations to call those outside...whether it's the American conservative union, or human events, or whatever else....an eagle form....I've got a one-pager, or a two-pager on this particular piece of legislation. You all look at this closely...you make your own judgment...but this is how I see it. And people are not fools...and they are not going to be led around by the nose. If what you're telling them is the truth, then they can react to that according to their own value systems. Even give them misinformation, distort what's in a bill...that's the last time you do that, because there goes your credibility. And we've been here....in another 6 weeks it'll be 23 years....without credibility you don't stay here that long. And so that's how you did it.

DW: So individual senators would then be getting the word from your staff people. They would be hearing from constituents.

WG: Yes. We would never have put out a Policy Committee paper saying, "10 major defects of the Baker-Bellmon Welfare Bill."

DW: That would not have been wise.
WG: _____ considerations are not out of respect. You just would not do that. The closest we would come to something like that, back in the late 1970s, when Javits and Chuck Percy and some other major Republicans were pushing with the administration....I think the Consumer Protection Agency....remember that?

DW: Oh yes.

WG: Well, we did a pro and con paper. The problem is....and we did this as fairly as we could....with pros and cons....Chuck Percy was so upset by the cons that he came storming to protest to Max about this hatchet job, which was about as fair as we could do. Let me give you one other example of how Policy Committee folks could operate independently of leadership. I don't think last time we talked about DC statehood.

DW: No. [END OF TAPE]