
Interview with Robert Liberatore

The interview was conducted by David Welborn in Washington, DC on April 20, 1993

Audio cassette 1
Robert Liberatore was a staff member in the U.S. Senate (1975-1984). He worked as legislative director for Senator Floyd Haskell (D-Colorado). In 1979 Liberatore joined the Democratic Policy Committee in the Senate. He was the Staff Economist for Robert C. Byrd. In 1981, after the Democrats had lost the Senate in the Reagan election, he became Staff Director of the Democratic Policy Committee. He served in that capacity for the next four years. He saw Senator Byrd transition from majority leader to minority leader. He watched Howard Baker, Jr. become majority leader in the United States Senate.

Robert Liberatore graduated from Georgetown University. He was assistant treasurer and international corporate loan officer at Chase Manhattan Bank in New York and Kingston (1972-1975). He was appointed Head of Global External Affairs and Public Policy at Daimler Chrysler (1993).

http://www.reuters.com/finance/stocks/officerProfile?symbol=FI.MI&officerId=1540663

Interviewer

David M. Welborn received a Ph.D. from the University of Texas, Austin. He served on the faculties of Indiana University, Texas Tech University, Northern Illinois University, and the University of Kansas. He was a member of the University of Tennessee faculty from 1973 to 1996. He was named a Distinguished Faculty Member in 2000.

Welborn served on the Advisory Committee of the Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy. He coordinated the Howard H. Baker, Jr. Oral History Project, focusing on party leadership in the United States Senate with specific attention on Baker’s service as the Republican leader.

David Welborn died on October 14, 2011.

http://www.utk.edu/torchbearer/2011/12/david-m-welborn-ut-retiree/

Select subjects


Format

Interview transcribed from Sony HF 90-minute tape.
RL: My name is Robert Liberatore. I go by Rob. And I served in the Senate as a staffer from mid-1975 through the end of 1984. I worked for Floyd Haskell, who was a Democratic senator from Colorado for three-and-a-half-years until he lost to Bill Armstrong in 1978, and I was his Legislative Director. And then in the summer of 1979 I joined the Democratic Policy Committee in the Senate, which was chaired by Robert Byrd, who at the time was the Majority Leader in the Senate. And I joined that staff as the Staff Economist and the person who worked on economic budget business issues, taxes for Byrd. I served in that role for a year-and-a-half, and then in 1981, after the Democrats had lost the Senate in the Reagan election, I became Staff Director of the Democratic Policy Committee, and I served in that capacity for the next four years, or during the first four years of the Democrats' exodus from power, their long and lonely exodus into the status of the minority. So I got to see both roles up close, that is, that of the Majority Leader and the Minority Leader in the same person of Byrd. And I got to watch Howard Baker make the transition from Minority Leader to Majority Leader. A transition I would say that came as a shock to him and his colleagues, because I don't think anybody reasonably expected the Democrats to lose the Senate in 1980. There's a little bit of talk about it, but nobody was really expecting that to happen.

DW: What was the impact of the 1980 electoral results on Senate Democrats? How did they, how did it hit them?

RL: Well, they were stunned and surprised. I mean, they expect, I think they lost thirteen or fourteen seats, I don't remember the exact number, but…

DW: No, I don’t, I can’t, I think somewhere in there, yes.

RL: Yah, it's a big number. And it was, turned out to be more than most people had expected, although it was interesting that in watching the election returns with Byrd in his office the night of the election, there were probably fifteen or twenty staffers in the John F. Kennedy office which is on the second floor of the Capitol, the Senate wing of the Capitol right by the revolving door by the second floor entrance, and it was a room that Byrd used as a Conference Room, and he himself, had a little much smaller room that is now the office of, let's see, who's got that, the Secretary of the Senate had it for a while but then he moved out, I don't even know who's in there anymore, but, Byrd would hold long, long staff meetings or get-togethers in this office, and we would spend, on average, three or four hours a day,
sometimes, in that office with him. And so we were all watching the returns, and it was about 8:00 o'clock after two or three people had lost somewhat unexpectedly, early returns came in, Senate returns, and Byrd stood up and said, "We're going to lose the Senate." And I think we all sort of scoffed. No one was expecting it. And in fact, there were some returns that came in, you know, ten hours later by half a, you know, a quarter of a percent, the race turned on a quarter of a percent but they all went against the Democrats. So, first of all, the Democratic senators were shocked. Second of all, they didn't know how to behave. They didn't understand the role of the minority. And a little bit of history. I, it, I watched the Senate change from a more collegial bipartisan place to a vastly more partisan place in the late 70s.

DW: Could I interrupt to ask you, at that point, what was forcing that change, or what was causing that change, in your view?

RL: I think it was a combination of, a combination of many things. It was the long, long time for the Republicans to have been in the minority. A view that this sort of cooperative, collegial, bipartisan approach was never going to get them the majority back. They seized, the Republicans seized on Kemp-Roth, the tax cut in the mid-to-late 70s as their rallying cry. Of course you had Jimmy Carter as President, who, you know, caused Democrats, really, to lose the Senate, I mean it was that election, that wipe out election that took them down with him. And they spent certainly 79 and 80 casting vote after vote, or causing to be cast vote after vote, on what they were trying to create as defining issues. And the defining issue was this Kemp-Roth tax cut. And you got moderate Democrats, like Howard Baker, you know, lining up, and you know, if Howard Baker was a moderate then, then liberal Democrats, who didn't believe in Kemp-Roth, lining up and voting with it, in 1979 and 80, trying to create this record to run against Democratic incumbents on. And, you know, Helms was getting more and more active in those days, but on the social issues, you know, abortion and prayer in school and all that stuff, trying to force votes on those things, so that challengers could use those votes to defeat incumbent Democrats. And while that was all a big nuisance, and Panama Canal was another one of those issues, back in 1979, while that was all somewhat of a nuisance, the real defining issue was Kemp-Roth. And, so after the Democrats lost the Senate, there was a lot of groping around trying to figure out what to do. First of all, the committee chairmen were no longer committee chairmen. They lost their staffs that they would have as virtue of being chairmen, the rule on most of the committees was that the majority was to have twice the staff of the minority. And so, the Republicans
got to, you know, hire a bunch of people, and the Democrats had to fire a whole lot of people. And, I think it took several months to dawn on a lot of these guys that the world had changed and that they didn't have much of a role to play, in forming policy, certainly not in 1981. A lot of them were petrified about their own re-election. So there was a tension in 1981 between those senators who had figured out relatively quickly that the way the Republicans had gotten into the majority was not by being collegial and cooperative and sort of acting in the national interest, above all, but rather by donning a very sort of hard partisan edge, and creating a record of votes that would cause the Democrats to lose the election. For example, well, here's another good one. Votes on motions to raise the debt limit. I mean, you go and you pass tax cuts or spending increases that require the federal government to borrow money, but there was a process in place that, whenever you borrowed money that would get to a certain limit, you would have to raise that limit so as to authorize more debt. It was completely a mechanical function. You had already cast all the votes already that said you were going to go out and borrow the money, by virtue of having passed the spending bills. But the Republicans would always, in the last two years, in 79 and 80, they would make that vote on raising the debt limit a partisan vote, so that, you know, Senator Church, from Idaho, was a big spending Democrat, because he voted to raise the national debt from $800 million dollars to $850 million, billion dollars. And the Republicans mostly all voted against it. So early on, we in the Policy Committee staff came to the view that we weren't going to have a whole lot of role in national policy that, that Reagan was defining, that we were going to have to play defense, that Reagan was defining the agenda, and so it made sense to do what the Republicans had done. And Byrd got this very quickly, I mean, his view was he wasn't going to cast another vote to raise the debt limit. The Republicans were now in control. They had always, for the last two years they had gotten highly partisan, made the Democrats cast these votes, because, and if you didn't raise the debt limit then you couldn't write Social Security checks, I mean the whole government would just stop. So all these arguments about responsibility and all that kind of stuff, you know, the Republicans had turned a deaf ear to in 78, 79, and 80. So, in 1981, Byrd led the effort to get Democrats not to vote for the debt limit. And you got all these guys like Jesse Helms and all the conservative Republicans who had never in their careers voted to increase the debt limit, then having to vote to increase the debt limit. Except we had a lot of guys on our side who instinctively felt it was morally reprehensible to do this, because they had been arguing all these years that the Republicans were a bunch of frauds, they had voted for all this stuff and now they were refusing to pay for it. So they didn't want to play that, a guy like Bentsen in particular, who just refused to go along, and Kennedy, a
whole lot of people. And the first couple times we tried it, there were fifteen or twenty Democrats who, ten or fifteen, whatever it was, who voted to increase. And as their votes came in, Republicans changed their votes and voted against it. So that caused a fury in the caucus, that, you know: "You idiots. You are letting these guys, who used to burn us at the stake on this issue, you're letting them not have to vote for it." So, the second or third time we tried it, it was, we got it down to about one or two Democrats voting to increase the debt limit and all, you know, all the Republicans having to vote that way. And, Howard Baker’s, well, first of all, a little bit about the process of congealing as a minority, because that took a while. Cause these guys were used, the tradition was they were committee chairmen; they relied on the Majority Leader to schedule their bill. Once in a while when there was a, when there was a particularly contentious issue like the Panama Canal, they relied on the Majority Leader to help them get their bill passed. But mostly, they just as soon, they saw Byrd's role as making the trains run on time. They didn't see him as a party spokesman, particularly. They had a Democrat in the White House. He was sort of their legislative mechanic. Byrd never had, in the time I was at the Policy Committee, I don't think there was ever a meeting of the Democratic Policy Committee, of senators. I mean, there was this enormous staff, well, it wasn't that enormous, actually. In the majority it was, it was maybe twenty people. And, but he, as chairman, controlled that staff, and he used it as his leadership staff. And never had the Committee meet, because he saw it just as something that would get in his way, interfere with his exercise of his authority as Majority Leader. In the meantime, the Republicans, while in the minority, were having weekly conference luncheons. And that was one of the mechanisms they used to sort of congeal themselves, as a force, and, you know, cast these partisan issues. And that helped to create the sort of partisan tradition that was relatively new to the Senate. You know, I don’t know, I'm not a Senate historian, so I'm sure there are periods in the Senate when you got these periods of highly partisan votes. But in recent history it started in the late 70s. And part of the way it was done was with these conference luncheons. The Republicans used their conference luncheon. They were also organized differently, in that they had a different, a Conference Chairman, a Policy Committee Chairman, and then a Majority Leader. And they all had different staffs. Whereas the Democrats, the Policy Committee Chairman was Byrd. The Congress Chairman was Byrd. The Majority Leader was Byrd. And they all had the same staff. I mean, there were different budgets, but when I was Staff Director, I controlled the Conference staff and the Policy Committee staff budgets as if, and the people were signed up on different rosters for purpose of pay, but they functioned as a single unit. There was no difference between the two staffs.
DW: This is a small point, and after I raise this, let me go back and ask you to elaborate on some of the points you discussed. I did a rough check, and I think that in 1981 there were twenty-two staff members listed in the Congressional Staff Directory under the Policy Committee. In 1984 there were thirty-three listed.

RL: Right.

DW: What accounts for the increase?

RL: Well, I started to say that the function that most senators saw for Byrd was not as a policy maker. He was a mechanic. He ran the Senate, made sure that they could go for their fundraisers, make sure there wouldn't be votes the day that they were away, that he would organize their, you know, find trips for them to take abroad, whatever. And he wouldn't get in their limelight. His shadow wouldn't get, that's how you get a Kennedy and a Russell Long, you know, agreeing on Robert Byrd. I mean, ideologically, you know, diverse, agreeing on a Robert Byrd as their Majority Leader. Yet, what they discovered in the minority was, nobody cared what they had to say about anything, anymore. The Republicans would write bills with a Republican, with a Republican majority on the committee. They would not consult Russell Long. I mean, eventually he figured out, I mean he used to stand up in 1981 and make these speeches about how, when, in the caucus, how when Eisenhower was President, Lyndon Johnson didn't try and fight him on every single thing that came along. That he went along with a lot of things Ike wanted to do, cause that's what the American people wanted, and that's what we should do, now that we're in the minority, we should go along. Once in a while we should stand and fight, but only once in a while. And we should be a cooperative minority and, you know. Well, he made those speeches for a couple a years, and then, eventually, after being frozen out for a couple of years in the process of writing tax bills, he sort of got more enthused about, you know, trying to create Democratic alternatives and defined, define the party, have the Congress, the congressional party define the party nationally. So you change from a system where you had a Majority Leader who was, in effect, the, you had a Democratic President in the White House, you had a Majority Leader who, whose job it was to make the trains run on time and not necessarily be a national spokesman, or a policy maker. You changed from that to having a Republican in the White House, being in the minority, oh and then a system of strong chairmen, to virtually no power as ranking minority member, because Republicans didn't care what we had to say about anything. I mean, they had so gotten themselves into a working force, and
they were so exalted at having won back the chairmanships and the majority, and having a President set their agenda in the White House, their job, and Howard Baker's great accomplishment as Majority Leader was to deliver Ronald Reagan his agenda. They didn't make the stuff up in the Senate. They just did what, pretty much what the White House told them to. And, you know Byrd once said, we'll get into Byrd's view of Baker, whom he greatly admired and had real fondness for, there are very few people I can think of Byrd having fondness for, using you know that word, that emotive word, but he was genuinely fond of Howard Baker. Everybody was. I mean, the guy was the most charming and beguiling guy you could ever want to meet. And wily as a fox, I mean, I have great respect for his abilities and, you know, I wouldn't be so bold as to say I have affection for him, because we weren't peers, but a fondness for him, too.

DW: Describe his wiliness for me.

RL: Well, let me finish the original thought. Byrd said of him, "You know, I was always the Senate's man." In other words, he would do what he thought was in the interest of the Senate or sometimes the interest of West Virginia. But he was not Carter's man. Baker, Howard, is the President's man. And he said all the time that, you know, Ronald Reagan gets all this credit for being this great legislative genius and strategist, and all this stuff. He said, you know: “Without Howard Baker, he wouldn't have gotten any of this program." And after we finally figured out how to get ourselves to operate a bit like the minority did, and we staffed up the Policy Committee to bring in more issues experts, because the initiatives weren't coming out of the committees. The Democrats on the committees, the way they would when they were chairmen, and they had their own big staffs. And when they would, it was hard to get consensus around them, because they weren't built from a perspective of the whole caucus. So we became, the Policy Committee became the source of lots, I'd say at least half of what would be characterized as any Democratic, or more, Democratic initiatives came out of our staff. And we had to be staffed up to do that. So everything as, sort of as, you know, like I was saying, you know, stupid things like, you know, getting everybody to vote against the debt limit, to, you know, major policy initiatives like a resolution to, on the Marines in Lebanon, where we would get none, and Glenn and Kennedy and, you know, it would be our people who would go out and figure out, "Where's the consensus here? How can we get?" and we got every Democrat to vote for that resolution, and then, which effectively challenged the President's ability to put them in there, invoking the War Powers Act, in effect. Only one Democrat voted against it,
George Mitchell, he's Lebanese, partially Lebanese. And then the Marines were blown up, you know, and so. But anyway, it was necessary to have people who could, who were legislative operatives, more people than were there, because the staff of twenty, ten of them were people who put out the voting records of the Senate, on a bipartisan basis, who were in effect the clerks of the Senate, not, there is a Clerk of the Senate, but I mean, not that role, but I mean we did the votes, daily bulletins that say, you know, what's in each bill that comes up, they would just go to the Democrats, kept senators' voting records, I mean all of this stuff, there was a group of clerks, eight or nine of those people, of those 21, were basically, that's what they did. Not at all involved in the policy process. Then there was a very small issue staff, that's what I joined in 79. And then there was a staff of floor people, who were truly the mechanics that scheduled legislation, and there are four of them. So that was the staff. And what we beefed, what we did, the reason the staff grew is we beefed up the policy staff, to get more people in there to handle these varieties of issues, and we created a communications arm, that didn't exist, for the Policy Committee, or the leadership staff, that was like what the Republicans had in the Democratic conference.

DW: In the Republican conference.

RL: I'm sorry, in the Republican conference.

DW: That was Margo Carlisle's operation.

RL: That's right. We were just copycatting. They, again, in this era of sort of creating a partisan force, they created this Republican conference communications office. It was a PR thing. Well, no one had ever done that, I mean, the idea of party partisan communications. So, I mean, they'd forced the Democrats to vote somehow, and then Bango, this communications thing would be beaming it out on the air waves that, you know, Frank Church just voted to raise the debt limit. So, in effect, moving what might traditionally have been a electoral political effort, in house, into the Senate. So we did the same thing, you know, fought fire with fire. Plus there was also a, they started this process of satellite feeds, and that was very popular with senators, where you would go into the recording studio and you'd have Senator Boren talking about agriculture bill and beam him up, and then call the stations in Oklahoma, and they'd pull him down, and so they'd get their own senator talking about this bill. And it's very effective way for these members to get, communicate back home. So anyway, we set that up, and that took a bunch of staff to do, as well. So that's why the
numbers went up. But the role changed. We changed from being Robert C. Byrd's staff, which we basically were in 1980, to being the staff of the Democratic conference as a whole. Now surely we were Byrd's staff, and they all saw us as Byrd's staff. But for the first time, and I don't know how much this is still like this under Mitchell, for the first time, Democratic senators started coming to us about, you know, "Let's think. You know, we've got the Social Security thing coming up, here. Reagan's voted, Reagan’s proposed cutting Social Security COLA benefits." I mean, that to me is one of the great examples of how we took, it took us 2 years to get to this, but how we took a tradition that the Republicans had established and went to town on them. And we made them vote seven times on that issue. And Baker would line em up. I mean, he would come down, he would sit on the desk, this table, the Republicans would have a table in front of the desk, and the Democrats would have a table. And Baker would sit on the Republican table and look up the aisle as they would come marching in to vote, and whenever he wanted their vote, he would sit on that table. That was his signal. And I can't remember what the thing was. I don't know whether there was Social Security, I think it was Social Security, Al D'Amato came down and he was screaming and spitting mad, that Baker was making him, I mean, you know, for the whole gallery, for everybody saying, "Howard, no, damn it, Howard, I'm not going to vote on this!" And, but he got the, you know, he got the vote. And if you go back and you look at 81, 82, you will see the Republicans casting a series of votes against inoculating children against, you know, communicable diseases, again, you know, they'd line up, and, it was amazing, those were the sort of, you know, at the end of the day, not very important votes, it turned out. But things like Kemp-Roth, where they, you know, which Baker called a river boat gamble, and a lot of them had historically questioned, you know, they all lined up and voted for it. And that was the, that was, you know, Reagan's mandate. But it was also the fact that they had finally gotten the majority, and the way they were going to keep it is by sticking together. They'd gotten it by sticking together and they were going to keep it by sticking together. Now eventually that crumbled. In 83, 84 you really started seeing it come apart, where the Chafees and the, you know, sometimes Danforth, and, you know, others would just sort of drift away from that hard block of Republicans. But, in the years that mattered, which were 80, which was really 1981, I mean, Reagan's agenda was set, and the agenda we live by today, almost, the budget agenda of Ronald Reagan was set in 1981. The course was set with Kemp-Roth and whatever the hell that name of that budget –

DW: The Reconciliation Act of 81?
RL: Yah. Oh, whatever it was, named after a couple of congressmen, budgeteer congressmen Republicans. Well, actually, they made it bipartisan in the House. And, you know, a large number of Democrats went along with Kemp-Roth. I mean that's an indication of how scared they were, in 1981, that they were next, because a large number of Democrats were up for re-election in 82. I think it was like a 2:1 ratio, Democrats to Republicans. You know, of the third of the Senate that's up, two-thirds of that third were Democrats, in 1982. So they were petrified, including Byrd, that they were going, they were next. And so, we had started off with a, and in fact O'Neill and Byrd got into a public spat about this. O'Neill basically said the Senate Democrats were chickens, because he took on Kemp-Roth, you know, the 30 percent tax cut [thing]. And the Democrats only sort of picked at it, in the Senate. Now some took it on, you know, the Kennedys and the Cranstons, and those guys took it on frontally. But Byrd and a lot of others, they would just pick at it. Just, you know, maybe take a little, you know, cut down how much you were going to give millionaires. Give it, [sort of] like real little refinement votes as opposed to a vote against it. And, by the end of 82, first of all, the recession had lingered for so long, that, at this point, you know, it, things weren't looking good for the Republican in the congressional elections. The nit pack, which was the right-wing group that had been very effective, they had finally figured out a way to inoculate against nit packing, and Byrd did it in West Virginia, you know, saying that these outside, this outside outfit is coming, and, you know, the right-wing extremists, and, so he [sort of] inoculated against them that by mid-82, most of these guys that were up for re-election in 82 weren't worried anymore, and the ones who were worried were Republicans. And in fact, after all the Social Security votes in 1982, and the sustained recession and, you know, this whole litany of votes that we had forced them to cast, and I've got some books up here that actually show this stuff, we put it in a format that was useful to the press and to whoever else might want to read it, like a Democratic challenger, that would take these apparently incoherent, you know, random votes and put them together in subject, and say, "Here is why the Republicans, here is what the Democrats tried to do about children, you know, infants and children and all this stuff, as an issue, or education, or, you know, budget sanity, or whatever the thing was, and somebody could read this and then look at all those votes and go to the back and see how somebody voted, and, you run a campaign on it.

DW: Let me ask you this. Take any example you choose. You mentioned developing a position on the deployment of troops to Lebanon, a moment ago. When you were trying to develop a consensus on the Democratic side on a policy position, how did you go about doing that?
RL: Well, first of all, we convinced Byrd, and he was reluctant at first, he was not anxious to do this, that he should start holding weekly luncheons, like the Republicans did. And those weekly luncheons became a place to vent. There were only, you know, two or three, four staff people and senators, and that's it. And you got to see where people were coming from. I mean, you, I mean you could figure out fairly quickly where there was a consensus point and where there wasn't just from the debate in the caucus. And where it was worth trying to push an initiative, and where, you know, you just never were going to get anywhere. And, it would, we, Byrd, in the minority, we used task forces, as a way of congealing, as opposed to giving the responsibility to the ranking minority member, the former chairman.

DW: Would these be task forces that would span a number of committees?

RL: Exactly.

DW: Yah.

RL: So the idea was to break out of the committee's system, to break the hold of the former committee chairman, the ranking member, and to –

DW: Was there resistance to this, on their part?

RL: Yes. Oh, sure. But that resistance changed through time, because once they realized that they were absolutely like bumps on a log, I mean they were absolutely useless as members of their committees, even though they were ranking members because the Republicans would just go off and write all these bills without them, they got more and more interested in getting the leverage that would come with consensus of the Democrats, because if they could get consensus of the Democrats and then pick off a few Republicans, they could carry the day. And, at a minimum they wanted to start, they understood this process of creating a legislative record for challengers to run against. So they could win the Senate back. I mean, that became a great motivating force, because they had seen it done to them. And, you know, nationally, the best interests of the country, I mean some people would say that that was, you know, a large motivating factor with a lot of them, but more and more, but an equal dose of it was trying to win back the power they had lost. And so, while some of them resisted task forces initially cause they saw it usurping their power, when they realized they didn't have any power to be usurped, they went along. One of the most resistant through the
whole process was Russell Long. He, you know, [had a] long-time chairman of the Finance Committee, the most powerful committee in the Senate. He was, and among the most conservative members of the Senate, he was of the caucus. He was one of the last ones, really, to stop resisting. But even he, at the, you know, by year three or four, was saying, you know, "Mr. Leader, you ought to get a group of us together and we ought to go do such and such."

DW: As I recall, when the Senate Finance Committee was working on the 1982 tax bill, the, Dole convened the Republicans who worked at the last stage in the process, in a closed meeting [with] the Republican members of the Committee in a closed meeting excluding all Democrats, and then they opened the door and walked out with the final product. That probably had an impression on Senator Long.

RL: That did. It did. But in the early, it was interesting, in the first six months this was all very, they were trying to feel their way in 1981, they were trying to feel their way and, a lot of em resisted being partisan. I mean, they, you know, they found what the Republicans had done to be terribly distasteful, and you got a whole spectrum on that. I mean, you got Pell who, you know, on foreign policy just, you know, just wouldn't, you know, refused to do it. And you'd get a guy like Eagleton who hated the policies of Ronald Reagan so much that he would stand up and make these impassioned speeches in the caucus, I mean really, one of the, they’re the ones I most remember. [It’s] funny, I don't know why that is, but Eagleton was the most impassioned, most furious about what he saw happening to his view of the world, and, and that, you know, God damn it, we didn't deserve to be called Democrats if we weren't willing to go out and fight, and we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. You know, really interesting sort of rallying cries. Then you'd see these guys sort of sitting there looking up trying not to connect eyes with him because they were going to go out and vote with the Republicans. So –

DW: Alright, so you had, so you had [these sorts of] issues in the luncheons.

RL: In each, we would, yah, we would, you know, Byrd controlled the agenda in the luncheons, and it was our job to develop those agenda, to, you know, give him talking points, to suggest that he call on Senator so-and-so and so-and-so to address this issue and that issue. We would have worked with Senator so-and-so and or, his staff, perhaps, to sort of prime them. I mean, we would try to orchestrate things in that caucus, and sometimes it would
work and sometimes it wouldn't. Frequently it would work. I mean, we did, there were a lot of initiatives that came out of the caucus in the four years that I was there.

DW: Explain to me, if you can, I know there are extreme subtleties here, the weight that Senator Byrd personally was able to exercise in leading to a particular conclusion in these undertakings.

RL: Well –

DW: Really what role was he playing and what impact did he have, as the Republican leader, I mean as the Democratic leader, excuse me?

RL: Well, he, Byrd always worked very hard at being fair with his colleagues, and spreading the glory around, and I think, you know, he didn't threaten them, that's why he got to be leader in the first place, he was sort of a non-threatening, so, Ted Kennedy could still be the liberal guy and, you know, Fritz Hollings could still be whatever he wanted to be and, they could all be their own, Church could be Mr. Foreign Policy and, he wouldn't get in the way. In the minority, his role was to try to sort of, you know, explain, to try to develop a common view of the situation, you know. "Here's how I see how we find ourselves." And that was our role. I mean, we would write those scripts for him. And, and try to be inclusive, try to bring in different points of, you know, the different ideologies within the caucus, and constantly be pushing the notion of "Let's try to remember that we are, we don't have any strength going out there as individuals if we, we've got to reproduce what the Republicans did. We've got to get ourselves together as a block, cause they're off as a block, and until we're a block, we're useless." And eventually that thought took hold. There was a lot of grousing about Byrd as a spokesman. I mean, Hollings in particular was, you know, openly derisive toward Byrd, as were some others, that, you know, he was not the ideal national spokesman. Suddenly he and Tip O'Neill are thrust onto the national stage. And, and he obviously was not the ideal national spokesman for the Democratic Party. But he was generally effective in the inside stuff, and sometimes, I can't remember the specifics, but I know that there were instances where there were groups of Democrats who were actually mad at him for being too collegial with Baker. And he would say to us, "You know, I could have raised this point a order or that point a order on Howard today. I could have really messed him up." He wouldn't have used those words "messed him up," but "I could have thrown a spanner in Howard's works today, big time. But I just, I can't do that to Howard." I mean he really,
there were sometimes he would say, "Well I'm going to go out there and I'm going to spring this amendment." He’s say, you know, he’d call me up and say, you know, "What are we going to do on this, this budget? You know, the Republicans are trying to make us vote on prayer in schools. What do they not want to vote on?" And I'd, you know, say, oh, I know where there was a good example. They were trying to get Mondale to denounce Farrakhan or somebody, back in 84. Somebody introduced a resolution, the senator from Idaho, the real hard—

DW:  Steve Sims?

RL:  Steve Sims introduced a resolution to call on the Democratic candidate to denounce Farrakhan or something. Or Jesse Jackson, or somebody [from], there was some real hot stuff going on, and, you know, Byrd called up in a panic and said, you know, "Our people don't want to vote on this, you know, what do they not want to vote on?" And we found, somehow we came up very quickly with some statement that somebody had made about the Holocaust, and Jews, it wasn't Jesse, it wasn't Jesse Helms, but it was some right-wing hero, had said something about the Holocaust, no the Jews were, the Nazis were right, that's what it was. I forget who this was, but it was a great debate. You ought to go look this up.

DW:  I will.

RL:  It was a riot.

DW:  I will.

RL:  It was during the election period in 84. And so, I ran up to the Senate floor, and I showed it to Byrd, and he, you know, he had this big grin on his face, and he said, "See if you can find somebody to go offer it." So I gave it to Biden, I think. And he hopped up and, you know, and he offered that as a second-degree amendment to the Republican amendment. And everybody decided, "Maybe we ought to just get rid of both these amendments." But, I mean, that kind of stuff, he would generally warn Baker that he was going to do it, in advance. Not always, but sometimes. And, you know, we'd all sort of shake our heads because, you know, once you'd told em, then they can figure out some counter-strategy. Then he'd say, "Well I just, you know, I just can't," now I'm sure Baker's version would be, "He used to stick it to me all the time with his damn amendments he'd have in his pocket."
DW: Well, you know, his people don't, his people don’t say that. What they say is that, Baker, they felt that Byrd tested Baker on a few occasions, shortly after Baker had become Majority Leader, but after that, the relationship was as you described it. And they say that one of Baker's key strategies in dealing with Senator Byrd was to make absolutely sure that Byrd was well informed as to everything Senator Baker intended to do, on the floor, so he would not be surprised.

RL: That's what he did. And that would disarm Byrd, you see, because if Baker had been more, like Dole, more combative, in a procedural way, for example, Baker never tried to use the rules to fight with Byrd, because that would just get, that would be just what Byrd wanted. So he, you know, I don't know what Howard would say to him, but I'm sure he’d go over and say, you know, "Robert, I'm, sure you can, you know, make some point of order here, and I could do the same, but I don't want to do that. Can't we figure some way out of this?" And, whereas Dole would raise some point of order, Byrd would go, "Wow!" You know, he could have run rings around Dole, in terms of the rules, and so that would have been right down Byrd's alley, so.

DW: We've been going for about an hour now, which was the time we asked for. Let me end it here with the hopes that we can come back because this is just extraordinarily fascinating [and] useful, with one final question to close the circle, as it were. On election night in 1980, Senator Byrd and his people were around the corner, as it were, from where I think Senator Baker and his people were over in the Republican Leader's office. Do you remember anything about any interaction between the two offices that night?

RL: I don't. I don't remember anything. That doesn't mean there wasn't any. I don't remember.

DW: Cause I, it is, when you think about it, a rather dramatic picture of these two groups just at a very, very surprising transfer of power, occurring, and nobody is prepared for it.

RL: Right. Yah, I, it may be. That's worth exploring. It may be that Byrd called Baker. It wouldn't surprise me if he did. I just can't remember his doing it.

DW: Okay. Well, let me thank you at this point.

RL: Okay.
END OF THIS INTERVIEW 4-20-94