
Interview with Jody Powell

The interview was conducted by David Welborn on May 4, 1994

Audio cassette 108b
DW: _____ morning, what we in Knoxville call Blackberry Winter. I don't know what you call it in Georgia.

JP: Cold.

DW: But, in any case, we appreciate the opportunity to come in off the street and talk about what some might consider to be ancient history—having to do with the time that you were in the White House with President Carter and Howard Baker was the Republican Leader in the Senate, particularly. Do you recall when you first became aware that there was a Republican senator from Tennessee named Howard Baker?

JP: I don't recall the precise moment, but I'm sure it was on the day he was first elected, because just growing up in the South and being interested in politics and Southern politics, I generally kept track of what was going on in a general sense around the region and the country. And of course, back in those days, Southern Republican senators were kind of new in and of themselves because of their scarcity.

DW: Were there any shock waves that hit Georgia, our neighbor to the south, when Tennessee committed the heresy of electing their first Republican since Reconstruction?

JP: Well, I guess yes and no. Tennessee was always a kind of a perverse state, as you from the deep south had that whole east end of the state that had marched to a different drummer a century ago, and that that had produced a difference in politics. We, of course, had somewhat of the same thing in the mountain counties of north Georgia, but it was just a much smaller part of the state, so its impact on state politics was much—but even, if you look back, as you well know, in the period leading up to the Civil War and then the Reconstruction period after that, all the way up to the—Tennessee had a different type of politics, a more competitive party system, more so than before the sort of—Roosevelt sort of solidified the solid Democratic south, but in that period of time prior to—between the Civil War and Reconstruction, in the 1930s, than was the case in other parts of the freedom.

DW: One additional contextual question along those lines. What was the condition of the Republican party in Georgia when President Carter was governor?

JP: Beginning to emerge primarily in the areas that one would expect—the suburbs around

Atlanta and a few other places. A not insignificant part of it, coming from the movement of outsiders from other parts of the country into the Atlanta area. It was still, and I think to a significant degree, a different sort of Republicanism from southern Republicanism today. The movement of more conservative, blue collar and rural voters in the Republican party really had not begun, and to the extent they were disaffected from the Democratic party and were voting otherwise, they tended—George Wallace provided a temporary home for them for a number of years. Republicans in the Georgian legislature really tended to be and to see themselves more as good government types who, in a way, were pitted against a more traditional county, political, rural, Democratic organizations, etc., and I want to be careful how I say this, but the Republican's savant strategy and the extent that that was based upon and built upon racial antagonisms, etc.—it really hadn't begun to make itself felt in Georgia politics in 1970. So the dynamic was quite different. And frankly, in many cases, Jimmy Carter, as Governor of Georgia in 1971 through January of 1975, enjoyed a great deal of support from the Republicans in the legislature, because in many cases they very closely identified with his sort of reformist views, new ways of doing things, efficiency, better management, anti-corruption—that sort of thing.

DW: When Governor, did President Carter systematically make an effort to bring these people into his coalition in the legislature?

JP: Oh, yes. It was obvious from the beginning that in many cases they were natural allies, and that the principle opposition for the things he wanted to do was going to come, not from the Republicans—and understand the Republicans were not a sizable force, but every vote counts when it's close, right—but we, organizing the state government to make it more efficient, that sort of thing. That was a natural constituency, and the natural opponents were going to be Democrats who had a vested interest in the existing state of affairs.

DW: This is perhaps getting ahead of the story, but I think some people would say, from the Republican perspective at any rate, that President Carter perhaps did not do enough when he was president to reach out to Republicans in the Congress and particularly in the Senate on a more or less continuing way to try to draw support, and this hurt him. Would you comment on that?

JP: Well, I suppose it depends on where you sit. My overall view is that the United States Congress without regard to party is the most adept institution in the history of mankind in
blaming its own failures on somebody else. And that it is most commonly the president, of whichever party, when the real answer to why is generally—well, the reason why is because “it was a damn tough vote and I just didn't quite have the guts to make it.” The actual answer you will usually get is that the president didn't spend enough time with them or didn't call them, or didn't pay enough attention to them, or didn't serve enough free liquor at the White House, or sold the boat so they couldn't ride down the river together. Which doesn't mean there may not be some truth in what you say, but another way of looking at that is that—I think the Carter Administration was the last time that there really has been any significant ongoing bipartisan cooperation, without regard to which president was in the White House—there have been episodes of it since then, but they have become rarer and rarer. And I don't put that—the credit that existed and maybe is entirely at the feet of President Carter or the administration, I don't put the growing lack of it, by any means, entirely at the feet of succeeding presidents of either party. I think it's an unfortunate aspect of our political system in this town. But in some ways, looking back on those four years, and trying to place them in context of the past 30 or 40, they almost seem to me now as if they're a throwback to an earlier era in terms of the degree to which there was genuine—and I think there's a difference between genuine bipartisan work toward a commonly shared goal and what I think now is more often when it happens, very transient alliances of conveniences over this or that than that particular thing. I mean, I had the sense that on some very major things there was an understanding of—perhaps not too strongly, to put it as a sense of obligation felt, to work together and consult together and place national interest above partisan interest, that now is a very, very rare thing.

DW: There are some particular situations in which that seemed to be played that I want to ask you about a little bit later on, but do you recall when the first time that you met Howard Baker personally?

JP: I honestly don't. I am sure it must have been some time during those White House years. I guess I ought to explain that the reason for that is that I had enough problems on my plate, trying to deal with the press, without getting myself in the line of fire dealing with the legislative branch.

DW: Just to clarify the record. President Carter had upon occasion had bipartisan Congressional leadership meetings. Would you attend those?

JP: Occasionally, yes.
DW: What do you recall about those? What were they like? What was going on?

JP: They always made me nervous—not just the bipartisan ones, but the Democratic ones, too, that—I felt like the President was being pretty forthcoming in terms of being frank about what he thought and where he was headed, etc., in that my usual experience was that the reward for that was that, sooner or later, and usually sooner, something he said got leaked by one of the Congressional attendees in a way that was unflattering to a president and to the administration. But that's just a Press Secretary's point of view, I guess. And as I said, the don't think the Republicans were any more guilty than the Democrats—in fact, in most cases, less so.

DW: What was the nature of President Carter's relationship with Senator Byrd, in your view? How would you describe that?

JP: Prickly.

DW: Why was it prickly?

JP: I don't know. They were both very proud men. Senator Byrd, a person who generally sees himself very much within the context of an institution—the United States Senate is very proud of that—and a very aggressive protector of what he sees as the statue and prerogatives, etc. of that institution and that body, which is, in many ways, admirable. I think, and this is not anything that was ever said to me, it is totally an observation on my part, but I think sometimes President Carter was less convinced that there was that much to be proud of about the behavior of the body. And was frequently impatient with the procedures and the processes, etc., which Senator Byrd and others saw as being something to be proud of and to be protected, and President Carter sometimes saw as being impediments to getting anything done in a reasonable amount of time.

DW: Would his patience show through in his interaction with people like Byrd and other senators?

JP: I think he was generally, to the best of my knowledge, very careful about his sort of unfailingly courteous, etc. I don't recall sort of sharp or bitter exchanges. Senator Byrd
used to hold a meeting with the press every Saturday, and I would guess two out of three of those Saturdays, whatever story came out of those meetings, was critical of the present Administration. I think he had another thing going there, too, that Democrats in the Congress were not accustomed to governing with a Democratic president, for most of them, and they had grown accustomed to be deluged with ______ legislative branch dealing with a president of the other party. At the same time I think, for a lot of them there was a sense that the election of a Democratic president really amounted to very little more than just a return to the normal state of affairs, and that was really the way it was supposed to be. You had Democrats in both houses and the White House, and that was the way it was in that it was just sort of a return to business as usual for them, and I think the problem was it was a failure to understand that the election of Jimmy Carter of 1976 really was a close-run thing in ways that went well beyond just the closeness of the vote—that he was elected a Democratic president precisely because he was not seen as just as a return to business as usual.

DW: What is your feeling now, or what was your feeling at the time, as to the relationship between President Carter and Senator Baker? Did it differ in some qualitative sense with his relationship with Senator Byrd?

JP: Well, yes. I think anybody would tell you that Senator Baker is an easier person to get along with than Senator Byrd is. I mean, there's no doubt about it, they both have their strengths and weaknesses, but if you have to sort of figure out who is going to be easier to discuss things with, personally, then there's no doubt about that. I'm sure they—I mean I know they had their differences and all that, but my sense of it from Carter's perspective was that it was quite positive in that he understood that there were limits to what the leader of the opposition in the Senate could do or would do, and maybe sometimes was disappointed or wished that those didn't exist—you know, that he appreciated those areas of cooperation and support, and that he saw in Baker a senator—again, more from the old school in foreign policy and other important areas of bipartisanship, which sort of interestingly, as I've mentioned earlier, almost being a throw back to an earlier era, but you know, in Georgia, we grew up with our models of senators for half a century were Walter George and Dick Russell, and their way of operating—their way of relationships with, say, and Eisenhower, for example, were the way we thought senators were supposed to act. And Senator Baker, and again, I'm not quoting President Carter, but an observation, and I think, my impression was that in most cases President Carter saw Senator Baker behaving more in
that way, the way that we sort of thought senators were supposed to act than a lot of them, or most of them, perhaps, up there—Democrats or Republicans.

DW: Well, there were at least three instances involving important foreign policy questions that I know Senator Baker was helpful to President Carter: Panama Canal, obviously the Turkish arms embargo, and some Middle Eastern arms sales. And then there was Salt II, where he was not quite so helpful. Do you have any insights as to what in general was going on between President Carter and Senator Baker on any or all of these matters?

JP: I really don't in specific—other than in the general sense, obviously that support was of real importance, and all three of those issues were very contentious and highly charged, and in the case of the Middle East and of Turkey/Cypress you had very deeply involved and committed ethic interest in the United States that added to the voltage and the political atmosphere, and of course in the Panama Canal Treaties. You have to look a long way, I think, to find a foreign policy vote, putting aside the _____ and all that, but an involving piece of work that allows such passions, and such passions so broadly within the public. And any one of those it would have been fairly easy to find a way to differ in a seemingly responsible manner. There's always a way out, if you are looking for it. You can always support the president in principle in these matters, but never seem to find a way to vote with him, for one reason or another. And certainly the political temptation to do that was pretty extreme.

DW: With the exception of—we've mentioned the Salt II Treaty, where Senator Baker was a problem for President Carter and the Carter Administration. Do you recall any other situations in which Senator Baker was viewed by people in the White House as a major problem?

JP: I'm sure there must have been. I don't really recall them at—seemed like we were on the same side on the snail darter, as I recall. But oh, well, we were certainly on opposite sides on Clinch River, the breeder reactor. I don't recall that as being—

DW: Well, there were some parochial issues. Tennessee issues that—

JP: Yes. Those fall into the category where you kind of didn't exactly expect the senator from

Tennessee to support you on something like that, and I didn't get the impression that –

DW: How was Senator Baker viewed in the White House as a presidential candidate and a prospective Republican nominee when he was in the race in 1979-1980?

JP: I thought he would have been the most difficult nominee to defeat, and, but at the same time, he would have made the best president of the bunch. So—and a lot of people since have said, "Well, you people don't know what you are talking about. You thought Baker was the guy you were worried about, and Reagan was the guy you should have been worried about." I still disagree with that. I think even though we didn't beat Reagan, we came a damn site closer than we had any right to, in a way, and most people remember, and I still think Baker would have been harder to run against than Reagan was. We had something to work with with Reagan, in that people were kind of scared of him, and they were afraid he was going to do something crazy. And so even though the economy was in the pits, and we had hostages overseas, and oil prices in quadruple, and all that—there was still a real reluctance on the part of a lot of Americans to put Ronald Reagan in the White House, which was very helpful to us. In the end he was able to overcome that sufficiently to win the election, but I don't know what we would have had like that to work with in a campaign against Baker. He's not a scary person, [and he hasn't a whole set of really crazy things, you know, that we can.] You know, we've all said a few, but I still—but that was an election where, when you become a president, given the situation on the ground, as I said, the economy and all of that, the only way we were going to win that was to make our opponent the issue and we weren't totally successful or adequately successful in doing it with Reagan, but it would have been much harder to do with Howard Baker.

DW: Was there more to it than the simple fact that Baker was not as threatening or controversial a figure? In terms of the difficulty of the race if it had materialized?

JP: Yes. I mean, you're driving at something, so. Yes, you can say some other things. I mean, I think Baker would have been an even more of a threat to our Southern base than Reagan was, although he proved to be not an insubstantial threat as it turned out. This really goes back to my original point, but in terms of my senses, within the Republican party, moderate Republicans who we might have gotten in the race against Reagan, and did have for periods of time during that campaign, to a greater or lesser degree, I don't know how we would have gone after them if Baker had been a nominee.
DW: Following along that line, you said that Baker would have been the better president, in
comparison to President Reagan. Why do you say that?

JP: Well, I mean, why did I think it at the time, or why do I view it –

DW: _____.

JP: I think why I view it that way now is reasonably obvious to the astute student. I mean, I
don't think we'd have piled up three trillion dollars worth of debt or any of those other
things, if Howard Baker had been president. I just thought—nothing particularly insightful
here, I just thought he was a wiser, more thoughtful, more reasonable sort of person. Still
do.

DW: Were there any members of the Senate during those four years that President Carter was
particularly close to, and that he looked to for advice?

JP: That's a better question to go to some of the Congressional relations people, I guess. I'm
sure you have asked them that, too. From my perspective, what I saw there, there were one
or two that really—I'm sure there were obviously some more than others and leadership
more than—but there weren't two or three or four that—it seemed to me that there was a
relationship that really stood out from others.

DW: You've seen a lot of politicians at work over the years. How would you characterize Baker's
political style? And his leadership style in the Senate? How does he come across to you?

JP: You have to remember I wasn't there. The Senate and all that. But, more collegial than
hierarchial; more sort of relationships and understanding where people are coming from,
and all that. I think it's worth noting, whether it's of relevance or not, but that in terms of
exercising leadership, primarily through power, rewards and punishments, etc., though I'm
no expert on the legislative branch, that is generally harder to do as a leader of the minority
than the leader of the majority, and so there are fewer mechanisms for providing pleasure or
extracting pain from your colleagues in that position. One thing I ought to add to, going
back to something you said earlier about Byrd and the relationships with opponents, it is
probably worth noting that one of the difficulties that President Carter ran into, a little bit
unexpectedly, I might say, in dealing and working with Republicans, both in the House and the Senate, were Democrats in the House and the Senate, and there was a great deal of ambivalence to say the least on the part of the Democratic leadership about just how close they wanted the President to get to the Republican leadership, and on the one hand they wanted enough there so that the votes could be gotten if you needed them. On the other hand, they didn't want a situation developing that threatened their position in terms of the rewards and benefits that a president and administration can bestow on members of the legislative branch. I mean, they didn't want the president to feel like he was doing things that in effect sort of helped a Republican senator get re-elected, for example, even though you wouldn't do something directly in that regard, but little things like going out of your way to make sure nobody gets to announce this grant or that and the other, etc. And I can remember several occasions when we got word sent back—and I'm sure the Congressional relations people remember more than those—but from Democrats that they thought the President was being a little too nice to their Republican colleagues were getting a little too close, and they were sort of being a little too chummy there, for their taste. And I don't want to overdo that, but it is very real, and I suspect, and I think it is sort of unique to that situation. Republican presidents, on the whole, certainly for my lifetime, have had the Republican leadership of the Congress has known that a Republican president has got to deal with Democrats and Democratic leadership, etc. There's no other way to get action without doing that. So I think out of necessity, Republicans in the Congress have been in a way much more sophisticated about the relationship between a president of their party and their colleagues on the other side of the aisle.

DW: Let me ask you this about a specific instance that's somewhat related to this, to see if you have any recollection of it. In the campaign of 1978, President Carter came to Nashville and campaigned for Jane Eskind, who was the Democratic opponent of Senator Baker. I don't know whether you traveled with President Carter on those kinds of trips or not.

JP: I remember that one.

DW: What do you recall about it?

JP: I don't recall the specifics about it except that I was certainly very uncomfortable with it. If it had been my decision, we have never done it. But I don't feel too bad about it because, as I recall, the reward we got for doing that was that in 1980, Jane Eskind supported Teddy Kennedy and his opposition to President Carter for the Democratic nomination. So, I think
if that was a mistake, we paid for it; we can move on. What do you recall about it?

DW: I don't recall anything about it. I just know that it happened.

JP: I remember a good bit of argument about that, and back and forth, etc. And there was a reason we did it, and I cannot remember what it was, but it was a "thing." I mean it wasn't something that was done just generally in the sense of supporting a Democratic nominee. There was a reason for doing that, as a way of tipping the balance, but I don't remember what it was. My recollection is that my view at the time, or whatever reason it was, it was not adequate.

DW: Well, let me ask you a final general question. Based upon your observations, then, or for that period of time, and when Senator Baker was Majority Leader and then when he was in Reagan's White House. Do you have any overall views as to Howard Baker as a politician, as a political figure—and in that context, let me ask you this—perhaps it's unfair to put you on the spot like that. But a few moments ago, you said Senator Baker had strengths as a politician as well as weaknesses. What did you mean by weaknesses?

JP: I didn't have anything specifically in mind, other than just that we all have them. And as I say, in those days, I wasn't close enough to it, if he had some sort of particular hang-up—if there was a reason about a particular issue or that sort of thing—probably he did, because everybody does, and that sort of thing. I wasn't close enough to see it, but I assume he's probably not really perfect. So.

DW: Just your overall impressions of Howard Baker.

JP: I don't want to overdo this. I mean—about my impression—obviously what I've said previously is not only positive but very positive. And when, in conversations these days and times and people ask me how Washington has changed since I got here, one of the things that I always mention in that list of changes is how much nastier and more partisan and thus less productive, I think, the process of the political process and the governing process has become in that getting on toward two decades, I guess. And if they don't understand what I mean, the one thing I've found that helps them understand very quickly is to say, "Well, think about the Republican leadership in the House and the Senate that Jimmy Carter had to work with, and what they were able to do together, and look at what Bill
Clinton has to deal with." And that's usually the end of that discussion. They know exactly what I'm talking about. That's an over-simplified version of it, but it's true. And I guess it's also, and I'm not sure Senator Baker would take this as a compliment, but I suspect he would, that in my view, he was, as a senator, very much like the sort of senators, in a positive sense, that I had grown up to know and admire from the South. And, well, Walter George was from my home town, and though I only knew him as a small boy, really, I certainly—he and Senator Russell, and it's probably a sign of just getting old and crotchety but I don't see either the South as a region or the country as a whole producing those sorts of senators at anything like the necessary rate, these days.

DW: Well, Senator Baker had an influential role model on that point—namely his father-in-law, who had that kind of relationship with Lyndon Johnson. Well, is there anything that needs to be added?

JP: I can't think of it. The only thing I had thought to add—I wasn't sure whether we had talked about it before was just sort of making sure you knew of and got two people that, as far as the Carter years were concerned—did we talk about your talking to President Carter? Are you going to do that?

DW: I intend to do that. I hope to do that.

JP: OK, good. OK. Well, if you—not that it would be worth very much, but if you are having trouble getting it done, I'll be glad to do what I can. I'm sure other people that you talk to would be glad to, too. I'd be glad to do that.

DW: I appreciate that.

JP: And I'd be surprised if you were not having a hard time getting it done, because he stays so busy that it's hard to get anything done, I mean in terms of getting something on the schedule, etc. But I'm sure he would want to do this, and if we need to—

DW: Well, we'll certainly call on you if that's necessary.

JP: No, as I say, I'm not promising I can deliver, but I'd be willing to try.
DW: I understand. Well, with that, let me thank you very much for your time and a very interesting and insightful conversation.

JP: Thank you.

END OF TAPE