
Interview with James H. Quillen

The interview was conducted by David Welborn in Washington, DS on November 15, 1995

Audio cassette 55
DW: For the record, it is a damp, cool day in Washington, DC, but we’re all out early, taking care of business. We appreciate your seeing us this morning, Congressman.

JQ: I’m delighted to do so. I’m sorry to get you up so early.

DW: It’s probably a good thing that you did, because this means we will have a full and hopefully productive day. Let me ask you first to talk about your relationship with Howard Baker, Jr., before he got into politics as a candidate. Let me begin by asking you if you were surprised when Senator Baker announced in 1964 that he was going to run for the Senate?

JQ: First of all, I served in the House of Representatives here in Washington with Howard’s father. We were close personal friends; he was a guiding light to me before he passed away. Then after he died, his wife Irene filled out his unexpired term, and I served with her during that period of time. The conversations led to Howard Baker, Jr. I didn’t really know him well prior to service with his father and his stepmother, but I always thought he had a great future, based on his father’s ability and his congressional record, being an important member of the House Ways and Means Committee. So that was a stepping stone to get to know Howard Baker, Jr.

DW: What was his father like as a legislator and as a politician? I never had the opportunity to meet him.

JQ: He was a very skilled legislator and, in my opinion, a great politician. In some instances, if you didn’t know him well, you would think he was gruff, but he had a wonderful heart, a wonderful drive, and his goals were outstanding.

DW: In terms of personality and political skill, is Senator Baker quite like his father?

JQ: In political skills yes, but personality, as I remember, they are different. Howard Jr. has an easygoing personality. He ingratiates himself in the hearts of people; his father had similar motives, but in a different way. For that reason, I hesitate to compare them, because the son follows in his father’s footsteps to a degree.

DW: So you weren’t really surprised in 1964 when Howard Baker, Jr., decided to jump into politics?

JQ: Not really surprised, because he was from a political family. That was my second year in the Congress here in Washington. I had served eight years in the state legislature prior to running for Congress in 1962, 1963 was my first year. I really didn’t know Howard well before 1964. In the campaign, I supported him, and he did a masterful job in campaigning, but unfortunately he lost. It turned out to be a blessing for him.

DW: How so?
JQ: He came back in 1966, defeated his opposition, won tremendously, and that was a stepping stone to the future for Howard.

DW: You campaigned together some in 1964, did you not?

JQ: We did, and maybe not enough. We campaigned together, but we really campaigned in 1966 together. We initiated the Quillen-Baker bus tour through the district, stopping in each of the counties back then. As I recall, in 1966 there were fourteen counties.

DW: You started out in Sevierville, I think.

JQ: Historically, yes.

DW: What was he like when he was out campaigning? What was he like when he was talking on the courthouse squares or wherever he spoke when you all were campaigning?

JQ: He came over very well; he’s a good speaker, and people liked him. His personality projected itself into the people’s mind, and they had faith in him.

DW: Did he seem to enjoy campaigning? Some politicians don’t, some do.

JQ: If you had been on the bus tour at any time during that year or the years thereafter, you would know that he enjoyed campaigning. He did it in a different way than most people.

DW: What do you mean by that?

JQ: Of course, running for statewide office, you don’t have the time to get out into the countryside and shake hands with all the farmers and do the things. I represent the now eleven counties, back then fourteen as I recall. It could have been reduced some. But you don’t have time to do the campaigning as an individual Congressman, if you run statewide.

DW: There is too much territory to cover.

JQ: No question about it.

DW: Do you recall any difference between Baker as a candidate in 1964 and Baker as a candidate in 1966? Was there some growth and development there?

JQ: I don’t know if you would refer to it as growth and development, in your second race you always know a little more than you did in the first race. That was true with Jim Quillen, and it’s been true in every race thereafter for me.

DW: You always pick up something new or learn something new. There was a primary for the Republican nomination in 1966 with Ken Roberts and Howard Baker, Jr., contesting for the
nomination. How did that race play out in the first district? Did this cause problems for you as the incumbent member of the House?

JQ: As I recall, Mrs. Reece, the wife of Carol Reece who had served for many years in the Congress and who had filled out his unexpired term, was for Roberts. I remember that I had a button made—Baker-Quillen or Quillen-Baker, whatever it was—and Mrs. Reece didn’t like that.

DW: And she told you so, I guess.

JQ: She did; she was a great supporter of mine, it put me on the spot. Howard knows that I helped him.

DW: This is a question not directly about Senator Baker or your relationship with him, but it’s relevant. Talk a little bit about Guy Smith and the role he played in the Republican party in East Tennessee.

JQ: He was the Republican party, because he was the editor of the Knoxville Journal, the Republican organ of East Tennessee—and the state, as a matter of fact. Guy wasn’t for me.

DW: In your first race?

JQ: He had a headline either the morning of the election, it was a morning newspaper, or the morning before the election—"Quillen Loses" I recall the headline said. “Quillen Loses by 75,000 Votes.”

DW: That was kind of like the Chicago Tribune “Dewey Defeats Truman” headline.

JQ: Over the years, Guy Smith came to be a very close friend.

DW: What do you know about the relationship between Senator Baker and Guy Smith?

JQ: I don’t really know. Of course, his father served in the second congressional district for years, and Guy always supported him. My memory would tell me that Guy was a close friend of Howard Baker, Jr.

DW: At the time, were you surprised that Senator Baker was able to win a statewide race as a Republican in 1966?

JQ: Let me put it this way. He broke the sound barrier and built the Republican party statewide. There were skeptics, because the state had been controlled by the Democrats forever.

DW: How was he able to pull this off?
JQ: By working at it. Nothing ever just happens, you have to make it happen. He had a good philosophy and a good program; for that reason, he sold the people that he could do a good job. He’s a media professional, comes over well on TV. He’s a good speaker, as I’ve said.

DW: My impression is that he perhaps is the first Tennessee politician running on a statewide basis that really made effective use of television in his campaigns.

JQ: I don’t really know; I’m not a great user of TV, because I feel I don’t come over well on it. That has changed over the year, it’s back then I’m talking about. Secondly, I didn’t have the money to do it

DW: Would you comment further upon the impact of Senator Baker on building the Republican party in Tennessee?

JQ: As I said, he broke the sound barrier; from that it was a stepping stone for the party to grow and be the leader.

DW: After he came to Washington as a member of the Senate during those years you served together, you in the House and Baker in the Senate, of course you were both members of the Tennessee delegation. Would you talk a little bit about the Tennessee congressional delegation as a whole has worked over the years, Republicans and Democrats alike. Is it a fairly cohesive group when it comes to Tennessee interests? Is there a lot of conversation back and forth?

JQ: Yes, a lot of conversation. But you know, you get busy in the House and you get busy in the Senate and you don’t have that close relationship other than getting together and using the telephone.

DW: No regular meetings?

JQ: Yes, there are regular meetings of the Tennessee delegation. Back when I was elected to the Congress, and Bill Brock was elected the same time I was, there was Howard Baker and myself, that was the Republican delegation in the House.

DW: You could have the proverbial meeting in the telephone booth.

JQ: As I recall, a few years after that we elected five out of nine Republicans in the House, as we have today. Then we lost, we kept going down the drain in Tennessee.

DW: Now it’s coming back up somewhat. What accounted for that recession, as it were, in the fortunes of the Republican party in Tennessee, from that high point when you had a governor, two U.S. Senators—as you say, five members of the delegation. That was in the early 1970s, how do you account for the fall off after that? What happened?
JQ: State leadership. The Republican state committee didn’t do their job. The state chairman was a part-time operation, and no effort, no concerted effort, was put in it, which was necessary to keep going.

DW: In such areas as candidate recruitment and fund raising and so on.

JQ: The Senate race was every six years, we have to keep that in mind.

DW: Right. Do you recall any special projects close to your heart that you worked especially closely with Senator Baker on?

JQ: We worked very closely together. As Howard would say on the last bus tour in each of his speeches, he didn’t recall that we had ever had any misunderstanding or ever had any words of disagreement. So we worked closely together. Projects—you go down the line, anything that passes the House has to pass the Senate. People forget that. We worked together on projects, and I wouldn’t single out any one. To me, they are all important.

DW: Did you attend the Republican national convention in Kansas City in 1976?

JQ: I did, and Howard Baker’s room was next to mine.

DW: What are your insights as to President Ford’s decision to ask Senator Dole to be the vice presidential candidate?

JQ: I was absolutely taken aback and surprised beyond any imagination. I didn’t see it; Howard Baker would have been the champion of the party, and Ford would have won, in my opinion.

DW: Did President Ford, with whom you had served for years in the House, have the occasion to talk to you about Baker as a prospective vice presidential candidate?

JQ: Never mentioned it. After he did that, I went over to Senator Baker’s room, and he was terribly disappointed, because he was led to believe that he would be the VP. And he should have been. I have every high regard for Bob Dole, but on the other hand, Dole was not ripe for a national campaign at that time. His one-liners would get him into trouble, and it did.

DW: In 1977, Senator Baker was elected as the Republican leader in the Senate. Of course, he had tried twice before in 1969 and 1971 unsuccessfully. So his role changed in 1977. He remained the Republican leader for eight years, and you as the ranking member of the Rules Committee were a part of the Republican leadership on the House side. Could you talk a little bit about first the working relationship between Senator Baker as the Republican leader and House Republican leadership during that period of time.

JQ: Senator Baker’s style was completely different. He worked closely with the members of his party in the Senate and likewise the other members as well, the other party. He didn’t have a
hammer to drive, he had persuasion to use. In the House, just everything was taken for granted, that the Democrats had control and that they were going to keep control. That was just floating. But Baker seemed to have a completely different approach and a different goal in mind. Or else he could not have been elected as Republican leader of the Senate.

DW: Did Baker and Congressman Rhodes, who was the House Republican leader for part of the time, and then Congressman Michel, in your view, talk a lot? Did they work together?

JQ: I think that John Rhodes worked real well and, as far as I know, Bob Michel did. They had their individual meetings with Senator Baker.

DW: What about the relationship between Senator Baker and Tip O’Neill?

JQ: I have no insight on that. Tip was quite a political operator. I served on the Rules Committee with him for a number of years before he got into the Democratic leadership.

DW: How did you get along with him personally?

JQ: Fine. Tip O’Neill, as I say, was a partisan partisan, but he got along well with the members.

DW: It’s been said by some that one of the sources of problems, when problems arise in relationships between the House and Senate, is that Senators, unless they have previously served in the House, don’t understand the House as an institution. And members of the House don’t understand the Senate as an institution. My question is did Senator Baker understand the House and how it worked?

JQ: You’ll have to ask him that, I don’t really know. I know the Senate has completely different rules than we have in the House, and the legislative process is different.

DW: You’ve seen a lot of party leaders come and go in both houses. First of all, how would you characterize Senator Baker’s style as a party leader?

JQ: Howard characterized it that his style was completely different; let’s put it this way, he ingratiated himself into the hearts of the other members. His style was completely different, but he did an outstanding job, in my opinion.

DW: What was it about him that was ingratiating with his colleagues?

JQ: His confidence, I think that’s the main thing. Keeping his word, people believed in him. That’s my opinion.

DW: Were you involved in his presidential campaign in 1980?
JQ: [Down] to a degree. It started early; as I recall, he went to Maine in 1980 and lost that state, and then he withdrew later. Don Sundquist was active in it.

DW: Yes, he ran the campaign. What can you tell me about the relationship between Senator Baker and Ronald Reagan when Reagan was president?

JQ: It must have been outstanding, because Ronald Reagan tapped him for Chief of Staff. Howard, in my opinion, would have been in the presidential race had that not occurred.

DW: Had he talked to you about running for president again?

JQ: Yes, and he would have made a good president.

DW: Did you have any dealings with him when he was White House Chief of Staff?

JQ: Not any more than usual.

DW: To sum it up, in your view what is the essential Howard Baker? How would you sum up Senator Baker as a person and as a politician, in general terms?

JQ: I would sum it up with the same comment: he’s a good politician and he’s a good person. You can’t be a bad person and be a good politician, or vice versa. So I think he is highly regarded, and I think I’ve summed it up just the way it ought to be.

DW: Is there anything you would like to add to the record or comment on further before we conclude this discussion?

JQ: Of course, I know not the purpose of the interview other than it’s interviewing friends in regard to how they feel about Howard Baker, and I’m delighted to participate. He’ll tell you, I’m sure, as I will tell you now, we are friends, and we work closely together even today.

DW: With that, Congressman Quillen, thank you very much for your time this morning. It’s been a pleasure.

JQ: I’m sorry to get you up. Over the years, a country boy who became an attorney and to achieved the goals that he has must be remarkable. I don’t know how anyone could categorize it any differently.

DW: Thank you very much.

JQ: You’re welcome.