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It's always a pleasure, even for a faculty member of the University of Tennessee, to visit the campus of Vanderbilt University in its Peabody dimension. Let me ask you first, Mr. Seigenthaler, when did you begin your education in Tennessee politics?


Approximately right, I'm sure.

Kefauver broke the back of the so-called Crump Machine in 1948, and I didn't cover that campaign because I had just started with the paper when that campaign began. Then I was an intern and became a reporter in 1949, so I didn't cover that campaign. So his next campaign would have been in 1954, and I covered some of that. I covered some of Frank in 1952, Kefauver in 1954, and the Gore race in 1956.


Which would mean that he would have beaten McKellar in 1952, so he and Frank would have been running together that year. That was Frank Clement's first term in 1952, so 1952 was really the first time I had a chance to cover campaigns.

How would you describe the condition of the Republican party, if it had a condition at all in Tennessee at that time.

Sure! I can't remember the year, it would have been maybe 1950, but the first time I ever heard politicians yell at each other was a meeting of the Republican state committee. I believe they met at the old Ryman, which was before it was the Grand Old Opry house. What was the old, white-haired man—A. B. McLean, I think was his name—was in a row with, I believe, Guy Smith.

It must have been Guy Smith! If there was a row, Guy Smith was there.

There were two of us there covering that. I was astounded! I didn't know there was a Republican party of any substance; then when I got up there and heard these fellows yelling at each other, I couldn't figure out what the fight was about, because there was no statewide party anyway. On the other hand, there surely were two House seats, and there was a long-
standing patronage arrangement with Crump, so there was something to fight about. But I can’t remember what Mr. McLean was fighting with Guy about. One of the people who got up to speak that day was Bill Miller, who later became a distinguished federal judge here and who ran for Congress in the first or second district later on before he became a federal judge. Ike named him to the bench because he ran a better political race than anybody thought he would and they wanted to get him out of the way.

DW: Would you talk just a little bit about your impressions of Guy Smith as a journalist and as a Republican leader in East Tennessee?

JS: Yes. He was in a different era; politics was still very close to the heart of journalism all over Tennessee. I thought Guy Smith was tough minded, sharp witted, sharp tongued; he had a keen mind and could be mean as a snake. He was very effective both as an editor and as a politician. Never an issue I knew of that the Tennessean _____ . If there was any real ideological competition among editorial voices in Tennessee, it was between the Tennessean and Guy Smith, not between the Tennessean and the Banner. The Tennessean and the Banner’s competition basically had to do with issues over civil rights. The Banner would choose side in the Democratic primary and most often sided with Crump. Jimmy Stalman was a totally different personality than Guy Smith. I remember once I was on a platform with Jimmy Stalman, we were addressing a group of students. One of the students said, “What’s the difference between the Tennessean and the Banner?” I said, “Let’s just talk about national politics. The Tennessean has always endorsed Democratic candidates in the presidential and national elections. The Banner always endorses Democrats in state and local elections, but he always endorses Republicans.” He leaped to this feet and said, “Let me correct that. In 1948 we endorsed Strom Thurmond! I would not go with Thomas E. Dewey!” Guy would have no more thought of not going with the Republican candidate than he would think of flying to the moon. I don’t know if Guy saw the newspaper as an extension of the Republican party or the Republican party in Tennessee as an extension of the newspaper! My conversations with him were uniformly pleasant. He was unfailingly courteous to me, both when I was a reporter and when I became a news executive. I never had a cross word with him, and he never stuck a needle in. He knew I was a younger man, and he never went out of his way to belittle or criticize or try to put me down. I thought we had a good deal of mutual respect. On the other hand, I have seen him with other people, with Republicans, I have seen him put them down and be mean as hell. I thought he was a very tough, bright man. That’s my impression of him. My contexts with him were only during political campaigns. If I were in Knoxville during a political campaign, covering a political campaign, I would call him and go by to see him to ask him, “What about this, what about that, what was the Journal going to do?” When I became editor of the Tennessean in 1962, I would see him two, sometimes three times a year at the Tennessee Press Association meetings. He was a force, there is no doubt he was a dominant force. He could be belligerent, but he was pretty cool about it though; he didn’t mind getting in and mixing on his own, but he also had people who spoke for him a lot. He was feared, Republicans generally feared him, a lot of Republicans feared him.

DW: Based upon what I’ve been told, the Journal and what appeared in the newspaper was the single most important thing that the Republican party in East Tennessee had going for them.
JS: I think that’s right. It was a focal point, it was a rallying point.

DW: Republican strength in East Tennessee basically was defined by the *Journal’s* circulation area.

JS: Sure it was, that’s right, it sure was.

DW: Do you have any recollections of Howard Baker Sr. during that period?

JS: I knew who he was. Again, to me, he was a gentle man; the few times I met him and rubbed up against him, he was always just a nice presence—homespun and had a pleasant manner. I liked him, but I didn’t have any dealings with him really.

DW: Were you in Washington or Nashville in the 1964 campaign season?

JS: I was in Nashville.

DW: What do you recall about Howard Baker’s campaign for the Senate that year?

JS: That was his first campaign. I remember he came to see me, with Joy, at the *Tennessean*. He came to see me by himself first, and the second time he came back Joy was with him. He said he was going to make this race, and that he knew that the *Tennessean* would not be for him, but that he thought the campaign was important, that Republicans had to raise the flag in statewide races and try to make serious campaigns. He didn’t have opposition? Ken Roberts ran against him later?

DW: That was in 1966.

JS: But he didn’t try very hard in 1964, he was just that he opened the door and came in and was very friendly and very bright. He talked a lot about his career as a lawyer, talked a lot about his father and mother, about his commitment to public service. I came away from the first meeting wanting to know him better. In the second meeting with Joy, I wanted to know both of them better. I had not much of an impression except that here was a very smart, quiet guy who was beating his head against a stone wall. He was not going to create a two-party system in this state, and he might as well forget it. But I admired his courage for trying.

DW: Was that initial meeting in 1964 your first association with him? Had you known him previously?

JS: I don’t think so.

DW: Between the 1964 and 1966 campaign seasons, did you see much of Senator Baker at all? Was there communication?

JS: Yes. Whenevever he was in town, he tried to stop by, but I can’t remember how many times he came. It was still just cordial and friendly.
DW: Did you think he had a chance in 1966 after what happened in 1964?

JS: Yes. After Bass lost the primary, I knew he had some chance. I didn’t think he could beat Clement, but I knew that the Kefauver-Gore-Bass wing of the Democratic party, Kefauver now being dead—that wing of the party, which basically thought of itself as the liberal wing of the Democratic party and separated itself from the Clement-Ellington wing of the party on a basis of a relationship with Crump—that Crump continuum in the minds of many of those people, and those of us at the Tennessean, was what really cast the die in the water. I knew that there was not much likelihood that any of those people were going to raise a finger to help Frank. I can’t place the date, but Howard came to see me during the primary. Ken Roberts asked us for an endorsement, and I didn’t want to get into that. I didn’t want to get into a Republican primary, I didn’t want to wade in. Why? There are 6,000 Republicans in my circulation area? What the hell do I want to pick a fight among them for? I was still thinking that that party was a sort of splinter party, made up mostly of people who got mad at each other. One meeting where you go through that ordeal and realize how pitted they were. They were as pitted as the Democrats were on the other side. Anyway, at some point during that campaign Howard came to see me, and we had a long conversation, a long conversation. I remember it very well. He talked about the need for two parties in Tennessee and how every other part of the country except the South had put the regionalism that grew from the Civil War behind them. That was the first time I ever knew there were two Republican candidates in the heart of West Tennessee; he said that, “If you’d look at the record, you would find out there are two.” I should have known that, but it was the first time it ever really made an impression upon me. He said, “If we can pull this off...” I was already thinking the Tennessean’s role in politics in effect ignored a small but influential readership, those who were Republican. It was very small. When Maxie Jarman ran, Winfield beat Maxie, and Maxie got something like 10,000 or 11,000 votes, even as late as when Winfield successfully ran.

DW: It was 1970.

JS: In 1970. So out of 10,000 or 12,000 votes—I guess Winfield got 1,000 and Maxie got 11,000. So there were 12,000 votes even in 1970, and that was the maximum.

DW: That was in this area.

JS: That was affecting Davidson County and my circulation area. There was not any real pressure to pay any attention to what Howard was saying, but he engaged me in a discussion on the need for a two-party system. He said to me many of the things I was thinking to myself and that I knew myself. I don’t know if Howard even remembers the conversation, but I remember it vividly. It was a long conversation. In those days, the editor’s office was a very spare office with a little sliding door into the newsroom. My secretary was just outside the other door. He sat over in the corner, he didn’t sit face to face with me. We talked about this need; he knew that Nashville Republicans had talked to me about getting into the primary for Ken. My recollection of it is that we agreed that a two-party system in Tennessee would be the best thing that could happen. Once again, he took the initiative; he said, “I don’t expect your endorsement in this campaign, but I’ll tell you what would be very, very
helpful: if the *Tennessean* took no position at all.” That’s the first time anyone ever introduced that idea to me, and it was very powerful. I took it to Amon Evans, the publisher, and it was very powerful to him. Subsequently, when Howard came back, I told Amon we wanted to meet with him, and we had a brief meeting with Amon. We didn’t tell him what we were going to do, but we decided in the editorial board meeting that an appropriate position for us to take was not to endorse Clement, and we stayed out of that race. Again, I had no idea we would early on create a two-party system in the state; if you looked at it at the time, you would find it hard to imagine it ever could happen, unless you knew that politics periodically undergoes upheaval that turns the tables on everybody. But I did feel that Howard’s campaign that year might be victorious. Everybody I knew who was for Ross Bass was disgusted. Everybody I knew who was for Albert Gore was disgusted with the Clement-Ellington machine. We called it leapfrog government. I guess I saw Howard every time he came back to Nashville; there weren’t that many times, he didn’t waste a hell of a lot of time in middle Tennessee, because there were not that many Republican votes in middle Tennessee. I don’t know what his campaign schedule would show for that time, but I think he spent a lot more time in east Tennessee, as you would naturally expect.

**DW:** And a lot of time in west Tennessee.

**JS:** During some meetings he asked me about different sorts of people in the Democratic party who might be open minded enough to think about supporting him, overtly or covertly. I gave him an opinion on a lot of those people, who had been part of the Bass campaign. He asked me about the Powers brothers, two dentists, one in Clarksville, the other in Waverly. One of them was the mayor of Waverly. I have no doubt that both of them supported Howard during that campaign, covertly. Obviously they had Democratic credentials. I gave him my reaction to maybe 15 or 20 people he asked about, what sort of people they were.

**DW:** Do you have any recollections of your impressions at the time, based on these conversations, about Baker’s strategic thinking about politics? How did he impress you as a strategic political thinker?

**JS:** He had a keen mind. He understood what he was going to do and what the possibilities of it were before I did. I don’t know where that came from, maybe just in his genes. To me, it had to be learning experience. First of all, the understanding that a no-endorsement would be very helpful to him; secondly, in his conversations about Ken Roberts, he very positive. You look for those things: “I like that boy, but.” None of that, there was not a caveat. There was not a low blow, there was not a sneak punch. “Ken’s a good guy, a good lawyer, good fellow, good friend of mine.” Not even “newcomer to town,” no knocks on Pat Wilson, who was bankrolling Ken. Just right straight across the board friendship, which I thought, “You would never get that out of a Democrat who was running against another Democrat in a primary.” They would say, “I like that boy, but.” And when they put that “but” on _____.

**DW:** That’s when your ears perked up!

**JS:** Right. I don’t know that it came that early, but as long as I can remember, when Howard talked to me, I thought in geographic terms about the politics of Tennessee. I came to understand that what he was talking about was possible primarily because of the geography.
In other words, if he could take away a substantial number of disgruntled Democrats in middle Tennessee, just for a one-time shot, he could change the character of Tennessee politics. Once he was elected statewide, he had a real shot. The second thing I remember talking to him about, and we’re still talking in a time when the rooster was on the ballot and when Lt. Lee still had substantial black vote in Memphis, which was Republican in national elections, and Howard saw that as potential. He knew it was the party of Lincoln, and he knew there were—despite the fact that Jack Kennedy had made the first big turnaround on that—Howard still knew there were certain numbers of blacks who were going to be loyal to him. The other thing I remember was “Negro,” every time he said it, which you didn’t always get from all politicians. I thought he was smart as hell. Because he was thinking a lot about this, he had a theory about politics that went beyond announcing, raising money, doing campaign ads. There was a theory about how to do it. Integrated into that theory was that he had to be a centrist. He’s the only politician I’ve ever known who I think is truly a moderate for the sake of being moderate.

DW:  Moderation as a value.

JS:  That’s right. Moderation as a value, not as an excuse and not as a crutch. You will find in his speeches in 1966 praise for Clement for Clinton, Tennessee—for protecting black kids going to school in Clinton—1958, maybe?

DW:  Somewhere along there.

JS:  So I thought that Howard Baker had a strategy and that it was grounded in attracting people from the center, not waving any flags, not _____, taking full advantage of dissention in the Democratic ranks and thinking in terms of the geography of the state as to where the power bases were. He knew there was a power base in east Tennessee and that it was his. He knew there was one here that had splintered and there was one in west Tennessee and that he had a shot at some of that, because of the black vote and that also there was a growing conservative movement in white west Tennessee and he would benefit from that.

DW:  What’s your read on his appeal to the voters of Tennessee in that election in 1966?

JS:  That’s going way back.

DW:  Let me revise that. What kind of public image, as a candidate, did he project?

JS:  He projected the image of a straight arrow. No guile, no duplicity; without meaning to, he was the antithesis of Frank Clement. He had a new face but beyond that, everything seemed understated. With Frank, there was a lot of rhetoric; with Howard, there was very little. With Frank, there was very little discussion of the issues; with Howard, there was a good deal of discussion of the issues. But again, he was not mean spirited. I don’t think Frank Clement ever thought Howard Baker could beat him until election night. I remember having a conversation with Frank when he came to the paper in which he said the state was not going to go Republican, and he didn’t believe it was going to go Republican.

DW:  How did he react to the fact of the neutrality of the newspaper?
JS: Frank?

DW: Yes.

JS: Without any bitterness. He and I had talked, he knew what I was thinking about. There was no real love lost there; although I liked him personally, we were about as tough on him as Guy had been on Democrats. We continued to look upon Ellington and Clement as an extension of Crump. I don’t mean he was surprised, he would have been shocked if we had endorsed Howard. I’ll tell you this, we came pretty close to endorsing Howard that year. As a matter of fact, we might have done it, given the fact that the number of leading Democrats were covertly supporting Howard. We might have done. If there had been just a little more base of Republican support in middle Tennessee, it would have been an encouragement to do it. You talk about how Guy identified with the Republican party in east Tennessee, in 1966 when we endorsed_____ [is that the year Olgiati ran?] No, it was 1962, I think, when Olgiati ran. When we endorsed Bill Farris from Memphis over Rudy Olgiati, we lost third place. Rudy was running against Buford—no, that wouldn’t be right, I guess he was running against Frank in 1962. I remember when we endorsed Bill Farris over Rudy Olgiati, we lost circulation. A guy named Joe Bean, a lawyer up in Manchester or Tullahoma—it had a massive effect, 200 or 300 circulation, just wiped out circulation. Now, they all came back in a few weeks, you know, but it was really hard to envision that people took it that seriously. They all normally read editorials, and here was an editorial on Sunday—my phone started ringing! Amon Evans and I decided that we wanted to do that, because here was an opportunity: the Clement candidate was on one side, the Kefauver candidate was on the other side, and Farris was totally unencumbered by either side. He tilted a little more toward Kefauver and Gore than he did toward Clement and Ellington. I remember Amon and I talked about it and knew he was going lose, but the Tennessean needed to establish an independent identity. That must have been 1962. I was just back as editor of the Tennessean in February or March maybe, and that’s when it was. It was Olgiati, Clement, and Farris. We took Farris; we knew he would probably come up with 27 or 28 percent of the vote and that that would be respectable in a three-way race. From my point of view—I don’t know how Amon felt about it—it was a strategic statement to say we’re not happy being identified in this role in which we are expected to go along as a newspaper with whatever the political powers decide, so we endorsed Bill Farris.

DW: Do you have any views on the importance of television in that 1966 race and Baker’s use of television? Was that a factor?

JS: I don’t think it was much of a factor. This may be wrong, but I think there was what we would now call a documentary that was a five-minute commercial that Howard did toward the end of the campaign. You may know whether he did or not, but I recollect that there was; it might have been two minutes, but it was a long commercial about the life of Howard Baker. It dealt with his and his family’s commitment to public service, but I don’t remember much about it other than that. I thought that was maybe as good a thing as I had seen; you couldn’t buy a spot that long now. I’d be interested to know—I believe it was in that year—but beyond that, I have the feeling, not just on television but on the stump—he was just the
antithesis of Clement. He projected the image of a different sort of Republican and a different sort of candidate.

DW: In 1972 you did endorse Senator Baker. Tell me the story of how that came about.

JS: First of all, we knew we needed to make the second statement; we had taken the first step, we had really taken a couple of steps, so part of it was reestablishing the identity of the *Tennessean*. Howard and I had continued to talk from time to time. Not frequently, because I didn’t see him that often, but we continued to talk about the value of the two-party system in Tennessee. I got the same reaction, that there would be a number of people who would cancel their subscriptions when we endorsed the Republicans for the first time. But, I also knew they would come back as the others had, so we had pretty much made up our minds that we were going to do that. He didn’t have any opposition in the primary.

DW: It was Ray Blanton as the Democratic candidate.

JS: I had problems with Ray Blanton from the very first day, as a congressman, so my feeling about it was that it was a good time to do it. Blanton was a west Tennessee Democrat, didn’t stand for much. That made it pretty easy. We subsequently did endorse Blanton for governor, which was a mistake. I had no real desire to endorse Blanton; it was less Blanton than our interest in creating [a] healthier climate for the *Tennessean*, because we thought that created a healthier political climate for the state. When you had a guy like Howard Baker seeking public service, his father and step-mother had been in Congress, his father-in-law was the Frank Clement of the Senate in terms of eloquence and oratory.

DW: At the least!

JS: That’s right. So that was a pretty easy decision; we were moving in that direction, and this was a step that made some sense. Some Democrats in middle Tennessee had shown affection for him in his race that he won. In the interim, speaking again about his theory, the one thing you got out of middle Tennesseans about him was that he understood about constituent services, and that was important. I saw a commercial this morning for Bart Gordon in which an old guy says, “When the country needed me, I went off to war. Now, I need Bart Gordon. When I needed my veteran’s benefits, Bart Gordon was there. He needs me now, and I’m here.” That sort of thing. Howard understood the first rule of politics is constituent service; the second rule of politics for him, and maybe it was the first, was just not being a phony about what he said he was, which was a moderate. Being a moderate put him in the liberal camp on civil rights. But beyond that, if you just looked at his proposals over the years and the place that he came from, what he did, he pulled a little off both sides and molded together legislation that was centrist but was progressive.

DW: In your conversations with Senator Baker during his first two terms or until he was elected Republican leader, you would talk about the importance of a two-party system in the state, as you have said, but do you recall other things that you talked about?

JS: Yes. Most of the conversation was not about a two-party system in the state; most of the conversation was about pending political issues, a lot of conversations about civil rights and
the direction the country was going, a lot of conversations about honesty in politics. He is not a gossip, but, on the other hand, he just absolutely loves to tell political stories and to talk about political persons. If he trusts you, he’s very open with you and will tell you about people he talked with last week or someone he had a conversation with about this or that, and he wants to hear your stories too. He liked Robert Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy liked him, and that’s not well known. Not too long ago, a couple of years I guess, he went to New York; it was a hell of a tough flight, flying to New York to be on a program for Robert Kennedy’s memorial. He made the speech, took an hour and a half, was nice to Ethel, left and flew back wherever he was going; it was, a real imposition on his time, but he came and made a speech about when they had met and how they were friends. There was that sort of bond of friendship too; we talked a little bit about it, and he would say, “How’s Bobby?” Then if there was something that Kennedy was doing, he would be interested in that.

DW: Over the years, did you have the feeling or the sense that he was trying to learn things from you?

JS: I didn’t have that feeling, but looking back on it, I have no doubt about it. I knew about the Democratic party. I think he draws on an awful lot of sources to program his political mind and fund his political instincts.

DW: That’s an interesting term: “fund his political instincts.” Could you elaborate on that?

JS: An instinct suggests a knee jerk and suggests an unchanging knee jerk. I think as he took information in, like the moderate that he is, it might affect the way he reacted so that it would be a very carefully placed kick, not a knee jerk. I don’t mean that, because I never saw him kick or knee anybody, but I think his reactions are more tempered because he takes in information. You sit down with some politicians you know in the United States Senate, some who haven’t gotten close to being as prominent or as far reaching as he has, and most of those that I know now in Congress, all you get from them is just an outpouring of ego. They want you to hear them on every single subject, and they are not interested in listening, they are not listeners. Howard Baker is a totally, totally different politician. I don’t think he has an ego! I watched him during the Watergate hearings, I watched him in a lot of different situations; he’s got the best rein on his emotions of any politician I’ve known. I’m sure he gets mad, because everybody does. Bob Kennedy used to have a rule: don’t get mad without a reason. I don’t think Howard gets mad even when he has a reason. My sense of Howard is that he is a listener; he will engage you in order to get you to converse with him, and he doesn’t hold back. I never had the feeling that he was picking my brain for information. He would have thought that was improper, to ask me some information about what was going on in an area where he didn’t think I would want to tell him. On the other hand, I never asked him a question that he didn’t answer, and as far as I know, he didn’t ask me one that I didn’t answer. My sense of it was that he was just naturally a good listener, and he self-programs that information and uses it.

DW: I’m probably overreaching here, but I’ve developed the impression that as a politician, Baker’s mind operated at two levels really. One, the analytical level, which he seemed to be very good at, and the other, the intuitive level. When you said “fund his instincts,” I picked up on that, because the development of a sense on Baker’s part—based on instinct, feel,
subtle kinds of things, this is the way things ought to be done or this is what should be done—was an important part of the way in which he operated.

JS: Yes, I think it is. Just go back for a minute to the endorsement. I always set down with an editorial board fully aware that I had the power, with the publisher’s blessing, to overrule any damn thing they did. On the other hand, the board was there for an exercise in democracy. To ram a decision down their throats would be have been offensive to them, and I would have lost respect for that. When you had something in mind you knew you wanted to do, you sought diplomatically to get it done. This was a big step for that editorial board. Joe Hatcher was a political columnist for the Tennessean for years and years and years; he had known about Guy Smith and looked upon Republicans in east Tennessee as the Darth Vaders of the day. Joe Hatcher was a very tough-minded guy, and so were the other members of that board like Tom Little, the editorial cartoonist. It’s not fair to say that Howard was disarming, they knew what they were going to get when he came in and sat down. His openness, his willingness to engage them, his willingness to challenge and listen and answer and respond and concede, “well, maybe you’re right about that,” made the decision relatively easy. It’s not just that he was likeable, it was just that he was so well informed and he had a terrific record in the Senate. If there was ever a guy made for politics, I guess Al Gore was made for politics. I think Howard Baker was made for politics. It was not that just Amon and I had decided what we were going to do; it was that we had decided on behalf of someone who made it so easy to do it and made you feel proud that you were taking this step. You know, for an awful lot of people, it doesn’t make a damn. Looking back on it, hell, this is not such a big step, a newspaper endorsing Howard Baker for the United States Senate. It was the first Republican endorsement this newspaper had made since Amon’s father bought the paper in 1937 and before that, back in 1908 when the newspaper was created. So it was a very substantial departure not to endorse anybody in the first instance and a major departure to endorse him in the next instance. It made every decision after that—endorsing Lamar, endorsing candidates for Congress, endorsing in presidential primaries for Republicans—it made all of that so much easier.

DW: It’s getting late, and there are a couple of other things I’d like to ask you to comment on briefly, if I may. Could you talk just a bit about your assessment of Baker as Republican leader in the Senate?

JS: First of all, when he became minority leader, that night I was totally shocked. I had no idea that was going to happen. About 11:00 a night, I picked up the wire service returns and looked at them; I went running into Amon Evans’ office and said, “Hey! Howard Baker is going to be minority leader!” He was elated and I was elated, not because we weren’t pulling for a lot of Democrats to win.

DW: You mean minority leader or majority leader?

JS: Majority leader, yes, the 1980 election. First of all, he got beat the first time he tried to get elected.

DW: And the second time.
JS: And the second time. I had asked him each time whether he was going to run again. His answer was, “Well, I don’t know. I’m going to assess it when the time comes.” I was convinced he would; I had absolutely no doubt that he would. I would laugh and say, “Yeah, you’re going to do it.” He would say, “I’m not going to do it if I don’t think I can win.” The first time he ran, he knew he wasn’t going to win; I think he just made a statement. The second time he ran, I think some people double crossed him. That was my impression; he thought he had a chance, but he didn’t have a chance. Never, never had a chance. Part of it was that he was Dirksen’s son-in-law; it’s hard to say that that worked against him, but I believe it probably did. He never said that, but I believe it probably did. His effectiveness as a majority leader had to do, again, with his consuming concept of public service as a means of getting things done, and he was as nonpartisan as a partisan leader can be. He learned from Dirksen, learned not to make Dirksen’s mistakes. In my view, it was a golden period of bipartisanship. Nobody refers to it that way, but just go back and look at it. Look at the ripples on the stream. He could stand up against opposition, opposition from his own party. He was not punitive; I don’t think there’s anybody in his party who ever would say he was punitive to them or that he stuck it to them. Sometimes his staff was urging him to be tough and would talk to me about being tough with people who were cutting him, but he didn’t do it. That’s the first thing; the second thing about him was that he had really effective people around him, particularly in the area of the press.

DW: That’s my second question.

JS: But it was not just those people. The mark of every great political figure I’ve known, they have to be secure by having bright people around them. They have to be secure by having people who challenge them, and he’s very comfortable with that. Fred Thompson is a good example of that, Ron McMahan is a good example of that, and Tom Griscom is a good example of that. He had a very able staff. It was exciting to talk to members of that staff about what was going on in Washington. They would be very open with you; they would tell you about people who were working on him. You talk to him about it, he’d would be ho-hum and put it behind him. That’s not just to say he was naive or that he was being a “Christian.” For him, it was good politics not to make strong enemies. I guess it was in that first race when I said, “You know we’re not going to endorse you.” He said, “It doesn’t make any difference. Every time I’m in middle Tennessee and I talk about the Tennessean, I’m going to make them think I’ve endorsed you.”

DW: That’s great!

JS: He’d make a speech and say, “As the Tennessean said last week, those are my sentiments exactly!” Another thing about him was his sense of propriety. There’s not been even a reflection of a shadow about his personal private life. I always thought that Howard had a very agile mind and was smart and would listen and had the guts to make a decision and stand behind it. Deep inside, I thought there was a hard core of self-confidence and that he knew what he thought was right and what he thought was appropriate and that he was not going to deviate from that. Nobody could have been in the position he was in when Watergate came out that was quite the same way. Nobody could have led the Republican party, both as minority and majority leader, in quite the same way. I think it had to do with that inner self that directed him as few politicians are directed. Now there are some others
who go in different directions who have that same sense of self worth, but he is, in my view, a very special, special man. That’s an award I gave him, that picture up there on the right; I don’t remember what we were saying that was so damn funny, but that was the American Institute of Public Service award. I was on that board, and they asked me to make a presentation to him at the Supreme Court in Washington. If you look back over his career, the toughest times—this is my judgment—the toughest times were the times that he had to deal with the administration during Watergate. They really worked on him. They gave him the cold shoulder, froze him out, said really bad things about him. But it never affected his sense of loyalty to the administration until he was convinced that the evidence was there to turn it around. The story has been told before—Fred doesn’t want to tell it during this campaign, I’ve tried to get him to and I know he won’t—but it is an absolute fact, because both of them have acknowledged that when Fred got the word on Butterfield’s tapes, he did call Howard and they did say, “Isn’t this great! The President has outsmarted us all. He’s got it all on tape, he’s obviously going to be able to exonerate himself.” Now it took them just about 20 minutes to find out that probably was not going to be the case. He had set up Dick Kliendienst as a source of information during that period—you probably have some stuff on that—and messages went back and forth to Kliendienst to the White House to him, to try to help in any way he could a beleaguered president. That back channel was, I thought, an intelligent way to proceed. He didn’t want to see the presidency hurt needlessly. But I’ll tell you, when the time came to stand up, he stood right up. Again, it’s a mark of a great leader, a great leader, to be able to take your party through an earthshattering crisis and still emerge with your character and integrity intact—not to mention the fact that they were calling him the studliest Senator of them all! He was really embarrassed about that. He absolutely blushed! At a dinner one night, Ron McMahan said, “Have you seen what Women’s Wear Daily has called Baker as a result of his appearances?” I said, “No, what?” “The studliest Senator of them all.” I’ll swear, Howard blushed! Anyway, his leadership is marked by his ability to be a moderate in every sense of the word and to stand by his principles in every crisis that came up.

DW: We have covered a lot of ground this evening. It’s getting late; let me give you one last shot: is there anything else that you think needs to be said before we conclude?

JS: No. I’d like to think about it a lot, there are probably a lot of anecdotes that might enrich the interview. I’m going to be in Knoxville to make a speech at UT sometime. Right’s here now, we’re talking about it today. When we nail down the date, I’ll try to build up a backlog of anecdotes and first-hand conversations.

DW: That would be wonderful.

JS: The relationship continued; I was at his table at a luncheon a week ago Sunday. He was being honored by a group here in Nashville for his commitment to the wilderness and preservation of the river and its environs.

DW: Big South Fork.

JS: It’s not a national park, it’s a national preserve. He got up to speak, it was a mostly Republican crowd, Tom Frist was there, a lot of Fred’s friends were there. There were some
Democrats there too. Howard got up and made a ten-minute speech in which he acknowledged that the election was 19 days off or whatever it was, and in effect said that it was “an inappropriate time for a political speech, I wasn’t invited to make one, and I’m not going to make one. I’m here to tell you how happy I am that you are preserving these parts and to accept this award with great pleasure.” Then he told a few stories and sat down to great applause and a standing ovation. Again, that’s a sense of appropriateness. People think that sort of approach wins more friends to the Republican point of view and the Republican party than if he had stood up and made a hellfire and damnation speech for Fred Thompson. I’ll say this, and we’ll just let it go at that: I was lucky as a news executive to have had him come along when he did. I was a better editor because I knew a lot of politicians—obviously, the Kennedy brothers would be two of them—but in a very special and unique way, I was a better news executive because Howard Baker ran when he ran, coincided with my early years. He was in his early years as a political, and I was in the early years as an editor. I changed in ways that I think Guy Smith could never have changed by being exposed to Democrats. Howard made the right arguments with me, defending them with great logic. While its always been a casual friendship—how can you be close friends with a United States Senator, you living in Nashville and he’s living in Washington—but it has been a lasting one. If I were in trouble and needed help, I wouldn’t have to call him. I wouldn’t call him—but if he knew it, he would call me up and say, “What can I do to help?” Which says something about his values. It’s not accurate to say that we are close, but every time our lives have touched, it’s always been very positive and, for me, in an enriching way. Just one more thing...he called me one day—I covered the Republican convention whatever year Dirksen made the keynote. I wrote a piece about it; I was the editor, but I wrote a piece about it. He called me on the telephone and said, “Joy said this is the best story that’s ever been written about her father. Would you call her?” I said, “Sure, I’ll call, but I hate to just call and say hey, did you read my piece?” He said, “John, Joy sometimes is very plain spoken, but she also might think that she was intruding on your time. But she wants you to know, would you call her?” So I called her, and she was just effusive about it. She had been sick but she straightened it out; a few years later, he called me and said, “Joy wants to write a book. Would you call her and tell her if you think it’s a good or bad idea.” I said, “I sure will. What do you think?” He said, “I’m not going to tell you what I think. I want you to tell her candidly what you think.” I called her and said, “I think you ought to do it. I can’t help you with it, I’m just buried, but I think you should do it.” She never did, but I think she always wanted to. I thought, again, what marriage is perfect? But that’s just a couple of insights to a guy who thought an awful lot about his wife and what she wanted and what her needs were, despite the fact that they clearly had an awful lot of problems due to her illness. He’s about as complete a man as I know.

DW: That’s a good note to end this particular session.

JS: I’ll get back to you.