Interviewer: Senator William Bradley

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Box 2, Folder 38

Interviewer: First of all, Senator, thanks for putting aside some time for us this morning.

WB: Very pleased to do it, sorry it's rushed.

I: I understand how things are. What were your first associations with and impressions of Senator Howard Baker?

WB: I came to the Senate in 1979; at that time Senator Baker was the minority leader of the Senate and was a fledgling candidate for president in 1980. I remember I had just arrived in the Senate; within my first year in the Senate I determined who I would like to see get the Republican nomination—I was a Democrat, but I determined who I thought had the personal qualities of leadership and sensitivity and intelligence among the various candidates. Howard Baker was my choice—so what do I do as a Democrat? I decided what I would do is try to help Howard Baker. I gave him one of these memos without names on my view of the Republican party in New Jersey and he would go about securing the Republican votes in New Jersey. I didn't have any long conversations with him; these were based on my assessments of him as a minority leader and on the floor and his general demeanor.

I: Can you be a little more specific about the qualities that led you to this general assessment of Senator Baker?

WB: First, he had the patience of Job, and he had a quality that encouraged people to say what they really thought, knowing that he was going to listen to everybody and out of that would come a compromise—but that he would in no way compromise any of those views with anybody else. There was this discretion that informed his consultations that I thought was really very well done. It wasn't phony; a lot of people do it phony. They are like people who want to play cards and keep all the cards in their pocket and let you see only what they want you to see. You didn't have that impression with him; you had the impression that he was generally interested and wanted to hear what you had to say. As you offered it, that was...
factored into his own thought process; it was manipulative, in other words, it was absorptive and therefore creative. That was what I responded to at that time.

I: What kind of personal relationship did you develop with Senator Baker over the years?

WB: One of mutual respect. It ranged from the mundane—which was constantly asking him, "How much longer are we going to be here tonight?" when he was majority leader, "Are we going to get out in time? Can I get a plane?"—to more substantive interactions. I was never on a committee with him, but I once went with him to Saudi Arabia, and I saw him in meetings with the various dignitaries, the various princes and ministers and so forth. I was always very impressed; here was a man who said what he was going to say concisely, straightforwardly, and then actually turned it over to other members of the delegation, which was again an aspect of his generosity and insight. Even in that setting, he wasn't going to try to dominate. A lot of times a person who is leading the delegation, particularly if they are in the leadership, think that it's their show and everybody else is there to applaud. That wasn't Howard Baker; Howard Baker had his say, moved down the line, listened to what other people had to say.

I: Did you ever have occasion to work with him on a legislative matter you were interested in, particularly when he was majority leader?

WB: No, I didn't work with him on a particular legislative matter, no. I worked in opposition to him.

I: I should not have said "with" but in conjunction with.

WB: On the 1981 tax bill, for example, which he pushed through, I was one of nine who voted against it and spoke strongly against it. He was unfailingly courteous to me in terms of me being given the time under the Senate rules to make my case as to why I thought that it would lead to giant budget deficits and was a terrible thing for the country. He actually characterized it the day after it passed as a "river boat gamble." I thought that was illustrative of his honesty and integrity, because that's precisely what I thought it was, and it clearly wasn't a gamble I was prepared to make, even though the majority of the Senate did make it. I felt by that comment he was indicating his own misgivings about this policy but, as majority leader, was carrying the water loyalty for his chief executive—whom he lost to in the primaries, even though I felt he would have made the better president.
I: Could you comment on his relationships with the Democratic Senators generally.

WB: I thought they were good; I never heard a Democrat say a bad word about Howard Baker. They've said plenty of bad words about other Republicans, but I never heard a Democrat say a bad word about him. That was because he was fair and open and encouraged people and tried to never use tricks to cut people off. He was of the school, as most good leaders are, "Look, it's a question of who's got the votes, not a question of who can cut the cutest dance"—in procedure or in personality or in intimidation.

I: Focusing for just a moment on your first two years in the Senate when the Republicans were in the minority, what's your judgment about the effectiveness of the Republican minority during that period of time in regard to having an impact on the legislative process. Even though they were outgunned, was there an impact there, and, if so, to what degree could it be associated with Senator Baker?

WB: The one thing that I associate with Senator Baker in that regard most directly was the incipient SALT agreement, in which, as he did in the Panama Canal debate prior to my arriving, he was going to play the voice of reason. I think he also had positioned himself so that this would be a major element of his presidential campaign by demonstrating his leadership in this kind of international issue. As you got into 1979, I thought he did a very good job of using the Republican minority not as flamethrowers but as people who were actually trying to be constructive when it came to the SALT agreement. I know that the Carter administration talked to him on a regular basis, that kind of thing. Then, of course, Afghanistan occurred, throughout that whole calculation. Where I saw him most was in that lead-up in 1979.

I: Several people have said that in their view one of Senator Baker's most notable contributions during that period of time was to get the Republicans in the Senate to realize they had a chance, at some point, to become the majority and to start thinking as to what they would do and how they would go about handling things if they became the majority. Did you sense any of that?

WB: No, I had no sense of that. That's primarily a Republican sense.

I: What was the mood on the Democratic side of the Senate in the 1981-1982 period?
In 1981, the Democrats in the Senate were in a state of shock. Not only had Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter, the Senate had turned and a lot of very well known Democratic senior Senators had lost. The party was in total disarray and had no conceptual framework at all, either procedurally or institutionally to deal with the circumstance—meaning "We are now the minority party"—nor intellectually to deal with the thrust of the supply-side revolution—Reaganism generally, which was basically a giant Keansian stimulus while speaking the opposite, right? The Democrats were demoralized; people felt that there was no edge, they were at a loss, nobody knew what to do. This was epitomized when in April or May of 1991 when I was asked by the then minority leader to lead an economic task force in the Democratic Caucus to come with the Democratic alternative to Reagan and the Republican program. After about four or five of these meetings I determined that the distance between Russell Long and Ted Kennedy was too great to have anything other than mush—but we tended to persevere. Then the real—I wouldn't say the bankruptcy—but the real kind of low point came when in June or July when I was asked to be the person—as a first-term Senator really in my second year in the Senate—I was given the honor of responding as the Democratic respondent to Ronald Reagan in his big address to the nation on "pass my tax bill." It was a mark of people not knowing what to do, that they would turn to somebody who just got here—and who certainly didn't have a hook on the institution—to respond to Ronald Reagan. The Democrats were demoralized, without a program, and in that regard they tended to cling to whatever was getting 50 votes—that's why so many Democrats voted for the tax bill and so many Democrats voted against the spending cuts. I voted against the tax bill and for the spending cuts, but the vast majority did not.

Did that mood begin to change in the 1983 to 1984 period?

No.

It continued on through.

I think it continued on through until probably 1985, 1986. It continued through until Iran-Contra revealed Republican weakness in a very traditional form.

Let me ask you about a couple of things that happened in 1981. First of all, the AWACS sale.
WB: That's the reason I was with him in Saudi Arabia.

I: Which side were you on?

WB: I was against the sale.

I: I'm sure there were efforts to persuade you to change your mind on the matter.

WB: I didn't have much lobbying on it, I really didn't. I didn't have a lot of people calling me saying, "You've got to vote for this."

I: Do you have any general insights as to how Baker and the others involved were able to bring about the—

WB: My impression was that they pushed all of the buttons; they had the right people calling the right people—the great moment being when some ambassador to Italy, Maxwell Rabb I think it was, called Larry Pressler out of the Foreign Relations Committee to urge him to vote for it. That's clearly a Howard Baker operation, and that's really the mark of a good leader. The mark of a good leader isn't going head to head with some guy to convince him; if you did that you would use up all of your credibility and chits too quickly. The mark of a good leader is knowing who should be calling the person to get them to do what you want them to do. Howard Baker understood how to do that. Also, he didn't have a Lyndon Johnson/break-your-arm mentality.

I: What was your impression as a Senator at the time of the role Baker was playing in the reconciliation effort during that period of time?

WB: I don't know, I would not have good knowledge. Do you mean when he was majority leader?

I: When he was majority leader.

WB: It was kind of picking up on that tactic as a way to deal with things in a more systematic and comprehensive way. I don't know, I was never in meetings with him, but it clearly was a stroke of genius to use this method to achieve reduced spending. Although it had been used, I think, by Carter once, it was not nearly as large as the program that went through in 1981.
I: What did you sense to be the relationship between Senator Baker and Senator Dole during that period of time?

WB: I wouldn't be a good person—Dole was on the Finance Committee, so I knew Dole very well, but I didn't know Baker except as a leader. They were both running for president. After the presidency, what Baker did was give Dole a lot of room as Finance chairman. It's always a question for a leader, particularly if he knows the subject, to determine whether he's going to run it or whether he's going to let his Committee chairman run it. He had a very healthy respect for Bob Dole's ability and gave him the room to lead from the Finance Committee. To a certain extent, one might say that was against Baker's interests, in the narrowest political sense. In the broadest political sense, it was clearly in his interests; it was in the interest of the institution. I don't like leaders who try to control it all themselves, I don't think that's good leadership.

I: Do you recall any situation where Senator Baker did seek you out and ask you for your help in regard to some matter?

WB: No, I don't recall any. Where he asked me for my vote, you mean?

I: Not necessarily just for a vote but for help in some regard. I don't know what the other possibilities might be.

WB: There are one or two—not memorable; no, it was more questions of process and courtesy, not help. I was never asked, "Could you help us here?" or "Can you see your way to be with us here?" or "Could you be absent that day?" No, I never heard any of that.

I: In terms of political power, how much power did Baker have during the period he was majority leader? How much power does a party leader in the Senate have, on either side of the aisle?

WB: It depends on the president and the state of the party at the time and the personality of the leader. He came in with a very popular president, who had the public behind the program, and he skillfully managed that program. So he had tremendous success, if you look at his time as leader, in what was accomplished. By virtue of that success, his leadership itself was also enhanced, because his views were thought to be even more worthy than they might
otherwise have been: he won, so he must know something that nobody else knows, right? After all, he's the leader. So his views were probably solicited on a regular basis by the administration. I don't have personal knowledge, but I think that he was a fairly powerful figure at that time. There's an old Chinese saying that there are three kinds of leaders: the leader who you are afraid of, the leader who moves you to tears or whatever, then the leader who nobody knows was the leader—and it's the third that is the best. I think that's the way Howard Baker operated, that was his power. He didn't push himself out to take credit.

I: Did you have a sense that at least some Republican Senators would defer to Baker simply because he was the leader?

WB: Yes; sure, that's a tendency in the body. Somebody you've formed an opinion of as being talented suddenly becomes leader, and they are a genius. It's like JFK once said: the older he got, the better football player he became.

I: Let me ask you two more questions, Senator. What comments would you make about Senator Baker's time in the White House as chief of staff?

WB: Oh, my God! He was performing a national service, at a time when the whole thing was going down and where credibility had deteriorated to the edge of criminality, right? He entered the picture and restored relations with Congress and ran an effective, efficient ship. It was also an illustration of how he was able to put his country before his ego, which is not always possible. There are not too many other leaders that I could imagine subordinating themselves to the point you have to as chief of staff, with the man that you ran against and thought you were better than. And, in some cases, were better than. That was a great public service on his part, and he did it by the same way he did it as leader: heavy consultations, a lot of conversations, a lot of openness, and then some skillful moves when it was appropriate.

I: What is the essential Howard Baker then?

WB: My perspective is not of somebody who worked with him everyday, but my impression of him was that it was a combination of gentleness and sensitivity, a touch of self-deprecating humor, a fine mind with a penchant toward the wisdom angle as opposed to the data angle. A storyteller of sorts, average; most politicians are zero, he was better than average. Somebody who appeared to me from afar to have a tension in his life that was unresolved; I
never was able to determine whether there was a personal tension in his life or what, but his exterior as a politician was so calm that one would have to conclude, because life isn't that way, that there was a turmoil inside that he masked by his external calmness, which made him an effective leader because, in this body, people show it all frequently in ways that are embarrassing. So that made him an effective leader, but I've often wondered about his life. Whether he was able to find a sense of equanimity and satisfaction that was as deep as he knew one should have in a well-led life. These are my hunches.

I: But the nature of that tension remains a mystery?

WB: To me, yes; I don't make a living trying to figure out people's psychological state and what their mother said to me or what their family circumstances were or who said what to whom—that's not my business. My business is to assess them, whether there is that tension and what that implies for what I have to do in dealing with them. All of us have interesting histories, and if I was interested in that I would be a psychoanalyst and not a Senator.

I: On that note, let me thank you for a very interesting and insightful conversation.

WB: Thank you.