

George A. Smathers
United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969
Oral History Interview
U.S. Senate Historical Office

PREFACE

George Armistead Smathers served two terms in the United States House of Representatives, from 1947 to 1951, and three terms in the United States Senate, from 1951 to 1969, as a Democrat from Florida. Born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on November 14, 1913, he moved with his family to Miami, Florida in 1920. After attending public schools in Dade County, he enrolled in the University of Florida. When he graduated in 1936 he was named “best all-round man” of his class. Two years later he received his law degree from the University of Florida and entered private practice. He served as assistant U.S. district attorney in Miami from 1940 until he was commissioned in the U.S. Marine Corps in May 1942. Discharged as a major in October, 1945, he became special assistant to U.S. Attorney General Tom Clark.

In the Democratic primary of 1946, George Smathers defeated incumbent Representative Pat Cannon to win election to the House of Representatives. Four years later, he unseated Senator Claude Pepper in a legendary primary campaign, long the subject of political commentary and misrepresentation. Senator Smathers won reelection in 1956 and 1962 with little or no opposition, and served until his retirement in January, 1969.

As a senator, George Smathers became a close friend and ally of Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson. In 1956, during the absence of Johnson’s whip, Earle Clements, and following Johnson’s heart attack, Senator Smathers acted as Democratic floor leader. However, he declined to be considered for the official post of whip. He was a close personal friend of both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, from their days in Congress to their presidencies, and retained a close friendship with a Republican member of the Class of ‘46, Richard M. Nixon.

Senator Smathers chaired the Senate Democratic Campaign Committee in 1956, served on the Democratic Policy Committee, and was elected Secretary to the Democratic Conference. He served on the Commerce, Finance, and Foreign Relations Committees, among others. Throughout his years in the Senate he made Latin American affairs such a special concern that he was once recognized on the floor as “the Senator from Latin America.”

Senator Smathers’ years of service spanned the era from the Solid South to the two-party South. When he began his Senate career, southern Democrats dominated the institution through their chairmanships of the major committees. Symbolic of the political changes of the times, he was succeeded in the Senate by the first Republican senator from Florida since Reconstruction. Over the years he witnessed the evolution of both the South and the Senate on civil rights legislation. In 1963, Senator Smathers became one of the first southern senators to vote for cloture, on a communications satellite bill. Together with Spessard Holland he sponsored the Twenty-Fourth amendment to the Constitution, outlawing poll taxes.

Following his retirement from the Senate, George Smathers returned to the practice of law in Miami and Washington, and became a prominent Washington lobbyist. In these interviews he offered his opinions of the Senate from both inside and outside the institution, its committee activities, its dealings with the press, and its leading figures.

Senator Smathers deposited his papers at the P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History at the University of Florida in Gainesville. He also gave oral history interviews to the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson presidential libraries.

Senator George Smathers died on January 20, 2007.

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Interview #1: The Road to Congress
(Tuesday, August 1, 1989)
Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie



Senator Smathers
Senate Historical Office

Ritchie: It's a real pleasure, senator.

Smathers:: It's so nice to meet you. The fellow who was here ahead of you, Dick Baker, very nice guy. We had a nice talk, and he was interested in looking at the pictures on the wall, particularly that picture of [Jack Kennedy](#), and [Frank Church](#), and me, back there, when we were the four youngest members of the Senate at that time, when we first got here. And then that picture immediately behind you is when we first came to the House. That was the class that got elected in 1946. [Nixon](#) is there, and then Kennedy, and myself, [Thruston Morton](#), [Tiger \[Olin\] Teague](#) down there in front of the microphone, [Don Jackson](#) over there in front of Nixon and Kennedy. The other guys are two fellows I know, but I have never been able to recollect who in the hell they are--but I know them. They're nice guys. One was from California.

Ritchie: I noticed the [Alben Barkley](#) picture over here.

Smathers: Right, that's when I was being sworn into the Senate. That's Senator [\[Spessard\] Holland](#), who was my senior colleague. I beat [\[Claude\] Pepper](#), who had been there, and I took Pepper's place. That other picture was when [\[Lyndon\]](#)

[Johnson](#) was majority leader. [Earle Clements](#), the senator from Kentucky is sitting between [Albert Gore](#) and [Dick Russell](#), he was the assistant leader and I was the whip behind him. But Clements got defeated and I became the whip, so to speak, and served the balance of the year. But anyway, we went through these, he enjoyed it, and I did too.

Ritchie: They're really excellent. We've been collecting a photographic heritage of the Senate, photographs on every senator, and events of the Senate. We use them for various publications.

Smathers: I can provide you with copies of these pictures.

Ritchie: We would be very interested in getting some copies. Quite often in terms of publications we're looking for a picture that really captures the Senate at various moments. And pictures like that gathering in Johnson's office are the type of things you don't see often.

Smathers: That's right. See, that was in Johnson's majority leader office, which at that time was on the third floor of the Capitol. We met in there. He later moved it down to the second floor, where [Bob Byrd](#) had it for a long time. Then when [Johnson] got to be vice president, he moved it across the hall. I

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don't know what's over there now, but that had been a committee room. Some committee that Johnson made move, and he took it over himself.

Ritchie: I understand he had a great sense of real estate on Capitol Hill.

Smathers: Oh, yeah, he was big in real estate. Big in real estate. All right, sir.

Ritchie: I wanted to ask you about yourself and your roots. I was interested to see that your father was in politics, in New Jersey at first. Did you grow up in a political family, and a political environment?

Smathers: Yes. My father was very political, and there were two reasons. First, he had worked for his uncle, whose name was George H. Smathers, in North Carolina. He had worked for him when George H. Smathers was the president of the North Carolina state senate, and was a Republican. My father had been invited by his uncle to go down there to uncle and be a page. So my father fell in love with politics at that very early age, and he really never got over it.

Then my father, after graduating from the University of North Carolina, became a lawyer and went to New Jersey, actually as a professional baseball player in Newark. While he was there he took the bar and passed it, and decided to make New Jersey his home. He moved to Atlantic City, because he was a Democrat, and

there were no Democrats that he could find in Atlantic County. He figured this was the place to go to start the Democratic party. It was shortly thereafter that [Woodrow Wilson](#), who had been president of Princeton University, decided that he wanted to run for governor, and he wanted to run as a Democrat. So he came to Atlantic County and solicited my father to handle his campaign in Atlantic County, which my dad was glad to do. Wilson won and became governor, and thereafter as governor Wilson appointed my father as a county judge, so to speak.

My father served in that capacity until his rheumatism got so bad and the cold weather bothered him so much that the doctors finally said, "You've got to go south, as far south as is possible because you need warm weather. This cold, damp New Jersey weather is going to leave you in this pain that you're having." So my dad put us all on the train and we went south as far as you could go. We got off the train in Miami, in 1920. I was a very little boy, I just remember we were all dressed in long black stockings and wool stuff, and gosh it was hot! I couldn't believe it. The sun was so bright. I was five, I guess. But anyway, my dad established the family in a place called Magnolia Park, which today is almost downtown Miami! It was a little, small community at that time. We lived there ever after.

But my father loved politics all the time, from his own experience in Raleigh, and from his brother's experience as United States senator. I wanted to say

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how that happened was that when my father got sick, as a judge, he wrote his brother [Bill Smathers](#), who was also from Waynesville, North Carolina, but who had gone to Washington and Lee to school, and was a good athlete. He had graduated as a lawyer and gone back to Asheville. My father wrote to his little brother--younger brother, not little, because Bill was bigger, physically. He wrote to Bill to come up to New Jersey and take over this judgeship. He felt that he could be an interim appointee and then probably run and get elected, which is what happened. When my dad left New Jersey, the governor appointed Bill Smathers to fill the unexpired term. Bill Smathers did become a judge, and a rather prominent judge. Then he ran for state senator, and got elected, and then he ran for the United States Senate and was elected from New Jersey, and served one term in the Senate [1937-1943]. I came up to see him from Miami, twice, to see Bill Smathers. I didn't come up here to see him, exactly, but came up and saw him. So, to go back to your original question about my interest in politics, I was named after a politician, a state senator; my dad was greatly interested in politics and served as a judge by virtue of politics; and my uncle Bill was a United States senator from New Jersey. So it was fairly easy for me to have a big interest in politics.

Ritchie: Did your father continue in politics in Florida?

Smathers: No, my father became a very prominent lawyer, down in Miami. He had a big law firm called Smathers, Clutson, Huck. But my father never did get over his rheumatism and arthritis. Finally, it got so bad that he had to retire. He was one of the first guinea pigs, so to speak, that they tried cortisone on. He volunteered to be a guinea pig in some program of new medicines that were calculated to cure rheumatism and arthritis. My dad volunteered for that, and actually went through a lot of trauma and a lot of pain. He had retired from the law practice at that time, but he lived on to be eighty-three years old, as a matter of fact. He tried everything. He wore coins in the bottom of his shoes, which some--not I guess top-quality--doctors prescribed at that time. Later on, in my lifetime, you'd see guys with copper things on their wrists that were supposed to suck up some impurity out of your joint, so that it wouldn't pain you. My dad did that for a while. He went up to Canada where a fellow had some sort of strange copper treatment that he gave, you couldn't get it here in the United States.

Then he would have my brother and me go out to a beehive. We would put one of these great big five gallon jugs over the entrance to the beehive and get maybe a hundred and fifty, two hundred yellow jackets, and cover them up. Then my father would stick his hand into this big jug, and let these bees sting him. Somehow that venom which the bees put into his system greatly helped his arthritis. People used to say, "By God, that's sort of like hitting yourself over the head with a hammer in order so you'll sleep good!" But we did that, and we always had beehives at my father's house. We would catch the bees and he would get stung, and that was the one sort of sedative or medicine that really did help him. But, after creating a very good office in Miami, he had to retire finally, because he became quite deformed.

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He was always interested in politics, and I think in many ways got me started. When my turn came to be in high school, I was a pretty good athlete, played all the sports, and won the trophy for the best athlete at Miami high school. I had several opportunities for what were then scholarships, which meant that rather than give you anything free they would get you a job. If you waited on tables, and that sort of thing, that would pay your way through school. I had an opportunity to go to the University of Illinois. Zepke was a very famous football coach, and he had come down and watched me play a game or two, and offered me what amounted to a scholarship. I really wanted to go. My ambition was to go to the University of Illinois at Champagne, Illinois. But my dad kept saying, "No, that's not the place to go." He said, "You will someday probably want to be in politics" (because I'd already been elected president of the student body in high school and that sort of thing). He said, "You'll want to be in politics, and you'll need to go to the state university so that you will know boys from all over this state. I'm not going to let you go to Illinois." Well, we had quite heated discussions about that. I wanted to go to Illinois so badly. It sounded so far away and so glamorous.

Finally I had to yield to my father's insistent orders that I go to the University of Florida. So I went to the University of Florida, and had a very wonderful time, as a matter of fact, and was a pretty good athlete. I was captain of the basketball team, and was captain of the track team, and I played football for a while, but I wasn't really good. Kind of had to give that up because I kept getting injured. I wasn't very husky. I was elected president of the student body, and president of my fraternity, and that sort of thing. So I had a lot of interest, politically.

Incidentally, it was at that particular point in my life that I met [Claude Pepper](#). I was president of the student body, and had been captain of the debate team, as well as the athletic part of it. Pepper had just gotten elected to finish out a two-year term. Some senator had died; I think it was [Park Trammel](#). Pepper was running for reelection, this was 1938. I went down to the county court house along with a whole bunch of other students to hear this rather famous senator. He made a brilliant speech. I was terribly impressed with what he had to say, and the manner, particularly, in which he said it. Well, it so happened that the next day he came out to the campus at the university and I was introduced as president of the student body. He asked me, would I manage his campaign on the campus for reelection? I was so flattered that I immediately accepted that kind invitation. I organized his campaign on campus for him, and finally it got to the point that I was so involved that I began to take over the whole county, not only the city of Gainesville, where the university was, but the whole Alachua County.

Pepper ran a very strong race and won very easily for reelection at that point, but that was my first introduction to Claude Pepper. Right after that, I graduated from law school, went down to Miami to practice law in my father's office. Although my dad had been retired, but he'd left the name there, Smathers, Clutson, Huck. So I went into that office, and I had been there

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maybe about six months when I got word from a fellow named Charlie Andrews, whose father was the other United States senator from Florida, in Washington. Charlie Andrews had been a PKA, which is a fraternity right across the street from the SAEs. I was an SAE, but Charlie and I were in the same class and knew each other. When Charlie graduated from law school he went to Washington to work for his father. I went to Miami to practice law.

I got this call from Charlie, and he said, "George, would you be interested in becoming assistant United States district attorney at Miami?" I said, "Yeah, Charlie, I would. What does it pay?" I remember him saying, "Well, it pays \$320 a month." I said, "Boy, that's a lot of money." And it was a lot of money in those days. I said, "I'd love to take it." He said, "Well, there's one caveat. Can you get Senator Pepper to okay it?" "What we do," he said, "is we take turns whenever there's a vacancy in a judgeship or in a U.S. attorney's office." In those days, the senators did all the appointing. He said, "Can you get Senator Pepper to go along.

He doesn't appoint anybody when it's his term that my dad doesn't agree to, and we do not appoint anybody to these kind of jobs unless he agrees. So can you get him?" I said, "Surely, I can get him. I'm confident that I can." I called Senator Pepper, and he very graciously and very kindly said okay. Some years later, he forgot about the fact that I was Senator [Andrews'](#) appointment, and he said that he had appointed me. Which was not actually the case. He had endorsed me, but he had not appointed me.

Anyway, I served in that capacity--now am I doing this all right? Let me just stop to say, is this what you want me to do?

Ritchie: Sure, I have a few questions I'd like to go back to.

Smathers: Okay. Anytime you want to interrupt me, why you go ahead, because I just get going here. So you stop me, and guide me, and lead me, and I'll be glad to have that.

Ritchie: One person I was really interested in was your roommate in college, Phil Graham.

Smathers: Yes, let's go back to Phil, because Phil is a wonderful fellow. When I was in Miami high school, one of the interesting guys that I met was Phil Graham. He was fifteen, let's say, and I was sixteen. We were about the same age, but I was a little bit older than he. He was a very bright guy. Tall, skinny guy, whose father owned a dairy, called Graham's Dairy. Philip's mother was a fascinating woman. She was a great intellectual. It was from her that Phil Graham got his intellectual inspiration and I think much of his intellectual talents, from his mother who I think shortly after this period of time passed away. She was the first person I ever knew who read *Time* magazine, for example, who read the *Saturday Evening Post* regularly, who was a great reader. They had a debate team at Miami high school, and among other things, Phil Graham was on that debate team. I recall one time he got me to try out for it, and I wasn't that good. But anyway, I got to know Phil.

As I said earlier, his father owned and ran this Graham's Dairy. His father became a state senator. I don't recollect just when it was, but it was before Phil got to Miami high school. His name was Ernest Graham, and he was a wonderful looking guy, rather large and husky, with slate gray hair and gray eyes. Very handsome guy. He had become a state senator, and then he decided he wanted to run for governor. Phil was obviously very involved in his campaign, and Phil's sister Mary, and they got me involved because I was president of the student body at Miami high school, as well as at the University of Florida later. When Ernest Graham ran for governor, I became the Dade County Young Man's Chairman for Graham for Governor. I got to know Ernest Graham very well, and of course

knew Phil intimately. Graham didn't make it, he was defeated. He made the second primary, but I think it was a fellow named John Martin who defeated Ernest Graham for governor. Now, we were still in high school at that time.

We went to college, Ernest Graham ran back to the dairy, Phil and I joined the same fraternity. He went up there a year earlier than me. He went to Gainesville, the University of Florida, a year ahead of me. Phil was a wild guy. He was so smart, and studies were so easy for him, that he could sit around and never study anything until the night before the exam. Then he would go through everything and once he had it was just like that [snaps fingers], and he was making straight As. Then he got to drinking whiskey. In our fraternity we had a lot of whiskey drinkers. That was kind of the thing to do in those days. The girls were up at Tallahassee, at Florida State University, which is today a great big university. That was all females, and down at the University of Florida in Gainesville it was all males. So every weekend there was this great transmigration of women this way and men that way to see each other. Anyway, Phil began to drink and raise Cain. He became the editor of the *Alligator*, which was the college paper. He had some articles written, and some of them were funny as hell, and some of them offended some people.

One weekend, Phil and his group began to celebrate pretty early, and he got very well polluted. In those days, when people drank whiskey, they didn't drink socially. It wasn't to take a sip like we all later on began to do, and sip a drink and maybe have another drink and then go to dinner. It was nothing like that. I mean, in those days when a guy started drinking he'd drink at two o'clock in the afternoon and he'd be absolutely plastered by six. He'd wake up again maybe at nine and get drunk again. But that was the thing. He was doing that one afternoon when his father, Ernest, showed up. I never will forget this, as long as I live.

They had a little fence around the SAE house, which couldn't have been eight or twelve inches off the ground, a little chain fence. Somebody went in and started looking for Phil, and said, "Phil, your Dad's here." "Where is he?" "Well, he's outside sitting in his truck talking to a bunch of the students." I think maybe I was one of them, if not John Stembler was, a guy who's alive today, who was one of Phil's very closest friends, and another boy named Billy Gaither, who's not still alive but anyway was a great buddy of Phil's. Somebody

found Phil, and he was really plastered, so Philip tried to run out to see his daddy, and he tripped on this little old fence, it was about six inches high, and fell on his face. Then he got up. His dad looked at him and said, "You come home, tomorrow. We ain't gonna have this anymore." He jerked him right out of school and put him back to work driving a milk truck. So that ended Phil's career for that year at Florida. Starting the next semester he went back to school. Made

wonderful grades, and he and I graduated at about the same time from the academic school, we both got AB degrees.

I didn't know where to go to law school. My dad was saying, "Go to Florida, you're still going to meet all the boys. The judges are going to be Floridians, and all the people that you practice with. You don't give a damn about going up to Harvard or somewhere." But Phil's mother talked him into going to Harvard, because she was a real, genuine intellectual. She knew the importance of Harvard and what it would mean to Phil. So Phil departed and went to Harvard that following September. I entered Florida, Phil went to Harvard. As you know, while there at Harvard he made the highest grades, and I think I'm saying this correctly, he made the highest grades that had ever been made up to that point. As I understand it, the grades that he made then are still the highest that anybody has ever made.

Phil was so smart that Justice Felix Frankfurter, who was then on the Supreme Court, offered Phil the job of becoming his--I think it was his chief clerk. Phil became the chief clerk for Frankfurter and helped write some very important decisions. It was shortly after that the war came along, World War II. I joined the Marine Corps, and Phil went into the Army Air Force. It was called the Army Air Force then, not the U.S. Air Force. I didn't see Phil anymore, they sent me out to the South Pacific and I stayed out there two years, even though I was already old enough to avoid the war, and I already had a son, and another son on the way. But I felt like I ought to go ahead and do my part of it. But to get back to Phil for a minute, Phil went into the Air Force. During the war I was based here for about six weeks with the Navy before I went overseas. Phil took me to dinner one night with a girl named Katharine Meyer. We went to the Mayflower and had dinner. I thought she was a reasonably attractive girl, but she was quite an intellect herself. Phil, after he took her home, he called me and said, "What do you think about her?" I said, "Well, I thought she was very attractive." He said, "I'm thinking about getting married." I said, "Well, I think that would be a mistake."

I learned from that experience, you never want to tell any guy who's thinking about getting married, and he's got some particular girl, you never want to tell him that that's not the girl. Because invariably he will be smooching with her a little bit and he wants to tell her how much he loves her, and he'll say to her, "Well, I want to tell you something, I love you and we're going to get married even though a lot of my friends don't think I ought to marry you." Or something like that, to prove how much he's going to love her in spite of some of his friends. So she naturally says, "Well, who are those friends?" And he starts naming them off. And of course she never forgets them.

That has been my situation with Katharine Graham, except I made another unguarded remark later, which I'll tell you about, as long as you want to know

about Phil Graham. But anyway, I offered my two bits worth, which was worth nothing, and it haunted me subsequently most of the rest of my life, although we naturally are very cordial to each other when we see each other, Katharine and I.

The war got over, Phil then came back from the war. Eugene Meyer bought the evening paper, I guess it was, here in Washington, and put Phil into it. Then they bought the other paper and merged two of them to become the *Washington Post*, and Phil became the editor of the *Washington Post*. It was about that time I began to run for Congress and came up here as a Congressman. So I would see Phil from time to time, and Kay Graham, and they came along with their family. Their children were the same age as my children. Donnie Graham who today runs the *Post*, as much as his mother lets him, he was the same age as my oldest son. We all became very good friends and used to see each other. His sister Lolly Graham, she used to date my other son Bruce, for a while. So we were pretty close to them. In the meantime, Phil became more famous. *Newsweek* was Phil's idea, so far as I know, with respect to the creation of the new *Newsweek*. It was his idea to make this a service with ABC and a couple of other newspapers. Phil was brilliant, and made the *Washington Post* the preeminent newspaper that it is today.

Then, I don't know, the pressure or whatever it was began to get to him. He began to take barbiturates to an alarming degree. And he began to do a lot of sort of stupid things. I'd see Phil from time to time, but I was busy over in the Congress. I would hear about these things, and then from time to time we would meet, but never for me to talk to him about it. One of our very dearest friends, who had been in the same fraternity with Phil and me, named John Stembler, John used to come up from Atlanta. He had gone to Atlanta to live, and he used to come up and stay with Phil and Kay a great deal. Then we'd all get together. John helped keep Phil pretty straightened out there for a while. But Phil wasn't physically a very strong guy, and I think the pressures of everything began to get to him. Finally he shot himself. They had a farm down in Virginia, and he was down there one weekend, this is what I heard, and he shot himself. Somebody asked me about it later, and in an unguarded moment I said, "Well, if you'd been married to Kay Graham you'd have probably shot yourself too." Somebody reported that back to her, which I had said, you know, in a smart ass, stupid, inconsiderate way, which I regretted. I didn't mean it at all. I was just being smart--thinking I was being smart. So Kay heard that, and naturally she didn't like George Smathers from that point on.

Before Phil died, they bought a television station in Miami. He got interested in Channel 10 in Miami. It's called WPLG, W Philip Leslie Graham, it took his initials and became the call station there, the principal CBS station. I was in the Senate and I helped that go through, as a matter of fact. Later, Phil was then gone to his reward, Katharine wanted to buy a station in Jacksonville, WJAX. Somebody told her that I was stopping her from getting

it, which was untrue, completely. I had nothing to do with it, even though I was on the committee which had jurisdiction over the Federal Communications Commission. I had appointed a fellow to that Commission named Richie Mack. He had a lot of influence, and he apparently had voted against Kay taking the Jacksonville station over, and she thought I had put Richie Mack up to that. She thought my brother, who was a banker, that he wanted the station. That's what she has told people, that my brother Frank stopped her from getting the station for a while, which is totally incorrect in that my brother is a banker and didn't give a damn about television stations, and never has.

So, regrettably, Kay and I have never hit it off real good since then. But I love the children, and I respect her. I loved Phil, and I'm trying now at this very time, I'm trying to get the Graham Foundation to do something with the journalism school at Gainesville, at the University of Florida, where Philip went to school, and have them name the school the Philip Graham Journalism School, which they would be agreeable to doing if the Graham Foundation will put up several million dollars. Anyway, I'm working on that now. That's pretty much the story of my association with Phil Graham.

Ritchie: Did Phil Graham get involved in your political campaigns at all?

Smathers: Yes, Phil was for me. He never got to the extent where he was beating the bushes for me. But his father, all the time he was alive, helped me. Phil's brother Bill helped me a great deal. Phil's mother died, and then Phil's father married another woman, and she and Phil's father were the father and mother of the current United States senator from Florida, [Bob Graham](#). Bob Graham was the governor, and a wonderful senator. He's a half-brother of Phil's. But Phil helped me a great deal, and Phil got very close to [Lyndon Johnson](#), and he was close to [Kennedy](#), and he was close to all those people, as I was. So I'd see Phil on a fairly regular basis and we got along great. Phil was without doubt the smartest fellow that I suspect I ever knew. Just plain brainy. He lacked some balance at time, as some of these brilliant fellows do. He lacked sometimes common sense, but he was brilliant, and a wonderful guy, sweet fellow.

Ritchie: I got the feeling he was fascinated with politics, too, even though he never got into it.

Smathers: Loved politics. His daddy was in it, and he was in it, so he's always loved it.

Ritchie: One of the questions I wanted to go back to, you mentioned that you went into the Marines. You were about twenty-seven at the time. . .

Smathers: At the time I went in the Marines I think I was twenty-six.

Ritchie: You were older, and you had a child. How did you decide on the Marines?

Smathers: Well, I'm glad you asked me that because I love to tell this story. The U.S. attorney's office at Miami in the federal building was on a corner. We had about three offices there. There were two assistant U.S. attorneys, Stuart Patton and me. In the next office was the United States Marine Corps recruiting office. As you had to walk from our office to the court room, which they had three different court rooms, and we were always in court, I'd walk by the Marine Corps office every day, and this went on for about a year, or a little less than a year. I would say, "Now, fellows, when you get a real soft job, let me know. Maybe I ought to go. Maybe I ought to do my part." Something like that. And I would kid them a lot. They had recruiting sergeants in there.

So, one day, after I had said this for about six months or so, the war started in December, 1941, so this was 1942, I was trying some very important cases and loved doing it. It was just the best job I really ever had in my life, just loved it. Putting everybody in jail. Nobody was safe. You know, I had the FBI working for me, and I was in charge of the whole south Florida. The Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Internal Revenue Service, you name it, Alcohol Tax Unit, they all worked for me. And they were always in there saying, "Hey, George, we ought to prosecute this guy. We ought to prosecute this. We ought to do this." They were for putting everybody in jail. And they had gambling at that time in Miami. To make a long story short, we indicted people that I've thought about thirty years later, I think it was really outrageous in a way. It scares me to death to think about it. But we ended up putting a lot of people in jail that I don't know now that I'm mellowed and older I don't know that I would have ever brought this kind of case against them. We ended up putting the county solicitor in jail, putting the state's attorney in jail, put the head of the OPA in jail. We had the biggest white slavery case that had ever been had up to that point in time, and I tried that case against some of the great lawyers who were brought in from New York and Jacksonville. I tried that case and we convicted them.

I learned then a couple of things, that if you want to convict people you want to get a real young jury, because a young jury was just like I was. They had not lived long enough to know that in the course of your lifetime you're going to make a lot of mistakes. Most of them are fairly innocent mistakes, but when you're young, you don't know that. You think everything's either black or white. Or if you can't get a real young jury, then get a real old jury, who have forgotten about making all those mistakes. I got onto that pretty quick, and I would pick a jury, we'd have a panel of seventy-five guys, and I would pick six, if there were going to be six on some cases, or twelve in other cases, I'd pick young people, and then talk about "we have to uphold the law. We can't let these people start breaking it down. This

whole society will go crazy." All this stuff. Anyway, we put everybody in jail. Nobody was safe. Until I went to the Marine Corps.

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One day they stopped me as I was walking by and said, "Say, Smathers, we got just the job for you." I said, "What is that?" They said, "Well, they've opened up a new thing where you can go to Officer's Candidate School. You've got to go to Parris Island, pass the physical part of it for six weeks, then you go to Quantico and pass the Officers' Candidate School. Then you'll start out being a Second or First Lieutenant, depending on how well you do." I'd finished a big case there, and I thought, "Well, I ought to go and do my duty." So I volunteered for the Marines and went through Parris Island, went through Quantico. Then I came to Washington--they put me here for a little while. That's when I saw Phil Graham, just before he was going overseas. I stayed here, and it looked like they were going to try to make a desk guy out of me and keep me here in Washington. But I thought as long as I'm going to be in the service I'll be damned if I'm going to sit around here pushing paper and being a lawyer for the Navy. So I feigned having an appendicitis attack. They took me to the Navy Medical Center. They took my appendix out, just on my representation as to where it was, and how badly it hurt. But that broke the umbilical cord with the administrative section of the Navy and put me back in the Marines.

When I got through with the Navy Medical Center out at Bethesda, when I finally got out of that, they sent me down to Cherry Point, North Carolina, which was a brand new Marine Corps base. From there they put me into an air group. I was a security officer. I had to go through some more schooling. Then they put me with a group. I went to California, to Camp Pendleton, and we went overseas. I was overseas in Guam and the Solomon Islands, those campaigns, up to the next year and a half.

While I was in the Marine Corps, the war passed us by down in the South Pacific. We Marines had been told that the next landing after we had won at Bougainville, there were minor battles at Vella Lavella, at Munda, where I was in an airplane that was shot down. We had a lot of very interesting episodes. They kept rotating these guys, but I never got rotated because I was the adjutant. I was the oldest fellow, actually, in these air groups. There would be six hundred guys in there, and I was twenty-eight years old, and I was the oldest fellow there, that is of officers. There were some enlisted guys who were older, but of the officers I was always the oldest. So they kept me there while they would rotate the fliers. I would be in charge of all the security on the ground for these various operations. I began to get very impatient.

About that time, we had the Tarawa battle, and Midway, and then [Douglas] MacArthur took over and went into the Philippines. In the meantime, we had been training. We in the Navy and the Marine Corps were going to land at

Mindanao, which is the southern tip of the Philippines. We'd been told very secretly that we were going to get ready, those of us in that area, and those who were not eligible could come home. When you'd been out there about a year, most everybody rotated. But I'd been there a year and never been rotated. I'd been to Australia for leave on one occasion--which was really great. But anyway, suddenly we awakened one day to hear on the radio (of course, there

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were no newspapers, we were out there and never saw anybody, never did anything) that MacArthur had landed. And he had landed up in the middle of the Philippines, and here we were, we had been trained, we were going to land at the tip end. Well, he had already gotten two hundred miles ahead of what the Navy and the Marine Corps were thinking about. The Army and the Air Force were already going up ahead of us. So that meant that all this training was then of no value.

So I said, "Look, I've got to get home. I've got two children now, I've never seen one of my kids." I began to write people, saying, "Let me get out. I'm the only fellow in this whole air group that's never been rotated." I wrote a letter to Senator Pepper, saying: "I wish, senator, you would look into letting me out. I'm overqualified in the sense that I was too old anyway, I've got a family, and I'd like to get out." I wrote Senator [Holland](#). I wrote to the attorney general Tom Clark, who knew me because when I was assistant U.S. attorney I had worked under him. He was not then attorney general, but he had a job in the Justice Department. This is Ramsey Clark's father. He knew me, and Ramsey's mother, they knew me rather well. They'd come to Miami while I was assistant U.S. attorney, and I'd taken them to dinner a couple of times, and he had watched what I had done down there, winning some big cases, and had written me a letter commending me for it. I wrote him a letter, and he's the fellow that I soon discovered was the guy who talked to the Navy and said, "Look, you've got a guy out there, he's got a family, he's been out there a year and ought to be rotated." He was the fellow who arranged for me, actually, to come back.

Now, Pepper claims that I wrote him, which I did, but that he's the one that arranged it. Well, the fact is that he didn't do it. Senator Holland and Tom Clark were the guys who helped me come home, although I did write to Claude, there's no question about that, asking him to help. And I don't say that he probably didn't do something, but it was Tom Clark, because when I came back Tom Clark made me an assistant United States attorney general in charge of trying war fraud cases. The Navy brought me from San Francisco back here to Washington, and I was here in Washington for a while, and then I got put into the reserve and immediately went to work for Tom Clark over in the Department of Justice. I was there for maybe three months before I finally said I wanted to go back to Miami. So that was my war story.

Ritchie: When you came into the Senate later on, there were a number of other Marine-Senators. [Paul Douglas](#) and [Joe McCarthy](#), an unusual assortment. . . .

Smathers: That's right, and [Mike Mansfield](#) was a Marine. There was [Danny Brewster](#) from Maryland who was Marine Corps. There were a number of them. I never saw Joe McCarthy while I was overseas. I was in the Solomon Islands, starting at Esprit de Santos, and moving right on up. Guadalcanal had already occurred by the time I arrived out there. But we had the battle of Bougainville, and we raided Lurabal. We went into Munda, we went into Vella Lavella, we went into Choiseul. They were small operations. And the air

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groups were very much involved, because there was a boy named Walter Mayberry who was head of one of the squadrons out there who had been captain of the University of Florida football team. I remember seeing him in a dogfight with the Japanese, and he got shot down. We never did find his body or anything. But Joe McCarthy, I read later where he said he was out there, shooting a tail gun, and all that stuff. I can't say that he did, and I can't say that he didn't. My own impression was that he didn't.

Ritchie: The reason I brought it up was because the Marines seem to have a special bond, more than the other services. Does that carry over to senators who served in the Marines?

Smathers: Yes, the Marine Corps being smaller, they stick together very well. I got to know Mansfield, I loved Mike Mansfield and one of the reasons I loved him was because he was in the Marines. I think that's the reason we got along so well. Danny Brewster was the same way. Paul Douglas, I don't know when Paul was in the Marines. He had been in the Marines, but see Paul was considerably older, probably fifteen to twenty years older than we were, but he'd been in the Marines.

I've got here on the wall a certificate of retirement as a colonel. What was funny about the Marine Corps to me was that I couldn't get promoted while I was in the Marines. I went in as a lieutenant and I came out as a captain. I went from second to first lieutenant real quick, and I got to captain and stayed there, all the rest of the time I was in the Marine Corps. When I got retired I was still a captain. After I got elected to Congress, all of a sudden I get notice one day--I had just retired, and I hadn't gone to retirement schools or anything--and I got notice that I had been promoted to a major now that I'm in the Congress. Well, that's great, boy I'm now a major. I talked around with Mansfield, and Mansfield said, "Yeah, I got a promotion too." I said, "Gee, that's great, but you know, I was in the damn Marine Corps for three and a half years, overseas two years, and I couldn't get a promotion while I was there." Here I am in Congress and I went to the Senate, and I got a notice that I was now a lieutenant colonel. My God, this is really something! Here I am, I haven't done anything, and I'm getting promoted. We

had a guy, I think it was that fellow there, [Robert] Cushman, I don't know, who had gone to the University of Florida, who had become the Commandant of the Marine Corps. I ought to remember his name.

Ritchie: Robert Cushman was Commandant under Nixon.

Smathers: Yeah, under Nixon, later. Before that, this guy, very nice guy, he was in the ATO fraternity in Florida, and he had become Commandant of the Marine Corps. One day I went over there to see him. I said, "Now, let me tell you something. I love the Marine Corps. I thought it was a great outfit. But I am embarrassed by the fact that since I've gotten into Congress and haven't done a damn thing, I get promoted three times. I couldn't get promoted once when the war was going on and I was really doing something. Now, this

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is ridiculous. You've got to stop this. I can't help you. I don't know if you're promoting me because you think I'm helping, or whatever it is I'm doing. And I have just finished talking to Mike Mansfield and he feels the same way. He wants to tell you the same thing. You promoted him two or three times. It doesn't make us proud of the Marines, and we don't much care about being something that we aren't. If we were going to summer school," (which some guys were doing, they'd come out of retirement and go back to active duty for maybe six weeks in the summer), "but we're not doing that. We've got to be here in Congress." So, anyway, he said, "Okay, we'll stop." I said, "Well, stop, for God's sakes." I loved the Marines, but they really were pretty bad about that."

Ritchie: They had their defenders in Congress. . . .

Smathers: Oh, yeah, they always did.

Ritchie: Who kept various administrations from cutting them out.

Smathers: Oh, sure. There were a lot of them in the House. Lot of guys in the Marine Corps naturally. . . . You know, there's an old expression that Marines like to talk, and they brag. We're the worst braggers, I guess, in the services. They used to say you never should go up and ask a guy if he was in the Marine Corps. If he was he would have already told you, and if he wasn't there's no sense in embarrassing him! The Marines used to tell that around, and laugh all the time. Of course, everybody in the Marine Corps thought they were superior, as I guess I did, to other branches of the service. Now, let's see, I had gotten myself where?

Ritchie: You had come back and were assistant to the attorney general.

Smathers: Yes, I came back and after I had been here in Washington for a short time I then got back to Miami and full retirement from the Marine Corps. The

office building in which we had our offices when the war started was the old DuPont Building. The Navy took that over during the war, and the Navy was still in it, and there was nowhere to open an office. I got back with some of the fellows who I had been close to. Jack Thompson was a wonderful fellow, and I talked with him about what we ought to do. We decided we'd open an office in another small building and we'd get a law firm going called Smathers and Thompson. We really didn't have much business or anything like that.

A fellow named Dan Mahoney was the editor of the *Miami Daily News*. He had married a daughter of [James] Cox from Ohio. Cox had been the governor of Ohio and the Democratic nominee for president, and a great politician. Dan Mahoney was a typical, handsome Irish guy, great politician. Good looking fellow. He called me one day--this was early '46--and said, "George, come down

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to the office here. I'm having Bun Gautier and Bill Lantaff, who have themselves just got out of the service, and I want to talk to you three guys." So we get down there, and he says, "Dade County" (which is Miami, Miami Beach, Hialeah, all that) "they need good representation in the state legislature, and Dade County is entitled to three legislators. I want to nominate you three guys with my paper. I will elect you. I will go out a hundred percent with this paper." And the paper was very powerful--it was before Jack Knight had really gotten the *Miami Herald* to be the big paper. He said, "I'll support you three guys. I want you to run, and the sooner you announce the easier it will be." Gautier, a good friend of mine, had been in the Navy, good Navy pilot, he said, "I'll do it." Bill Lantaff, who had been in the Army, Army Engineer, wonderful fellow, said "I'll do it."

I said, "Well, Mr. Mahoney, I don't know whether I want to go to the state legislature or not." If I'm going to get in politics, I would rather, I'd always felt, go to Congress. I'd rather be a Congressman. I don't really particularly want to go to Tallahassee." He said, "Well, you can't win. We've got a good Congressman named [Pat Cannon](#)." I said, "Well, I don't know, but I don't really have any desire to be in the state legislature." He said, "Well, I'm disappointed about that, I wish you'd reconsider," and so on. To make a long story short, I thought about a week, talked to a lot of my friends, and decided if I was going to get in politics--which I might as well because we couldn't open a law office, we had no place to open it although we hung a shingle on this building which we just had gotten back from the Navy--I said if I'm going to run I might as well run for Congress instead.

So I went to the FBI, who had been my big helpers before the war. The guy who had been the head of the FBI in South Florida was a fellow named Danner, Dick Danner. Dick was a wonderful guy, he was still the head of the FBI in Florida. I said, "Dick, I'm thinking about running for Congress. Would you be willing to manage my campaign?" He said, "Well, I've been with the FBI now all through the war and before the war and so on, and yes I'd like to make a change. I will do

it." I said, "If you'll do it, well I'm going to run." So I went to see this big fat guy Pat Cannon, who incidentally was a law partner of Gautier, who was the other guy that Dan Mahoney had brought in there and was going to run for the legislature. I went to see Pat, he weighed about three hundred and sixty pounds. He'd been a policeman. He'd gone to the University of Miami. He'd been a judge--no, he hadn't been a judge then, he was a judge later. I said, "Pat, I'm going to run for Congress. I'm sorry that it's going to be you. But I've got this wild hair to try myself in politics. I've thought about it a great deal. I want to run. And I'm not running against you, I'm just running for this seat." He said, "Well, George, I've defeated fourteen fellows, and you'll be the fifteenth. I'm sorry you're going to do it, but you'll see what you got into. You'll learn."

Danner helped me. I picked up a lot of young guys that I'd gone to high school with. They formed a group of young guys, a lot of war veterans, who were just out of the war, just back. Pat had not been in the war. The American

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Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, all those began to endorse me, and say "Smathers is the man." We worked like beavers. I knew these guys since high school, and they all helped. Pat Cannon called us the "Goon Squad." Smathers and his goons. So we got proud of that, we began to call ourselves the "Goon Squad." That district then included all of Miami, which is Dade County, all the way to Key West, Monroe County, and over to Naples, which is Collier County. That was the entire district. We really worked hard and we organized well. Danner, who was the head FBI guy, had a wonderful organizational mind, really good. He had as much to do with my getting elected as anybody. I won. I later got him the job as city manager of Miami. He managed my campaign also for the Senate later. But anyway, we won that seat.

I came to Congress, that was 1947, we got sworn in. I had met Joe Kennedy when I was district attorney putting everybody in jail. Joe used to come down from Palm Beach to go to the races. He always had with him the fire commissioner or the police commissioner from Massachusetts. Danner, who was the head of the FBI, big Irishman, he knew these Irishmen from Massachusetts. Joe Kennedy and Fitzgerald, and one named Fitzgibbons--there were two "Fitz's" I remember, one was police commissioner and the other was fire commissioner of Massachusetts. They would invite us to go to the races with them. I had met Joe Kennedy like that. I knew he was the ambassador to England. I knew he had been head of the Security and Exchange Commission. I had never met Jack Kennedy. I had never met any of the children at that time, but I knew Joe from just going to the races. I didn't know him well, of course, but that had occurred about three times. I learned a little later, and got more sophisticated, Joe was using some of us as sort of foils in a way, because he always had some really good looking girl along with him, and some of us were always getting credit as the fellow who was at the races with this good looking girl. We got so we laughed about that later.

I didn't know Jack Kennedy at that time. I never met him, I just knew that Joe had a couple of kids. When I got elected to the Congress, I came here and opened an office in the Old House Office Building. Two doors down from me was Jack Kennedy's office. My administrative assistant that I brought from Miami was a guy named Grant Stockdale. Stockdale fell in love with Jack Kennedy and Jack Kennedy loved him. Later Jack Kennedy made him ambassador to Ireland, when Jack got to be president. Ted Reardon was Jack's administrative assistant, and Ted and my guy Stockdale became intimate friends, and Jack and I became very close friends. Because Jack, as you can see from that picture, only weighed about a hundred and twenty-five pounds. Of the fellows least likely to be president, you'd have to vote Jack number one. He only weighed about a hundred and twenty-five pounds, and he had this bad back, and he had another illness that we didn't know about at the time, but he didn't look well. He was not well, he was in pain most of the time. When they'd ring the bells for us to go over to have a vote or have a quorum call, this poor guy would have a hard time getting over there. So the way it would happen is I'd go by and holler, "C'mon Jack, let's go." He would lean on me, or Stockdale, or Ted Reardon, and we'd all kind of march over to the floor of the

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House of Representatives where he would cast his vote, or vote present, or whatever was the order of the day.

We got to be very, very close friends during those four years that we were next door neighbors. He invited me up to Hyannisport in that summer of 1947, I guess it was, or '48. I went up there and met Eunice, and Pat, and all his family, and Mrs. Rose Kennedy. Later on, for some reason I got a very good [committee] assignment, when I got to the House. You know, in those days you had two committees. They put you on one good committee and one sort of bad committee. My so-called bad committee, or weak committee, was the Post Office and Civil Service. My good committee was the Foreign Affairs Committee. [Sol Bloom](#), ancient Congressman from New York was chairman. He used to tell us some wonderful stories all about when he first got there. He knew [Calvin] Coolidge and so on.

I might just tell you this story here, just for the record, which really was a true story that Sol Bloom told us, which I will never forget, about Coolidge. That Coolidge called him over one day to the White House about something. That Sol Bloom smoked cigars all the time. That Coolidge smoked cigars, which I didn't know about. That Sol Bloom, being chairman of the committee, was seated up near Coolidge's desk. It got to be about 5:30 in the afternoon and Coolidge got out a cigar and lit it up and started smoking it. Sol said that he looked so hungry, he didn't have a cigar with him, but he looked so anxious about it that President Coolidge finally looked at him and said, "Oh, yeah, Congressman, I hear you smoke cigars." He said yeah. So Coolidge opened his drawer and here was a

whole box of cheap cigars, five cent cigars, or maybe two for five, I don't know, but Sol telling this story said you couldn't believe these cheap cigars that this guy was smoking. So he said, "Here Congressman, have one." Sol said he took the cigar, but it was so cheap he just put it in his pocket. He didn't light it. Coolidge was looking around, and puffing on his, and talking to some of the others, and he looked back at Sol and sort of looked quizzical and puzzled, and he finally reached over and said, "Well, Congressman, if you're not going to smoke that cigar, I'll take it back." And he took it back and put it back in his box! Old Sol used to tell that story, and everybody would laugh, and it was a funny story.

Anyway, I got on that Foreign Affairs Committee. I forget what committee Jack Kennedy went on, but in any event we made a trip to Europe. I made two trips to Europe, both with Kennedy. Just he and I went to London, we went to France, we went to Spain, we traveled around a good deal and didn't really accomplish anything but we wrote a report to the committee when we got back as to what we discovered, and what we found. I made another trip with [Scott Lucas](#), who was then the [majority leader](#) of the Senate, and [Bill Fulbright](#), who was then a big guy on the Foreign Relations Committee, although I know he wasn't chairman then but he was already recognized as a very astute and able foreign relations senator. I somehow was invited along. We went into Berlin. The Russians were still in control. It was a very, very interesting, fascinating trip. Everything was on ready, I mean you could have started another war there

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in two minutes. I was shocked beyond my capacity to see how devastated the whole city was. I had never been to Berlin before, but there was nothing but devastation. You could stand in the middle of Unter den Linden street and look as far as you could, 360 degrees, and you could not see one single building standing completely. These people, the Germans, were walking up and down the street, they had nothing. If you had a handkerchief you could just throw it out and they would dive on it, fight for it. Everybody who went over there just gave away everything they had to these starving Germans. It was a shocking, pitiful sight I had never seen before.

When I got back to Paris, I called up Jack Kennedy to see where he was. He said, "I'm on my way coming over there on some trip," and I said, "Well, I'll wait here for you." So I waited for Jack. I remember his father kept an apartment at the George Cinq Hotel, the fanciest, most expensive hotel in Paris. Jack walked in, and I mean you would have thought he was the king. We went up there and stayed for about three days, ate nothing but the best food, smoked the best cigars, drunk what little--neither one of us were big drinkers--but whatever we drank it was the best. We had a marvelous time. Then he and I went on down to southern France and visited around there, went into Italy on a short trip. Then I had to come back, and I left him over there. I didn't see him for about a month after that. He had a very interesting time, and I had a lot of fun.

Jack and I went on another trip, we went to Cuba. This was while we were in the House. We did more traveling together than we did any other time. He was a very interesting guy in that he never had any money with him. Never. He didn't really know what money was. When I first began to go around with him a good deal and have dinner, the check would come and he'd always say, "Well, I'll get my half." So I finally said, "Okay, put it up." He would reach into this shirt pocket here. I soon learned that any guy who's got any money never carries in that shirt pocket. When you see a guy reach in this pocket to pay you something, you can just forget it. The guys who have got money have either got it in their hip pocket, or they've got it in this pants pocket. He didn't pay for anything. It used to bother me, so finally I complained to him about it. He said, "Well, I wish you'd talk to my dad about that." So I did. I said, "I don't know if you give him any money or not, Mr. Ambassador," I would never call him Joe. He said, "George, he doesn't know anything about money. Not the first thing. He's never had it, he just sends in chits to the office. That's what you ought to do." I said, "I don't think I can do that." He said, "Here's what I want you to do. You just pay for whatever it is, and then you send in this bill at the end of the month for half of what the cost had been, and we'll pay it. And I did that, for the next seven years or eight years, and got paid out of the Kennedy family fund for Jack's expenses.

Jack and I were very close, and he met [Jackie](#), and he invited me to be in his wedding. He told me that I was to be the best man. He said, "You're the only politician I'm going to invite." So I said, "That's fine, and I appreciate that." Later, I said, "Jack, while I was at the wedding, I talked to about nine guys and

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everyone of them kept saying that they were the best man." He said, "Well, I told every fellow he was the best man." We had the wedding, and Joe came to me the night of the party, which the bride's father, Bouvier or Auchincloss, or mother put on, and Joe said, "Now, you're going to have to speak for the groom. I want you to be funny. I want you to be clever. I want you to say everything that you can think of that's going to make Jack look good. I don't want the Bouviers to be outshining us." I said, "Well, OK, Mr. Ambassador, I wish somebody had told me this a little while ago. But anyway I'll do it the best I can." I don't think I was very good, really, but I got a big hand and it went off fine. So I spoke for the groom's side. That was quite an occasion.

I thought Jackie, still do think Jackie is about as lovely a girl as I ever saw. She's a real lady. She did a lot for Jack Kennedy, spoke beautiful Spanish, beautiful French, some German. She made several of those trips that he went on, particularly the one down to Bogota, Colombia, where Jackie really got more acclaim, more recognition, than Jack Kennedy did, because she was so bilingual and she could talk so beautifully in Spanish. She did the same thing in France. She did pretty much the same thing in Germany. I think she was great. I think she put the White House on a very high level and improved the tone of it enormously.

She's been criticized for having spent too much money. As a matter of fact in some of these books they've got me quoted several times as having said that Jack came to me and talked one time about her spending money. That's absolutely the fact, he did talk to me about what do you do when your wife spends so much money. I said, "All wives spend money, that's the first thing you've got to remember. There's hardly any wife that the husband doesn't think she spends too much money. That's just normal. Secondly, she's trying to improve the White House. She's buying a lot of stuff that's dramatically improving the looks of the White House, and you've got to remember that she comes from an atmosphere and an environment where everybody was pretty well off. You and your family are supposed to be rich, so you shouldn't be minding this at all." He would shake his head, but that was about the extent of it.

See, I've been quoted a lot saying things like that about Jackie. Some of those quotes have been distorted and exaggerated enormously. This latest book [*A Woman Called Jackie*] that C. David Heymann wrote, I don't remember ever having seen that guy in my life. What he does is pretty interesting, he says that each one of these quotations there was an interview that justifies this quotation. What he doesn't say is however, I did not make this interview, this was somebody else's interview that he was gathering up from around in various places.

I had Kitty Kelley interview me. If I had things to do over, that would be one interview that I would not have given. But at that time Kitty Kelley was not a well-known author. She came to me and said, "Do you know where I have been lately?" I said, "No, I never saw you before. How would I know that?" She said, "Well, I've been down to the Greenbrier in Texas." I said, "That's very interesting, what is that?" She said, "That is a fat farm that women go to in

order to lose weight and to get healthy." I said, "You look very good, it worked." She said, "Well, could you imagine who my roommate was?" I said, "No, I have not the vaguest idea." She said, "Your first wife was my roommate." Now, that is something. That puts me under some pressure, because I could see these two women lying up in bed at night conversing, and here I am a divorced man at this point. So then she started off, she said, "Now, I know all about your trips to Europe you made with Jack Kennedy. I know where you were when Jackie called." I said, "Okay, you know all this stuff." She said, "Yep, I know when you all went to Cuba." I said, Okay. She said a few or three things, and my response was "I guess that happened," because my first wife is a very charming lady and a very truthful lady, but she wasn't happy about our divorce, as I don't guess any of us were. She didn't like the life here, and she didn't like the activity, with me being gone a lot and that sort of thing. She was a more normal wife who likes to be the hell out of Washington, doesn't want to be here, entertaining and having people ringing you on the phone all the time.

As a matter of fact, to go back, I personally am of the opinion that [Lyndon Johnson](#) in a way was the guy who put my marriage on the rocks by calling me when I was the whip, his assistant, when [Earle Clements](#) ran in Kentucky. I point to Earle Clements' picture there. When he got defeated in Kentucky for reelection, I took his place, and then Johnson had the heart attack about that time. So I was actually the majority leader. Johnson would call me incessantly, every thirty minutes. You couldn't be on the floor and get things done because Johnson wanted to know what was happening, what's going on, who did that, what did this?

When he had the heart attack down in Virginia, I was down there with him that day. The first big heart attack. [Lady Bird](#) was down there. We were to George Brown's place. [Clint Anderson](#) was there, Senator from New Mexico. I'll never forget the morning that this happened--I'm wandering around a little bit here in this recitation--but let me go back and tell you this story about Lyndon and his heart attack. I've been talking about Kennedy and I ought to finish that before I get on Johnson, but anyway, I may never have a chance to say it again, so I'll say it now.

What happened was that Johnson said to me, I was his assistant, he said, "I'm going down this weekend and stay at George Brown's house, and I want you to go down with me." So you have to say yes, because he was the majority leader. He said, "Saturday we'll drive down." Okay, Saturday came, I came over to the Senate, Johnson was already here. He said, "Well, let's go." We get in the car and he says, "Now, we're going to stop by the Naval Medical Center and say hello to Senator [\[Walter\] George](#) of Georgia, who's sick." Okay, we go by. On the way out to the Naval Medical Center, Johnson said, "I feel terrible. I've got gas on my stomach, terrible gas." "Well I'm sorry Lyndon, why don't you try a little bicarbonate of soda?" Well, we haven't got any. So we go see Senator George, then we start for Virginia. On the way down, he's complaining "Oh, I have this terrible pain." So we stop finally at some little grocery store looking thing on the way down to Virginia, and we bought some bicarbonate of soda.

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We got some water, and put the soda in it, and he drank it, and belched and burped. He was a fellow who did that all the time anyway, but these were exceptional.

We go on down to George Brown's big estate down in Virginia and Lady Bird's already there, Clint Anderson is there, and several other people. George Reedy, I think was there, and I don't remember who else. We get there in time for dinner. We have dinner, and now Johnson wants to play dominoes. I go to bed, and the next morning I go down to the living room, and in addition to the big living room there was a sort of an anteroom, smaller but a part of the living. Clint Anderson was lying down on the couch there, reading the paper. I went in and he said,

"Here's part of the paper," and I sat down and shared it. Pretty soon, Johnson and Lady Bird came walking in. They'd been out on a walk somewhere.

Johnson looked terrible, was all nervous looking and distraught. He said, "Clint, you've had a heart attack, haven't you?" And Clint said yes, as a matter of fact Clint had a big heart attack. He had been Secretary of Agriculture and given up his job to go back to New Mexico before he got elected senator. He said, "Yeah, I've had a big heart attack." He was lying there and Johnson was standing up. Johnson said, "Well, let me ask you a couple of questions, did you have pain right down here in your left arm?" Clint said yeah. He said, "Well, Clint, did you have a feeling on the top of your stomach right there that somebody had stepped on you, like a horse, the weight is just awful?" Yeah, yeah. "Well, did you have something here behind your ear, which hurt like the mischief?" Clint said yeah. And Johnson said, "Well, God almighty man, get off that couch and let me lie down, I'm having a heart attack!" So Clint got up and said, "You probably are." He said, "George, we'd better get a doctor." Lady Bird said, "Oh, my goodness, we've got to get a doctor, what are we going to do?"

I went to the telephone and called the operator and said, "How do I get hold of a doctor right away?" She said, ring this number, so I did, and said it was an emergency, and a doctor came on the phone. I said we're at this house, George Brown's, and this is the address, and we need a doctor right away because one of the people here is having a very serious heart attack. It wasn't but about ten minutes till a guy drove up to the front of the house. We were looking for a car, and I saw him come in, a nice looking guy, he walked in and he had a little bit of a case with him. He walked in and saw Lyndon, and I said, "There's Senator Johnson and we think he needs some attention." He looked at him, and he didn't say a word, he just got up, said "excuse me just a minute," and went out to his car and got another, bigger satchel. He pulled out a big needle. I give you my word it was over a foot long. Johnson said, "What are you going to do with that?" And he says, "I'm going to give you a shot," and he took that needle and he stuck it into Johnson like you wouldn't believe. You could see him push the other end of it, and he turned around and Johnson was going "Ohhh, ohh," but didn't holler out or anything. The doctor turned around and said "You've got to get this guy to the Naval Medical Center as quickly as you can, because he's having a big heart attack."

I called a guy named Lon Thompson, who's a doctor here in Washington, who had looked after Johnson some, and looked after me. I said, "Lon, how do I get hold of a good doctor in addition to the Naval Medical Center." He said, "Well, give me the number." Well, some of us called, I can't remember who exactly, but we got hold of the Navy and they said we'll be there, with an ambulance, within an hour. I don't know why we didn't think about flying, but we didn't. Anyway, as Johnson stood up finally, Johnson was asking the doctor questions. "How serious

is it?" The doctor said, "It's very serious." He said, "Can I recover?" The doctor said, "Yes, but you've got to take it very easy." Johnson said, "Well, I'm head of the Senate, when can I go back to the Senate?" He said, "You can't go back to the Senate for thirty days, at least." Johnson said, "Well, I've got to go back before that." He said, "You'll have to take that up with the other doctors, but as far as I'm concerned, you can't."

Johnson then turned around to me and said, "Look, if I've got to go, you're in charge." And he said, "And I want to tell you right now, Smathers, this is no time for you to be your usual happy, sweet, nice guy. You've got to be tough. You've got to get these things done. We've got pass this piece of legislation, this piece of legislation. . . ." And he started enumerating them. "This has got to be done." I remember he turned to Lady Bird and he said, "Here's my money, here's my watch," and so on. What happened was, instead of waiting for an ambulance to come down from the Navy we got an ambulance there in a little town. But we made a reservation at the Navy Medical Center. It wasn't very long before that ambulance was there. Johnson and Lady Bird and somebody else got in it, and they were gone. We never saw Johnson again for some forty days, although he began to call us on the telephone in about a week. Just ran us crazy talking to him on the phone, getting things done. He was the most hard-driving guy I ever saw in my life.

I'm getting a little long, you just interrupt me, or say, okay we've heard too much about that, let's here about something else. And you might just ask me some questions.

Ritchie: I wanted to ask you more about that Class of 1946. I was looking over the list, and a lot of them you never hear from again, but some of them became very prominent. There was [Carl Albert](#) and [Hale Boggs](#), and yourself, and [Richard Nixon](#), and [John Kennedy](#), and [Jake Javits](#). I was impressed by looking over the list. Did you find that there was any sense of a class? In other words, did you identify with people that you came in with?

Smathers: Yes, I think that you do, as that picture right behind you shows. Now there were other fellows, but I don't know why there are just that few, just that nine there. There's Nixon, there's Kennedy, there's Don Jackson, there's Tiger Teague, there's Thruston Morton, myself, and these two fellows, one from California and one from Colorado. Don Jackson, Nixon appointed him later as chairman of the FCC, but he was a good Congressman. Yes, we were the "war baby" class, so to speak. We were all really very close.

I knew Nixon as well, I guess, as anybody. Nixon was a very hard fellow to know. I know Nixon today. I see him regularly. I introduced Nixon to Bebe Rebozo, and Rebozo and Nixon became the best of best friends. For the last four years, maybe

longer, every time Nixon has a birthday, I go to his party. Pat his wife does not attend those little parties, because they're not big parties at all, but anyway she's not feeling well. But Nixon comes down, and he has his birthday with Rebozo, and they always invite me and my wife, and my brother Frank and his wife. We four men and wives celebrate his birthday every year. Then he's down there with Rebozo, or Rebozo's up with him at least every other week, if not more frequently than that.

So I still get to see Nixon frequently. And I'm proud of the way he's handling himself, the way he's done. I don't know of anybody who's been criticized more than Richard Nixon. I don't know of anybody who has been more unfairly criticized. That's not to say that some of the criticism was not justified. Much of it was. But then he continues to get criticized, and made fun of, and ridiculed, and it really isn't fair to the man. The man has demonstrated that he's quite a man. He's an able fellow. He has done magnificent things. Certainly he was the guy who opened China up to the United States. He was the first fellow who talked about the SALT treaties and limitation of weapons, this sort of thing. He's a very interesting guy in that he's very hard to know, he's very hard to get acquainted with, as well as I know him. And I introduced him to Rebozo and he has no closer friend, as I said. He's hard to know, but I think he's a very honorable guy, unfairly abused, but that's the fate of some of us.

Now, let's see, you started off about the class. I still see him, and of course I saw Kennedy regularly, Thruston Morton came in that court. I used to see Thruston, he's now gone to his reward, a wonderful guy, we were very close. Tiger Teague same way, very close.

Ritchie: [Kenneth Keating](#) and [John Carroll](#) were also in that class.

Smathers: Was Keating in that class? Did he get elected in '46?

Ritchie: Yes, and Javits too.

Smathers: And Jack Javits. Well, I knew them both well, and liked them very much. I thought Javits was a particularly able fellow, Republican, he and Keating. Very liberal Republican, Jack Javits was, but a very able fellow, very fine speaker. Keating also a very able guy from New York. Both of them became senators. It's amazing how many of the class of '46 became senators. Just about everybody.

Ritchie: A good number of them. Among the other members of the House, beyond your class, who became senators, did you get to know them in the House, men like Lyndon Johnson and others?

Smathers: Sure. Well, I met [Scott Lucas](#). See, what happened to me, which was very nice in a way was that when [Truman](#) got the nomination in his own right-- well, let's go back before that. Truman never did like [Claude Pepper](#). In Margaret Truman's book, on page 375, or 375 I forget which, she has in there a reproduction of a letter which President Truman wrote to his daughter in which he said, "Honey, the three most dangerous people in the world are Joe Stalin, Lenin, and Trotsky, who are ably helped by their three close compatriots over here, [Henry Wallace](#), Claude Pepper, and [Glen Taylor](#)." The most dangerous people in the world. Well, to go even further back the history was that Pepper never did think much of Truman. Truman apparently reciprocated. Pepper did not want Truman to become even vice president, and when Roosevelt in effect dumped Wallace as the third-term vice president, Pepper was afraid Truman might get it and Pepper tried to stop it. He made speeches for Wallace, and made appearances, and naturally made Truman pretty mad.

When Truman got it, Pepper made a big speech, at the 1944 convention, that this would not have happened had it not been for Bob Hannegan, and Boss Hague in New Jersey, and these other big city bosses who made Roosevelt bow down and take Harry Truman instead of Wallace. The '48 convention, I did not go to that convention, Truman wanted to get the nomination in his own right, and Pepper again tried to forestall Truman. He nominated Henry Wallace as a candidate, and made some very fiery speeches about Wallace, how great he was, and so on. When Wallace did not get it, then Pepper offered himself as the candidate. But he could not get the Florida delegation, which was headed up by a guy named Frank Upchurch from St. Augustine, who was chairman of the delegation, he could not get the delegation to be for him. So he had to withdraw. The Miami *Herald* recently had a picture of that convention and it showed Pepper standing on a ladder taking down the name of Wallace and putting up the name of Pepper for president. Then when Pepper didn't get anywhere with his own nomination he then went to [Eisenhower](#), and said we ought to nominate Eisenhower, we don't know what party he's in but we ought not to ask him. He's just such an outstanding man he ought to be president anyway. All of this to stop Truman. So Truman's resentment and dislike of Pepper was very understandable, even at that stage.

So anyway, Truman succeeds in getting the nomination over Pepper's objection, even though it turned out that Pepper did what he frequently did, he would speak against something and then when he saw it wasn't getting anywhere he'd turn around and vote for it. He said, several times in his book that he'd really voted for the nomination of Truman, but the fact of the matter is he tried to do everything he could to defeat him first, and when he saw it was impossible he voted for him. In his book he says, well I really voted for Truman; Truman was my good friend. Of course he was not a friend. Truman really despised him.

Okay, where do I come in the picture? I come in the picture that I'm the Congressman for Key West, in addition to Miami. Truman goes to Key West regularly for a visit. It's customary for a president to invite the local

Congressman to ride on the airplane back to the district, in the event he wants to go. I got invited to fly with Truman to Key West at least a dozen times over the course of about three years. During that period of time I was able to meet Clark Clifford, I got to meet Judge [Fred] Vinson, I got to meet Harry Vaughn, I got to meet all of Truman's friends. I was going to read you something that a guy just sent me the other day about Truman writing my mother saying "I helped George" and so and so. It was after he got the nomination, my mother wrote him a letter to congratulate him, and he wrote my mother back.

[To secretary:] Sandy, do we have a copy of that letter which Jim Clark of the Orlando *Sentinel* sent? My mother's letter and Truman's back. It was really good.

But I got to know Truman on these trips. Well, here we are now after I'm getting to know Truman pretty well and Truman has observed me in action some. One day I get a call. Truman recommends a program called aid to Greece and Turkey, which was designed to stop the Communist encroachment on Western Europe by aiding Greece and Turkey. Pepper speaks against it over and over again, bitterly, but when he sees he's going to lose, finally, he ends up voting for it, but he tried to stop it. George Marshall was the Secretary of State, he develops a plan called the Marshall Plan, which is calculated to strengthen the free countries of Europe. Pepper speaks and votes against that. They had a program called the European Recovery Act, which again was another program calculated to strengthen the free countries of Europe and the world. As a matter of fact, Pepper speaks and votes against that. Pepper goes over to the Soviet Union, meets with Joe Stalin, comes back to Madison Square Garden, makes a speech, and says Joe Stalin is the greatest man on earth, we should all say our prayers every night and thank God that we've got a friend like Joe Stalin. Thirteen thousand people in the audience. He comes down to the floor of the United States Senate about three weeks later and says the same thing, but goes further and says we should share with Joe Stalin and the Soviet Union all of our nuclear weapons, all of our nuclear secrets. This is the wave of the future. This is Claude Pepper. This isn't George Smathers, this is Claude Pepper saying this on the floor of the United States Senate! All you got to do is look at the Record and there it is.

So you know how Truman feels about this. It was along about 1949.

[Secretary enters] Here's this letter from the Orlando *Sentinel*. It says "Dear Senator Smathers, I am finally getting somewhere, I hope your health is good. I thought you might like to see the enclosed letter from your mom to Truman. I will be in touch. Best, Jim."

Here's the letter from my mother, who says, "Dear President Truman, First wish to congratulate you on your magnificent and courageous campaign and your victory." He got elected now, and this letter is dated November 8, 1948. "I believe

the prayers of many good women had much to do with that victory. They believe as I do that God is always on the side of the selfless servant of the

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people. Having been blessed with a wonderful mother as you have, I thought you would find the enclosed news item amusing and interesting, which was: Granny Smathers, 95 years old, is Congressman George Smathers' grandmother and has never voted anything but the straight Democratic ticket--which she is very proud of especially and so am I."

Truman writes her back and says, "Dear Mrs. Smathers, I certainly enjoyed reading your letter of November 8. I want to thank you for the inspiring expressions which it conveyed. I especially noted the clipping and your references to Mrs. B.F. Smathers. It is indeed remarkable that a person of 95 years of age can be active. Please extend to her my very best wishes for her health and happiness. Very sincerely yours, Harry S. Truman. Then he says, in his own handwriting: "Had a good visit with George at Key West. He's the only public official I invited to see me. The others invited themselves." That's in the president's handwriting.

We began to like each other very much. That's when I got called over to the White House one day, and Harry Vaughn was at the door. I go in. I really think that was the first time I had ever been in the White House, in the Oval Office, even though I knew Truman and had been seeing him on these trips a lot, but I had never been in the White House. Harry Vaughn called me and said, "President Truman wants to see you." This was 1949, long about the later summer or early fall. I go in, and Harry Vaughn says, "Go on into the Oval Office. Sit there, the president will be in just a minute." Pretty soon the door opens and here comes the president. He's got a whole bunch of papers under his arm, and he's talking to Harry Vaughn and somebody else. He comes on in, and I stand up and salute as a good Marine will do, and he says, "Sit down, sit down, sit down Congressman." So I sat down. He signed a few more papers and he gives them to Vaughn. Vaughn is standing there, and Truman looks over at me and says, "George, I want you to do me a favor." "Yes, sir, Mr. President, whatever." "I want you to beat that son of a bitch Claude Pepper." Well, boy, that really shocked me. I don't know what exactly I said, but I said something like, "Well, Mr. President, I don't know. I know Claude, I know he's been way off the beat, he's been saying things I can't believe he'd say." "No, you can beat him, you can beat him. Don't worry about it, you can beat him." By that time, Harry Vaughn had come in and he starts signing some papers. I get up and he says, "I want you to do it now," and I walk out.

It was at that point that I really seriously began to think about running against Claude. I talked with Claude about it, because I felt like I should, as I had talked with Pat Cannon when I ran against him. I went to his office one day and said, "Claude, I'm getting a lot of encouragement to run against you, and I think that

Millard Caldwell who's the governor will probably run against you, but you got to straighten up. Everybody in Florida thinks you're off your rocker with this Joe Stalin bit." He said, "Oh, no, no I'm not. I'm not worried about it anyway." So I said, "I think I'm right, and I think that's the way to go. I don't think the people agree with you."

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We were on a plane trip together about a month or so after I went to his office. I told him again, I said "Claude, you're going to be amazed at how people over the state are very unhappy with this position that you're taking. People don't like this communist bit." He said, "George, I don't have to worry about it." I remember him very well saying this. He said, "I had this same problem in 1944. They called me Red Pepper then. Ollie Edmunds ran against him. He said, "I only made two speeches over the state and it was all over." He said, "That's all I got to do again." I said, "Well, I don't think it will be that easy this time." I then talked to a guy named Bob Fokes, who's still alive, who lives in Tallahassee, who was Pepper's administrative assistant. I said, "Bob, you've got to get your guy straightened out. I'm amazed at the amount of urging I'm getting to run against Claude. I don't particularly want to do it. He's a great speaker and really a very able guy, but he's really off his beam on this." Bob said, "I know it, I know it. But we can't get him back."



Claude Pepper
Senate Historical Office

It went along like that. I kept getting people who did encourage me without my solicitation. I could see that somebody was going to beat him. So I thought well, I think I'll just go ahead and do it. So I ran. You know, they called it a dirty race and all that sort of stuff. All races are dirty, but you never see the winner call it dirty, it's always the losers. It was a tough campaign, I knew it. I mean, things were done that Claude didn't have anything to do with, where I was put in an elevator that dropped five floors. Why we all weren't killed I don't know. Claude didn't, I don't think, have a damn thing to do with it. But the labor people hated

my guts so much, that somebody in that particular group decided--and I don't think the labor leaders themselves knew. We had the bolts on our steering gear on the car twice go out on us. These things happened.

One of the things that didn't happen, however, was that story that I went around in West Florida saying that his sister was a thespian, that he practiced celibacy, that he vacillated on the Senate floor. All this stuff. You know, actually, it's funny. It's so funny that that's why it keeps getting circulated. But it's a kind of an insult to the people of Florida to think that you can tell them that kind of junky stuff and get away with it. The people in Florida are not that dumb. I mean, you can talk about the Panhandle. That's where FSU is, that's where Central Florida is, that's where the University of West Florida is. In the state in that campaign there were 38 daily newspapers, 36 of them endorsed me. They would not have endorsed me had I been a little snotty-nosed guy running around saying ugly things. They endorsed me. I won by almost 2 to 1. That was dirty if you lost. I offered a reward of \$10,000 to anyone who could prove those things were really said, and no one ever collected it.

Bob Fokes, who was Pepper's administrative assistant, can tell you exactly where it got started, up here at the National Press Club in Washington. They had a group of reporters, it was a very colorful and important campaign at that time, and a group of reporters would follow Pepper for two or three days and then they'd switch off and follow me. Each of us had our sound trucks and all the other stuff. They began to exchange views, take off and come back here to Washington, to the National Press Club, and sit up there and talk to each other.

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"Did you hear what Smathers said about Pepper this week?" "Did you hear what so and so said about him?" You know, back and forth. They began to make this sort of very clever and very funny, but it really did not happen that way.

See, what Claude did, after that defeat in 1950, people forget this, he then waited. In '56 I was up for reelection, but he knew he couldn't beat me, so he didn't run against me. He was then living up in Tallahassee, up in north Florida. He waited two more years and ran against Senator Holland, who had been his colleague in the Senate. He talks about me being an ungrateful friend, and then he ran against Senator Holland who had been his colleague for some twelve years. He said about Holland, and this is quoted in the *Miami Herald*, had it on the front page not too long ago, he said "Holland is Rip Van Winkle, he's too old. You cannot have an old man up there representing you. Florida deserves better than a man that old and decrepit." This is the guy who later becomes the champion of all the old people, saying that about Holland. So, you begin to look at really happened.

Then he got defeated by Holland, so then he decides, where can I really get elected? He said, I gotta go to Miami and pick out a congressional district. I don't

know that he did it just like that, but he moved to Miami, and there was a district there, the Miami Beach district where there were a lot of minority voters. And there were old people, sixty percent elderly people, retired people, maybe not that many, fifty percent. So he ran as a candidate for the elderly and he won. And I've got to hand it to him. From that day forward there was a guy with two careers. From that day on he was the champion of the elderly, and did a very fantastic job. As a matter of fact, I contributed to his campaigns, the last twelve years that he was there.

I went further than that. When the Miami Kiwanis Club wouldn't take him in, because they remembered him as a great liberal in 1950, I was a member. One day on an airplane he said, "George, you'd really do me a favor if you'd get me in the Miami Kiwanis Club." I go to the Miami Kiwanis Club and make a speech for Claude Pepper to become a member, and they take him in.

Ritchie: There's a wonderful irony in that.

Smathers: Yeah. So we got along fine. Unfortunately, he wrote that book [Pepper: *Eyewitness to a Century* (1987)]. As some of the papers said, "Claude Pepper rewrites history." He told his version of the campaign, which was all obviously one-sided, and I thought very slanderous of me in a way. But he was getting old, he was encouraged to do that by a lot of the writers, make the book more salable or something. But we got along fine for the last twelve years of his life.

[End of Interview #1]

George A. Smathers

United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969

Interview #2: From the House to the Senate

(Tuesday, August 15, 1989)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie



U.S. Senate Historical Office
Senator Smathers with Administrative Assistant Scott Peek
Senate Historical Office

Ritchie: You grew up in the [Franklin Roosevelt](#) era, and you ran for Congress in the [Harry Truman](#) era. What did you consider yourself then? Did you think of yourself as a New Dealer or a Fair Dealer?

Smathers: I was always a Truman man. I had read about Roosevelt, and I saw him when I was a kid. He came through what was then the Great Smoky National Park. He was the fellow who did a magnificent job, later on it turns out, by sponsoring that whole area of the Appalachians as a park. My daddy and my mother both lived in Waynesville, North Carolina. So when I was a kid I saw Roosevelt come by, and I stood very close to him. He was in a roadster type car, and I had a chance to get within ten yards, or twelve yards of him. As a child I was very much impressed, but I never saw him after that.

Ritchie: But politically, how did you define yourself?

Smathers: How I defined myself? I did not define myself as . . . I was for Roosevelt, thought he was great, as did everybody. I didn't know anybody who wasn't for Roosevelt. When I went to college, of course, he was the president at that time. He was the president during the war. But I always thought he was a great man, that's just about all I know. I didn't know him like I knew these others fellows, so I can't tell you much about him. You asked me was I a New Dealer. The answer is no, not necessarily, but I wasn't anti. I just hadn't thought about it that much.

Ritchie: I did see a reference recently that your uncle said in 1942, when he lost his race, that it was mostly because of the anti-New Deal wave that year.

Smathers: He was a big New Dealer. My uncle, [Bill Smathers](#) from New Jersey, was very definitely a New Dealer, very definitely a Roosevelt man. But I wasn't. I don't know to me during those years, but I really wasn't as involved in politics as you would have thought I would have been, or probably should have been. But I just wasn't.

Ritchie: But you pretty much identified with Harry Truman's programs?

Smathers: Oh yes, very much, all of his programs. I was very much for his programs.

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Ritchie: When you went into the House of Representatives, your party was in the minority, for the first time in years.

Smathers: Right.

Ritchie: Did that have any impact on you, coming in as a new Congressman?

Smathers: Not especially. [Joe Martin](#) was the Speaker. He was a nice fellow. I never thought he was very efficient. [Sam Rayburn](#), who had been Speaker before and succeeded him later, was so much better as a Speaker. Joe Martin was constantly making little gaffs, making little mistakes, calling people by the wrong name, saying the wrong thing, and somebody was always having to correct him. He was a nice enough fellow, but I wasn't impressed with him at all, except as being a very nice guy. But he couldn't compare with Sam Rayburn, who later became Speaker, and of course John McCormack, who was then minority leader and became [majority leader](#). Naturally I was prejudiced considerably, being a Democrat, they being Republicans, but I've never been a great anti-Republican just because I've been a Democrat. Joe Martin was just a sweet fellow, but he was rather inept. [Charlie Halleck](#) was good, who was his assistant. Charlie from Indiana, he was very able, but Joe wasn't.

Ritchie: I was wondering, coming in as a freshman member of the House, does it make much difference if your party is the majority or the minority, or are you just pretty well down at the tail end no matter what?

Smathers: Oh, you're down at the tail end either way. But I still got a very good assignment, as I think I mentioned before. I was put on the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House, when [Sol Bloom](#) was the chairman. I think two years later after I got in there, the Democrats came into control. But the party wasn't a big thing, as far as I was concerned in those days. We all supported. . . I had been elected as a Democrat. I had run against a Republican. I don't even remember what his name was now, but it wasn't much of a race. Of course, my big race as had always been the case was in the Democratic primary. If you won the Democratic primary you almost automatically were the Congressman or the Senator. In those days, Republicans weren't very strong. So having Joe Martin as the Speaker, Charlie Halleck as I said was effective, very good. I don't remember anything else really significant.

Ritchie: Can you tell me a little more about Sam Rayburn, what your impressions were of him? Did you have much dealings with him?

Smathers: Well, actually I got to know Sam Rayburn a little bit as a member of the House. He told me, when I was thinking about running for the Senate, that I would be making a big mistake. He said that in the House you are much more effective than you are in the Senate. He thought that House service was much to be preferred over Senate service, and he listed off a long list of names of people who had been in the House who had gone to the Senate and

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hadn't amounted to much, had finally been defeated, and so on. He was a real House of Representatives man. He talked about legislation, tax legislation. He pointed out that all revenue bills had to originate in the House, and he would talk about that as being a very important thing. He said, "You're making a big mistake to give up your seat in the House." But I was not too impressed with that speech.

Now, after I went to the Senate, and when [Johnson](#) was majority leader, I got to know Rayburn a lot better, because I became very friendly with Johnson and Johnson moved me up very rapidly in the Senate. Johnson was continually in touch with Rayburn. He and Rayburn were very, very close. Johnson used to eat supper with Rayburn, it seemed to me about two times a week. Finally, Johnson got me in on that, which was of dubious value, or distinction, but I do remember Johnson would say, "Now we're going over and have a couple of drinks with Sam." We'd go over to Rayburn's office and we would have a couple of drinks, and Rayburn would always have a great big pail of onions, raw big round onions, and he would pull up the cuff of his coat and reach in there and pull one out, and ask, "Would you like an onion?" I don't know whether Johnson liked them or not, but

he would eat a raw onion. Sam Rayburn would sit there and peel it off. Mostly they looked to me like Vidalia onions. That was one of Sam Rayburn's fetishes. One of his little idiosyncrasies, that he liked those raw onions, and he would have those with his bourbon, and apparently do this every night.

A couple of times we went out to dinner at a restaurant or two around town. Johnson was always the fellow who made the arrangements. They would know when the Speaker showed up that they had to have onions. They would have them in a pot right beside his chair, never up on the table. He would reach in and feel these onions, and pull them out and hand them around to anybody who might want one. So during that period of time I got to know Rayburn a lot better than I did when I was a member of the House of Representatives.

But I got to know Rayburn primarily through Lyndon Johnson. This is why I said earlier that at one point in time Lyndon Johnson really ran the government. He controlled the Senate, there wasn't any doubt about it. Through Rayburn he controlled the House. [Eisenhower](#) was president, and Eisenhower listened to Johnson much more than he listened to any Republican senator, or any other Republican, so far as I know. So Johnson literally ran the government. He didn't call up and tell Eisenhower what he was going to do, or anything like that, but he was very persuasive with Eisenhower. Eisenhower would call him all the time and visit with him about various pieces of legislation, what they were.

We were all over at the White House to talk about the extension of Public Law 480, which was the agriculture bill where the government subsidized corn growers, wheat growers, it had been a big heavy item of debate and contention in both the House and the Senate. We went over there one day, Eisenhower apparently asked Johnson to come over and talk. . . no, I guess it was the other

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way around, Johnson said "I want to come over and talk to you about this." I guess that's what happened, but anyway, the scenario was that here we are sitting there, Lyndon Johnson, and [Hubert Humphrey](#), and myself, representing the Democrats, and [Bill Knowland](#) and [Tom Kuchel](#) and somebody else representing the Republicans, and the then Secretary of Agriculture.

Ritchie: Benson?

Smathers: Was it Ezra Benson?

Ritchie: Yes.

Smathers: He was there, and everybody was talking sort of at one time, it seemed though that was the case to me, but after we had discussed it back and forth, the Democrats got into a discussion with the Republicans about how far it

should extend and to just what type of farmers should it extend to. It had come down into the South. Johnson was trying to get it naturally to go all the way into Texas, to take care of whatever they were growing in Texas, he wanted to expand it to cattle farmers, cattle ranchers, and all that sort of thing. Eisenhower sat there and listened and after a while he finally said, "Lyndon, what the hell is Public Law 480 anyway?" We had been discussing 480 but nobody had called it 480, it was just the farm bill, but every now and then somebody would say Public Law 480, and Eisenhower sat there--I was amazed--for thirty minutes apparently he wasn't sure what the hell we were talking about. I think Rayburn was there from the House, there were House people there too, a couple of House guys.

You ask me about my service in the House of Representatives. That's when I really began to become greatly interested in South America. Miami, of course, was my home and my home district. It was close to South America. Key West, I represented, was ninety miles from Cuba. It was very normal, it seems to me, for me to become interested in Latin America, which I did. Sol Bloom let me make a trip to Latin America. I went another time with Jack Kennedy to Cuba. Bill Thompson and Jack Kennedy and myself, and I think a boy named Roy Anderson was with us from Palm Beach. We didn't do much on that, we had a nice time, and we met all the governing people in Cuba. I made another trip to Central America, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, as a member of that committee, and filed some sort of a report, recommending that we give some further consideration. That's when I first began to develop the theme that we should put less emphasis on East-West trade and more emphasis on North-South trade. It was very apparent to me that the Latin countries actually had no better country to trade with than the United States. We needed very much, and still do, to help them become more industrialized, to help them become more sophisticated, and they really would be on our side in all of these confrontations, in those days, with the Soviet Union, and with the rest of the world. The Latins would more normally be with us.

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Also I think I told you about making a trip to Berlin with the Senate side, [Scott Lucas](#) who was then the majority leader of the Senate and [Bill Fulbright](#), who I don't think was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee at that time, but shortly was to become chairman.

The things that I did in the House I'm having looked up now. I guess the thing that I accomplished was the final realization of the creation of the Everglades National Park. That was of course, much of it, in my district. It had originally been the idea of Congressman [Mark Wilcox](#), who was the Congressman who preceded [Pat Cannon](#), as the Congressman from that District. Mark Wilcox was a very able fellow. Little bit of a fellow, only about five foot two, had a great big voice, marvelous speaker. I remember hearing him a number of times, and he talked about the creation of the Everglades National Park, preserving the Everglades. He was the man who originated the idea, and who got it started,

however it did not become law until 1947, at which time I was the Congressman. Pat Cannon, and there was somebody else in between, a lady who was William Jennings Bryan's step daughter or something, she served one term [[Ruth Bryan Owen](#), 1929-1931]. Maybe she was before Mark, I don't know. But anyway, Mark was the originator of the Everglades National Park idea. Senator [Holland](#), who was then governor, was much for it. When he got to be senator he picked up the idea. It became law in 1947 finally, so naturally it fell to me to introduce the legislation, which I did, so I was in effect the sponsor of the Everglades National Park. It was not originally my idea, but it was a great idea. It's still one of the great parks, and will be.

Ritchie: I was interested to see that your maiden speech in the House was in favor of a defense bill. Republicans were talking about cutting President Truman's defense spending, and you stood up to speak in favor of retaining the President's proposal.

Smathers: Yes. I was very much of a Truman man. I got to know him really after I got to the House of Representatives. I did not know Harry Truman prior to my election. But I liked him right away and I always have liked what he stood for. I particularly liked his ideas with respect to defense. I was very much on his side with his concern, as was Churchill's concern, about the incursion of the Soviet Union from the east into the western part of Europe, from their obvious--at that time--statements that they could take over the world. Some people believed it, and some people didn't. I'm one of those who believed what Truman was doing was the right thing to do. I was for him when he dropped the atomic bomb, I didn't know him of course, I was in the service when that happened, but I thought that was the right thing to do, I always did. I liked him and admired him, of course still do. He's my very favorite president.

Ritchie: I was going to ask you about your interest in South America at that time. Did you see that as primarily an economic issue, or was it also a national security issue?

Smathers: It was also a national security issue. See, the United Nations was created just at that time when I came in. That was Truman who went to San Francisco and made a big speech, signed some bills, and everything like that. But it was very evident that we were going to need votes, we being the United States of America, in all of the issues that came up. And it looked to me that the best way we could get the votes was to get those of the Latin American countries whom everybody had ignored up to that time. So to me it was a political step that should have been taken, and should have been taken a long time before I began to talk about it. In addition to that, it's an economic problem, not a problem but an economic issue that in time has already proven to be a big economic issue, and it's going to be even bigger.

Now, how's it going to be bigger? I'll tell you how it's going to be bigger. When they create this European Community, which is coming into being in 1991 or 92, and when all the countries of Western Europe, and pretty soon they'll bring in the Soviet Union with them, there are going to be no more economic barriers between these countries. There are going to be no tariffs. They're all going to be producing that which they produce best. You're going to find one of the countries, Germany, will probably end up producing all of the cars, and Italy will wind up producing all of the clothes, and France will end up producing all the wine, and so on. They're going to then say: Look, we're not going to trade with the United States, we don't have to trade with the United States. We are fourteen countries over here who are now against the rest of the world--and the rest of the world is not well off economically except for the United States.

At that point, when these barriers, which mark my word will come down, trade between the United States, France, Italy, Germany, Great Britain is going to be more difficult. When that comes on, we're going to have to hope that we've developed considerable trade with the Latin countries, all the way to Argentina and down into Chile and those countries that still have a lot of the basic things that we have to have. They're going to be our market when the Europeans stop buying from us. That's coming, but I've talked about that long before this. Eventually, you're a young man, you'll live to see the day when we're going to need trade partners very badly, and the best trade partners we'll have will be those countries, from Mexico right on down.

Ritchie: When you started talking about Latin America, how receptive was the rest of the Congress? Was it a big issue as far as Congress was concerned?

Smathers: No, oh no. No issue. It was sort of a humorous issue, as a matter of fact. When I see [Vance Hartke](#), the senator from Indiana, when I see him even today, he says, "Hello there, the Senator from Latin America, how are you?" One day he was presiding in the Senate, and I was trying for some reason to gain recognition to make some sort of a speech or do something, I forget what it was precisely. Hartke was presiding, which was the job of all the junior senators. Nobody ever wanted to preside, because it was a very boring job just

listening to one senator after another make a speech. Then sometimes you had a vote. When you did have a tough vote, why the vice president would come in and decide it, or the senior presiding officer [[president pro tempore](#)] would preside. But anyway, I was out there seeking recognition one day. I kept calling, "Mr. President, Mr. President." Finally he said in exasperation, "The chair will now recognize the Senator from Latin America." There must have been fifty, sixty senators on the floor, and they all broke out laughing. That was written up in some of the papers, so I got to be called the Senator from Latin America. A lot of

people even say it today, Hartke still calls me that. But that's when I got interested in Latin America, as a Congressman, and later as a senator.

Ritchie: You were a Congressman from Miami, which was even then I suspect the most liberal part of the state of Florida.

Smathers: Right.

Ritchie: When you started to think about running for office statewide, did you have to adjust, to in a sense package yourself for the whole state?

Smathers: Well, I had gone to school at the University of Florida, like my father had wanted, and for the very reasons that he said he proved to be very prophetic. I had been up at Gainesville, Florida, which is the northern end of the state, for six years. I had been, as I told you before, president of the student body and active in politics. So when I began to run statewide I did know people all from all over the state very well. Then when I began to think about it and call these people who were former classmates of mine, in the university together, I would ask them what were they thinking about, like in Pensacola, or in Milton, Florida, or Tallahassee, or Panama City, or some of those far western counties in our state, they were all very conservative.

They had previously been [Claude Pepper](#)'s main support, and I could tell that they had become totally disenamored with him. They were very disappointed in his constant bragging about the Soviet Union, and about Joe Stalin, saying you've got to pray for Joe Stalin. He made that speech in Tallahassee, Florida, which is in the northern end of the state. But I knew that he was also very strong in my home district. That proved to be the case when we ran in 1950. There were ninety-eight precincts. I carried something like seventy-five of them. Claude got some votes in all of those seventy-five, but I carried them by a pretty substantial majority. The remaining twenty or twenty one, which were the minority groups, the black community, the Jewish community, he carried them so heavily that while I counted more precincts spread out over the county, he carried a certain segment of them so heavily that he actually won the whole county. He won my home county in that race in 1950. I, interestingly enough, carried his county, his area of the state. The area up there that he normally had been strong in, I carried all that. He carried my

home county, not by a big vote but by a good vote, but I still carried more of the precincts spread out around the county.

But you were right that Dade County was the most liberal county in the state, has been, is today. Today it's changing somewhat, it hasn't changed completely, but because of the influx of the Cubans, who are all conservative and Republicans.

The county now is having a big fight remaining Democratic. Claude, had he lived, would have been reelected easily, because he had two careers. His first career as a senator was the one that I stopped him on, but after he stayed out eight years--Holland, as I told you, beat him in 1958--then he got elected in 1962 to the House from the Miami district, a rather liberal district. Then he began speaking for the elderly people and all that sort of thing, and he was really a tremendously effective Congressman. There was no way that anybody would have beaten him. They're running for his seat now, today the Democrats are having a vote to see which Democrat will succeed him, but the chances are whichever Democrat succeeds him, the Republicans are going to win anyway. They could have never beat Claude, but they can beat whomever is the Democratic nominee, I do believe. That's not for quotation in publication before the election or anything, but that's just what it looks like to me now.

So the Cubans have brought about a political change, and I'm the guy that brought most of the Cubans in there. I'm not saying it just exactly right, but when Castro came in, I was the first and only voice in the United States Congress that spoke out against Castro in 1959 and 1960, when he was being feted and wined and dined by the American Society of Newspaper Editors and all the big groups. I knew what he was and I knew what he was going to be, but I couldn't get anybody to believe me that this guy's a bad guy. But when he began to persecute the people down there who had opposed him, they began to try to get out. I introduced legislation which made it possible for anyone who moved out of Cuba because of political persecution to stay in this country and not get thrown out by the INS, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, they could stay as long as if they returned to the country from which they came they would be politically persecuted. So bunches of them came, and to this day I would say that I'm a very popular guy with these Latins, and I think deservedly so, because not only was there this Cuban thing, but I was also for better trade, better relations with all the countries of Latin America.

Ritchie: You mentioned Pepper's strength in the minority districts; how important was civil rights as an issue in that 1950 campaign?

Smathers: In the 1950 campaign?

Ritchie: Yes.

Smathers: In the 1950 campaign interestingly enough it was not very much of an issue because neither one of us wanted to make it an issue. See, in 1950 the state was very conservative. Pepper had been very liberal, so he did not

want to talk about it. I, being from Miami, was somewhat liberal myself. I didn't particularly want to talk about it. The result was that he and I did not discuss civil

rights. I don't think he ever made a speech in which he referred to me as either strong or soft on civil rights. I know I never made a speech about him and his advocacy of civil rights. He was a strong civil rights guy. I was sort of strong civil rights, coming from Miami. I had the liberal part of the state. But I believed it anyway. And in 1964, when the first big civil rights bill passed, I voted for it.

Now in the 1944 race that Pepper ran against Ollie Edmunds, they used that against Pepper, his civil rights advocacy, very strongly. But it didn't hurt him that badly. They put out pictures of him shaking hands with blacks and that sort of thing. We didn't do that in our campaign, however, in 1950 there was a little of that done, but not by the Smathers campaign. It was done by Mr. Ed Ball, and a guy named Dan Crisp, who's still alive, lives in Jacksonville, will tell you that he's the guy that put out this thing called "The Red Record of Claude Pepper." That was the same thing they used in 1944. In 1944 I wasn't even there, I was overseas. But in my race, neither Claude nor I talked about civil rights very much because we were both civil rights advocates.

Ritchie: You mentioned Ed Ball. Pepper in his memoirs really puts much of the blame for his defeat on Ball.

Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: What was Ball's role in Florida politics at that time?

Smathers: He was the chief executor of the DuPont Estate. Now, the DuPont Estate owned large land holdings. In the far western part of the state the DuPonts still have the St. Joe Paper Company, they still have something like 400,000 acres. They still have that. Ed Ball and the DuPont Estate bought much land, particularly around Duval County in the northern end of the state. They bought the Florida East Coast Railroad, took it out of bankruptcy, and Ed Ball ran that. But Ed Ball was a real hater. He didn't like Pepper. They had previously been friends, but in somewhere back during World War II they fell out over a labor issue that had to do with the Florida East Coast Railroad. Claude went for the railway unions, and it made Mr. Ball mad. He then turned on Claude. Mr. Ball, I think helped finance the race of Ollie Edmunds, who was a circuit court judge down there in Deland, Florida, and had been president of Stetson University. Mr. Ball got him in the race, it was reported--I don't know this, I was overseas at this time and didn't know anything about this, but this was the word that went around. Mr. Ball got Ollie Edmunds to run. Pepper beat him ten to one, easy race. Then when I came along, I didn't know Mr. Ball. I had met Mr. Ball one time and we didn't talk politics, we talked about a business thing.

I was the first owner of the first television station in Florida, along with my public relations man--along with a public relations man--named Bob Vin, who

had talked me into applying for a television license from the FCC in 1945. The month that I got back from the war I saw Bob Vin. I had known him prior to the war very well. He had run the biggest radio station in Miami. He said to me, "George, there's a new thing that we ought to get into. I'm going to take you in, you're a nice guy." And he named two other people that would go in with us. He said, "We each have to put up something like eight thousand dollars and we can get this license for television." Well, I went in with him, and lo and behold we got the license. Well, by golly, I couldn't believe that. I decided shortly after that I wanted to run for Congress, so I wanted to get my money out, that eight thousand dollars I'd put up. I thought: who can I sell my interest in it to?

Somebody said: Mr. Ed Ball is the richest guy, he's the head of the DuPont Estate, and you used to be in the DuPont Building, why don't you see if you can see him? He also owned the Florida National Bank, so I went to the Florida National Bank to ask when Mr. Ball was coming to town. They said yes, he comes once a month. Well, I wonder if I could have fifteen minutes of his time? They said, yes you can. So Bob Vin and I went to see Mr. Ball, who's supposed to be the smartest guy ever. "Mr. Ball, here's this new thing called television. This is the first station south of Atlanta. The only station south of Atlanta. We're going to make a lot of money with this, but I want to do this, and Bob wants to do that, and we want to sell it to you. I will sell it to you for eight thousand (Bob wanted twelve for his share)." Mr. Ball, I remember him saying, said, "Well, gentlemen, you're very nice to come to see me, but we don't fool around with these newfangled ideas. We just don't have time for this kind of speculative thing."

Okay, so I didn't sell it to him. That's my one and only visit with him until after I had won the Senate seat, much later. This was after I had been in Congress and everything. I took that eight thousand dollar interest I had and sold it to a guy name Mitchell Wolfson, who owned all the theaters. He bought it, and Mitch Wolfson got it going, got a CBS affiliation. He sold it now about ten years ago for \$164 million. \$164 million! To this day my name is the first one on that license. It was Bob Vin and me and we owned that station, and I got eight thousand dollars. \$164 million. Anyway, that was my first contact with Mr. Ball, trying to sell him that, and he didn't buy it. I never saw him again until, oh, I venture to say after I won the election, had been sworn in, had been a senator for maybe a year or two. I never saw Mr. Ball.

Slowly, you know, at state Chamber of Commerce meetings I'd be the speaker and he'd be one of the people who were there, along with all the other members of the Chambers of Commerce, and that sort of thing. And there were several people who were good friends of his that became good friends of mine. So I slowly began to know Mr. Ball, and got to liking Mr. Ball better and better as I knew him. But he was a crotchety little old fellow. He hated Claude Pepper. He was the most conservative man I ever knew, Ed Ball. He was against anything that the government was involved in. He didn't like Roosevelt, he didn't like Truman, he was a deep, dyed-in-the-wool Republican. So only in

the late years of my life did I get to know him. Then I don't know how exactly but he introduced me to a lot of interesting people. He introduced me to Armand Hammer, who's ninety-two years old I see and who's just got himself a pardon from George Bush for his having given money to Nixon's campaign. But Mr. Ball introduced me to him, he introduced me to one of the Arab sheiks who came over here and stayed at the Carlton Hotel. Mr. Ball used to keep an apartment at the Carlton Hotel all the time, that is the DuPont Estate did, that was Mr. Ball.

Of course, everything that they had, it wasn't any great brain power actually, he just bought everything up in Florida and as Florida grew it just got enormously valuable. That's what's happened today, the Florida East Coast is now making money for the first time. He took that out of bankruptcy. He went out and bought all the bonds and took it out of bankruptcy and bought it for practically nothing. But he lived with it for twenty years when it was losing money. Now it's really making money. But all that land that it owns, all the way from Jacksonville to Key West, right downtown of everyone of those cities all the way down. That real estate is so valuable you just can't believe it.

Anyway, I didn't know Ball well, but he hated Pepper. He ran his own. . . he did his own thing against Pepper. I hope somebody will get Dan Crisp on record, because he's still alive, and he was the fellow who managed all the things for Mr. Ball. He'll be frank to tell you about it.

Ritchie: So they really ran an independent campaign.

Smathers: Yes, they ran an independent campaign. They weren't for me, they were against Claude. That was their big thing, they were just against Claude. Up in the northern panhandle area they put out a lot of stuff about Claude that undoubtedly hurt Claude.

Ritchie: He was an interesting character. I guess Florida was a much smaller state in terms of population and everything else at that stage, and someone like Ball could be an incredible power in the state.

Smathers: Big power. Particularly in west Florida. He wasn't so big down in Southland, Miami, Palm Beach and those areas, no. He didn't spend any time down there, although his railroad did have some property, but he didn't do much in that area. But he loved west Florida. He had a big personal ranch in Leon County, which is outside of Tallahassee, magnificent farm. As I said, they had about 400,000 acres out there at the St. Joe Paper Company. They had property up in Georgia, way across Georgia, all around up in there. He loved property, and he believed in property. He took the DuPont Estate from I don't know what it was in the beginning but he made it into a billion-dollar operation.

Ritchie: It wasn't very smart of Pepper to cross him, I suppose.

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Smathers: Well, actually, he didn't have that much influence truthfully. He was a guy who sat in his office. He didn't go out, nobody knew him. He didn't like anybody that was halfway even close to middle of the road. He was an extreme rightist.

Ritchie: How would you describe Florida at that stage? Was Florida really a southern state?

Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: Was it comparable say to Georgia and Alabama?

Smathers: Yes, in those days more so than it is today. See, all the people who move into the state, and we're going to be the fourth largest state in the Union in the census of 1990. We have a thousand people a day moving into the state. These people are coming in, most of them from the midwest, as you look at Idaho and Iowa and places that are losing population, we're gaining population. So our state is actually becoming now more of a Republican state. It's more conservative today economically than it was when I ran. It was conservative on civil rights issues, and conservative on communism. The big issue that defeated Pepper was his position with respect to the Soviet Union. That's what actually did him in. I tried to tell him that. I wish you people would someday, if you want to get picture of the campaign, would talk to Pepper's administrative assistant, for five years before I ran against him. That was Bob Fokes who is in Tallahassee who is alive today, and who can really tell you a lot about Claude's transformation and what finally did him in. I went to see Folks, told Fokes this. I said, "Claude's going to lose if he's not careful. He can't go against Churchill. He can't go against Truman. He's fighting a losing battle, and nobody believes that you've got to be soft on communism." And Claude was preaching that. That was his whole thing. That's what did him in. You could have never beaten Claude on any other issue than that, because he voted all the right issues. He was for civil rights, but he never let himself get so far out in front that it would enable somebody to beat him. So he would speak very conservatively when he was in Florida. He would speak very liberally when he was in New York. But I never faulted him on civil rights at all.

Ritchie: I know there were a lot of southern liberals, like [Lister Hill](#) and Fulbright and others, who always felt that was one area they couldn't touch. They couldn't keep a career if they got involved in the issue.

Smathers: That's right. You couldn't win. You couldn't get reelected. That was when they still separated the schools, they separated the restaurants, separated the rest rooms. I remember that very well. I didn't particularly like it. I had grown

up. . . a lot of southerners. . . actually, I think the southerners like the black people better than the northern people do. The southerners have lived with black people, they've grown up with black people. I grew up with a black guy named J.R. Franklin, who, until I was seventeen years old, was my

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very best friend. He lived with us. He lived in our house. He had a room just like I did, and he went to school, and we worked together, and we fought together, played together, and so on. Lot of southern white families looked down to their black families with great pride. They'd work with them, right along side of them day after day. They would go to church with them. Some of the white guys would sleep with some of the black girls, and vice versa, but somehow, they didn't want to be seen on Main Street with their arms around each other or anything like that. It was just bigotry.

There was a day when I'm sure that people back in the old plantation days when the blacks on a plantation outnumbered the whites, and the white guys were always afraid if we didn't keep the blacks beat down, that they were liable to physically come in and throw us out and hurt us. I think that was one of the reasons that it grew up the way it did. But I know this, that today I go to Chicago, and I go to New York, and I go to St. Louis, and I see that they've got segregation that's almost worse than anything we had in the south. While they profess to be equal and all that, they don't practice it, and they are really more fearful of blacks. The southerners aren't fearful of blacks. The southern knows blacks. They associate with them. They always have. As I said, I grew up with them. Wrestled and boxed and played baseball and stuff. It was only till we went to high school that we began to separate. And now they don't do that, they don't separate now at all. That's why you see blacks moving from Chicago back to North Carolina, from New York back to South Carolina, because they are really better understood by the southern people, and the southern people like them, they don't dislike them at all. Anyway, I didn't mean to get off on that.

Ritchie: Part of it is just looking at the state in a different period of time.

Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: In 1950, Florida was almost a completely different state, it seems to me, than it is today.

Smathers: Exactly, a different state. Today, see, the Democrats can't win in Florida. They did not win our most recent senatorial election, the Republican won. They've got a Republican governor. After the next legislature we're probably going to have a Republican-dominated legislature. So a Democrat like me, you know, I'd be in a minority. I would be having a hard time, except that my middle-of-the-road thing would have appealed to them. A lot of those now-Republicans

were Democrats. But the Democrats kind of run on their own, as they're doing throughout the south. You look at [Sam Nunn](#), he'll tell you that the current Democratic party, and current Democratic national leadership is making it very difficult for a southern Democrat in Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina. A well-known southerner would have a hard time, because of the national picture.

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Ritchie: Well, there was a split between the southern Democrats and the national Democrats as early as '48, at the convention, when [Strom Thurmond](#) led the walkout, so there's some roots to the current differences.

Smathers: That's right. It's there, no question about it.

Ritchie: Once you were elected to the Senate, to go back to that comment that Sam Rayburn said you should stay in the House because it was better in the House. Having served in both, what is the difference between being a member of the Senate and the House?

Smathers: Well, naturally, having served eighteen years in the Senate and four years in the House, I think there's substantial difference. The fact that you have from Florida today two United States senators, and you're going to have twenty-three or something, after this next census, Congressmen. The big difference is that in being a Congressman the issues are not different, the issues are the same. When they have a civil rights bill it's got to pass both the House and the Senate, when they have an appropriations bill it's got to pass both houses, and so on, so that everybody gets to vote on it.

The difficulty in running in a state like--or you might say the advantage; to me it was a difficulty--like Florida, where you have one end of the state, the Miami-Ft. Lauderdale area, which is quite liberal, and you go eight hundred miles away and you're still in the same state, and that part of the state is bounded on the west side by Alabama and on the north side by Georgia, you've got a totally different atmosphere in terms of the thinking of the people. In the northern part of the state, the country area we've got there, it's sort of conservative, a lot of them farmers, that sort of thing, very conservative. You come on down to Miami, and you have all the people who have moved in from New York City and who have moved in from Chicago, and they are much more liberal in their thinking. You run statewide and you have to adjust yourselves to the two parts of the state. It used to be that a fellow could make a certain type of a speech (Claude Pepper was very good at this) in the southern part of the state and go to the northern part of the state and you wouldn't think it was the same fellow talking about the state.

That's Florida, now you take Massachusetts, which I used to tease my friend Jack Kennedy about. He could get on one damn television station and he would not

only cover the whole state of Massachusetts, but he would cover into New Hampshire, and Vermont, and Rhode Island, and all the rest of them. And it's eight hundred miles traveling from Key West up to Jacksonville, and then going from Jacksonville over to Pensacola. Jack Kennedy could go from the southern end of his state to the northern border and it was only about I think sixty-eight miles, or something like that. And you go from the coast all the way in as far as you could go, going west, and it was only about a hundred and thirty miles. And he could get on any station in Boston and cover the whole area, not only his Congressional district but the whole state. Now you talk about politicking and the physical demands of politicking in those kinds of states are so different you

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can't believe it. It is a real chore. It's gotten easier because of television, but in 1950 when you had to physically go from Monroe County, which is Key West, and go all the way to Escambia County, which is Pensacola, there was no way you could travel in a car and do that in less than three days. And by the time you stopped and spoke all along the way, it was a real physical drain. So it was tough. I forget what your question was.

Ritchie: It was the comparison between being a senator and a member of the House.

Smathers: Oh, yes. So in Florida, you have these distantly related geographical areas which are as different in their thinking as if you were moving from one state to another. And yet you have to accomplish getting along with both ends of that state. This was the difficulty we've all had, I mean everybody that's ever run in Florida has had the difficulty. As a Congressman, you have a smaller district, and its geographic size is depended upon how heavily populated it is. If it's heavily populated, like Jack Kennedy's district up in Massachusetts, they were pretty much all of the same mind. You know, you get the right level of thinking at that point: they feel this way about religion, they feel this way about civil rights, and its a homogenous type of reaction. You take a big district like Miami when I first had it, this is not too good an illustration, I went from Miami to Key West, and of course they pretty much thought the same, and all the way over to Naples and Fort Myers, which is now very Republican. In that day they had no people over there.

But to try to answer your question, obviously it's much more difficult being a senator. Your area is bigger, your diversity of views is greater, it's more difficult. Being a Congressman, once you get into being a Congressman you can work that district today like they do and you are not defeated. I think the best proof of that is that in the last Congressional races there was only a change of one percent. Hardly ever does an incumbent Congressman get defeated anymore, because they develop this homogenous viewpoint, and theh're hitting it everyday. It's easier to hit because it's a small district, even though its heavily populated. If they can get

the endorsement of one paper, that's enough. When I ran against Claude, I think I told you this before, there were forty-two daily newspapers in the state. Forty-two daily newspapers. I was endorsed by thirty-eight of them. But Claude just helped me get that because I didn't know all thirty-eight of those editors, but they didn't like what he was saying. And it wasn't because his sister was a thespian, or he practiced celibacy, or he was an octogenarian, or whatever.

Ritchie: Well, as a senator, do you have more power of authority than you do as a member of the House?

Smathers: Oh, sure. Infinitely more. You appoint judges. You appoint U.S. marshals. You have a say-so as to who's going to be the immigration officer in Miami. You have some input into all the appointments. Any appointment that has to be confirmed you have infinitely more influence. No,

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being a senator is an infinitely more desirable, and influential, and powerful job than being a Congressman.

Ritchie: Was being a Congressman more restrictive, in the sense that you were limited to the topics that your committees were dealing with?

Smathers: Yes. And you were limited in the sense that everybody's first obligation was to represent their constituency, and your constituency is more homogeneous. It's not that divided, not that cut up. As a matter of fact, the legislatures, when they make a district, they kinda try to get the people of certain beliefs pretty well into one district. So it's much easier, much easier, and much less important. But they still get the same salary, so it's all right financially!

Ritchie: How would you describe the U.S. Senate that you first came to in 1951?

Smathers: Well, it was infinitely more of a club atmosphere than it was when I left it. It was much more respectful of seniority, and because of that you could actually get more done. I think democracy is a great thing, but I also think that you can have too much democracy so that you don't get anything done. And that's what's happened to the Senate today. They have a very difficult time building up a consensus because each of the senators now the minute he gets there they give him some sort of a subcommittee with a staff and he starts out having his own hearings and running things the way he wants to run them, gets a lot of publicity on that, and he becomes quite a factor. And when you have a hundred fellows, each of whom thinks he is--and technically he is--as important or better than anybody else, you've got a problem in trying to get things done. There's nobody who wants to say: Well, now, look, this man is an expert, he's the man who's made the study of this, this is what he found, and I'm going to vote with him. Now, each guy says: Well, no, I've had my own staff study it, and I've had this and

this and this. So everybody has got to speak on everything. Result is you can't build a consensus as well.

It used to be when Lyndon Johnson was there that the word would go out that Johnson wanted everybody to vote a certain way. And unless they were experts in some field they would vote that way. Certainly when Sam Rayburn was Speaker of House, he passed the word along that this was what he wanted the Democrats to do, and they would generally do that. Now, there would be some situations where a Congressman would feel as though he could not do it, it was against the best interest of his district, or he could not survive in his district if he voted a certain way, and he wouldn't, but that would be a rare occasion. So you had leadership that controlled the Congress and you could get more things done more expeditiously than you do today. These interminable speeches and arguments, and everybody's an expert on everything today!

Ritchie: You came in during the period when freshman senators were generally advised to keep quiet.

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Smathers: That's right. You were given a committee, and in time if you behaved yourself and supported the leadership, the leadership made all the appointments. There was no voting as to who was going to be it. They didn't have a Democratic caucus to elect so-and-so to some committee. Lyndon Johnson put you on the committee [raps on desk for emphasis]. Sam Rayburn put you on the committee. He was the fellow, and he'd approve it. Somebody might recommend something to do, but he had always the last word. He'd call a guy and say: "Look, I'm thinking about putting you on the Foreign Relations Committee. What is it you want to do, and how do you want to do it? Well, look, I'm expecting you to support the leadership."

When I was chairman of the senatorial campaign committee, raising money for the senators--Lyndon Johnson made me do that, I didn't particularly want to. We had a lot of speakers, we had Truman come in from Missouri and make a speech one time, and raised money for Senate Democrats. Between Johnson and me we ladled that money out. Johnson picked out most of the guys who were going to get that money. If the guy had not been a good Johnson supporter and there was a chance of knocking him off with another Democrat, Johnson probably would say, "Well, we're not going to help that fellow. Maybe this new guy will be better. But certainly we're going to help him against the Republicans." But that's the way the thing went. And actually you had leadership that was responsible and could lead. They weren't caught up with having to be on the telephone all the time rounding up this guy, rounding up that guy, and listening to him tell about what all of his problems were.

Ritchie: When you first came into the Senate, the majority leader was [Ernest McFarland](#) of Arizona.

Smathers: Yes, he was a sweet fellow. See, Johnson was his whip.

Ritchie: McFarland was never seen as a really strong leader, was he?

Smathers: No, he was just a nice fellow. He was just a sweet guy.

Ritchie: The real power lay more with the chairmen of the committees than the floor leader?

Smathers: Yes, until Johnson. And you know, Johnson never could control Fulbright. There were a lot of people he couldn't control. He couldn't control [Harry Byrd](#). But he did. Johnson was a genius at handling people in the way that they had to be handled. He didn't handle everybody the same way. He didn't rant and rave at the Harry Byrd's of the world, or the [Bob Kerr](#)'s of the world. Oh, no, he was so passive, and so submissive, and so condescending, you couldn't believe it! But that's the way he knew he had to handle that particular fellow. I've seen him kiss Harry Byrd's ass until it was disgusting. You know, "Senator, how about so-and-so; wouldn't you like to do this; can't we do this for you, and so on." He would get Harry Byrd to do what he wanted him to do, but that was the way Johnson operated. We mostly read about Johnson

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being a guy who would run all over you. That's true. If he could, he would. But there were those he couldn't, and on those he knew how to handle them. He was a genius.

Ritchie: I read a little piece that McFarland wrote, that when [Virgil Chapman](#) died, McFarland decided to put [Earle Clements](#) on the Policy Committee in Chapman's place, and he told Johnson. But when he went to tell Clements, he found out that Johnson had already told Clements he was going to get it.

Smathers: That's right, oh, yes.

Ritchie: I thought, Johnson would never have tolerated that if he had been majority leader.

Smathers: No, that's right. He would be mad as hell if you did it. But that's the way he operated.

Ritchie: When you first came in the Senate, were there role models, senators that you patterned yourself after, or who you consulted with to find out how you should operate?

Smathers: Well, not really. Let me say this, I always had a great respect for Senator Holland, my colleague. He was the man who had the most integrity of anybody I ever knew in politics. He was a difficult fellow to get to know because he was not a hale, outgoing, effusive, backslapping guy. He was very much of a student. He was very reserved. A very thoughtful guy, and a thorough gentleman. I liked Holland, very much. He didn't get along with Johnson too well, because he didn't particularly like Johnson's style. Johnson's backslapping style didn't go with him, and Senator Holland wasn't chairman of a committee at that time, so Johnson didn't have to use his other tactics on him. But [Spessard Holland](#) was as fine a public servant as I ever knew.



Senator Spessard Holland
Senate Historical Office

I really admired him, and we voted together on most everything. We made all the appointments together, whether we had an opening for a federal judge, or something. He would take his turn, I would take my turn. We'd always agree. Which had been done by Pepper and the predecessors, that you wouldn't appoint somebody who was distasteful to the other senator, and you'd always clear it with him in that sense. You took turns as to who you appointed. Holland and I never had the slightest disagreement about anybody, or anything. We voted, I think, together on most everything that ever came up. I was a little more liberal than he was in the civil rights field, but not much. We both voted for the 1964 Civil Rights Act of Johnson's, which Lyndon got through. I mean, I had to, because I was one of his assistants at that time. I helped to get Holland to vote, although Holland was for it. He just wanted us to stick together so we wouldn't one of us expose the other in the state. No, I had more admiration for him that just about anybody that I ever served with.

So you say role model, I admired Johnson, although I couldn't stand Johnson half the time. But I admired his absolutely unconquerable spirit, his determination to get things done, his indefatigable nature, I don't know how his body stood it. But you had to admire that. On the other hand, you have a fellow like [Mansfield](#), whom I just adored. He was just totally the opposite. He was a

thoughtful, kind, sweet, nice guy, hardly ever raised his voice. Johnson brought Mansfield along as he did me. As a matter of fact, I'm the guy that recommended to Johnson that he take Mansfield as the assistant leader when I said I wasn't going to do it. He asked me to do, he and Bobby Baker came to me. What year was that? The year that Earle Clements lost.

Ritchie: 1956.

Smathers: '56 was it? Clements was the whip. Nice guy, had been governor of Kentucky, nice fellow and a very good politician. I liked him, understood him. He was second under Johnson. I was third under Johnson. Johnson made me the chairman of the Democratic Conference and a lot of things, and then made me chairman of the senatorial campaign fundraising committee, and stuff. When Earle began to run that year, and he had a pretty serious opponent, he had to be gone down in Kentucky to campaign for reelection. So I automatically stepped up to his position. And Johnson really worked my tail off, just absolutely worked it off. I wasn't used to it, that kind of work, that kind of dictation, but you had to take it from Johnson. With Earle gone it was everyday some crisis, and Johnson was very unsympathetic with things that didn't happen, or certain fellows that you were counting on to vote--[Quentin Burdick](#), who's still over there, didn't vote like Johnson wanted--he'd say, "Why didn't you get on that, goddamn you, so-and-so and so-and-so two weeks ago. This is what he wants."

And that's when Johnson had the heart attack, along about this time. We were down at George Brown's. We discussed that. So I had suddenly come up two spots. I had taken Earle Clements place, Earle was gone, and all of a sudden Johnson was out, so I was really having to run the Senate. And Johnson was calling me every five minutes, after the first two weeks. Thank God he couldn't call on the telephone for the first two weeks and we got a lot of things done. Anyway, I was really running the Senate.

We get up to November, and Clements is defeated. The Congress is in recess. That was on a Tuesday, I'm in Miami. We recessed so that everybody could go back home and vote. A third of them were running, other two-thirds wanted to participate. So we were in recess. I got a call from Johnson saying, "I want to meet you in Washington up here tomorrow at eleven o'clock." I said, "I can't get there by then." "Goddamn it, you can get there." So I make a reservation at the Mayflower Hotel. I said, "I'll see you in the morning, no way I can get there today." So I'm irked. My wife was mad at me. "Why do you keep putting up with Lyndon Johnson? He's just destroyed your life?" So I go up there and check into the Mayflower in the morning, about nine-thirty. Here comes Lyndon Johnson and Bobby Baker. The phone rings and a voice said

"They're on their way up to your room, Senator Johnson and Mr. Baker." There's a knock, and there they are. Johnson's there in a raincoat, it was cold. He had a big cowboy Texas hat on. And Bobby was with him. Bobby usually was.

Johnson started off, and said, "Now, I'll tell you what you've got to do. You've got to pick up the phone, you've got to call [John McClellan](#), here's his number, and get him. He's going to be fine. I've already talked to him, and [Dick Russell](#) is in Spain on a trip, and you've got to call Dick. Dick will be for you, you know that, but you've got to get him, and here's the number over here. And here. . . " he told me somebody else he wanted me to call, I forget who it was, maybe [Symington](#), "call Symington, here's his number. Now you call him right now and it's all over with." Well, I was so irritated and so mad, I said, "Well, Johnson, I don't want to be your assistant." Well, it was just as though you had unleashed an awful smell of something. His nostrils flared, his eyes sort of looked funny. He said, "What are you saying?" I said, "I don't know that I want to be the whip." He said, "Do you really mean that?" He hadn't sat down the whole time, neither did Bobby, we were all standing. I said, "Yeah, Johnson, I don't know that I want to do it." So he said, "Come on, Bobby, let's go."

He got to the door and turned around and said, "Smathers, if you don't want to do it, who do you think we ought to get?" I said, "Lyndon, the only guy that could probably put up with you is that angel, Mansfield. Mansfield's nature is such that he could probably stand it." Okay, he turned around and walked out. The next thing I heard he had called Mansfield. Mansfield had done what he wanted me to do, and that's how Mansfield became the assistant majority leader. He asked me would I nominate Mansfield. He called me before the Senate gathered, and I said yes. I nominated Mansfield. [Frank Lausche](#) came to me and didn't want me to turn it down. He said, "I want you to do it, George." I'll never forget that, I've always thought about Frank asking me. I had several others wanted me to do it. [Russell Long](#) said, "You ought to take it, why don't you take it?" He said, "We all love Mansfield, but Mansfield's too sweet and too nice." I said, "Christ, you need something to offset Johnson." So that's how that happened.

Ritchie: One other person of that period that I wanted to ask you about was Richard Russell. You mentioned him in passing, but what was your relationship with Russell?

Smathers: Richard Russell was everybody's ideal. You asked me about my role models. It would be Holland and Richard Russell. Russell was a very, very able fellow to start with. He was the most polite, thoughtful fellow that you ever saw. He ran his committees that way. He did not run it with a hard, heavy hand. He was very polite, always so courteous you just would hardly believe it. Smart, knew how to get along with everybody. Was it 1952 he decided he wanted to run for president?

Ritchie: Yes.

Smathers: He told me about that, told as he did a lot of others, and because the Florida campaign, the primary, was in May, it was the earliest of any other southern state. He was going to make his kick off in Florida. He asked me would I help him. I told him that I would. He asked me would I introduce him at his first speechmaking, which was at the University of Florida, where I had first heard Claude Pepper. Many years had gone by now. I said, "Yeah, I'll be glad to. I'll go back to the university with you and I'll introduce you. Then we'll go to Ocala, we'll go on down to Orlando. I'll introduce you that whole day."

Dick Russell was such a shy man, and so introverted in a way, the public life really wore on him, but nobody would know it. I recall as we sat on the platform in Gainesville and the mayor of the city was introducing all the dignitaries, and there was a crowd out there of maybe fifteen hundred people, two thousand, a lot of news people, because this was his first speech in running to get the Democratic nomination for president. I was sitting beside Dick Russell, and his pants legs were shaking so, he was so nervous, and he was sweating. He was trembling so that I had to get an umbrella and put it between him and me so that you couldn't see him trembling. I never will forget that. It's funny how a little thing like that will impress you. This guy was so absolutely nervous and trembly that you couldn't believe it. He made a good candidate, and a good speech, and I took him on down to Miami.

The first time I ever saw television, they tried to have a debate on television between [Kefauver](#) and Russell. If ever there was a sort of a funny kind of a thing, that was it, because they would talk a few minutes and the lights would go off and they'd stop, "It's not working! Okay, let's wait a minute. Now, where were we?" The lights would come back on and they'd start again. I don't think they had a hundred sets in Dade County, see, so nobody was looking really. But the cameras were working taking the pictures. But that was some campaign, and of course Dick won, there in Florida, big over Kefauver. He finally didn't get very far, but he was a marvelous man.

I think [Sam Nunn](#) is trying to be in the image and likeness of Dick Russell. I think that's why Sam Nunn is making such a good senator. He knows what he's talking about. First he's a good student of the armed forces and what's happened in the appropriations, he knows what's happening, which is number one. And secondly, having gotten himself well prepared, he knows what he ought to be doing in taking the country the way that it ought to go.

Ritchie: In '52, Russell threw his hat into the ring to run for president, but in '53 he could have been majority leader just by asking for it.

Smathers: Oh, he could have been majority leader any time. He's the only guy that could have beaten Lyndon.

Ritchie: Why do you think he declined the majority leadership?

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Smathers: Well, he didn't want to do it. He'd rather be chairman of the Armed Services Committee, and a senior guy on Appropriations. He didn't want all that aggravation. You have to deal with all the senators, and he didn't want to do it. There are a lot of guys, some people are just not cut out for the job. I didn't think, for example, that McFarland was a particularly good one.

<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=B001210>" Bob Byrd has been a good one, but just because he's the most determined man that ever was. He's just by God going to get it through. Who else has ever worked harder than Bob Byrd? Nobody. He patterned himself after Lyndon completely.

But Dick Russell knew that it was a tiring job. Having to deal with all of them, you know, is like putting on a high school dance. It's a rat race! You get three saxophone players and then you can't get a drummer. Then you get a drummer and you can't get a piano player. Half of them want to come in free, and half of them. . . it's ridiculous.

Ritchie: Russell was chairman of the Southern caucus at that time.

Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: How influential was the Southern caucus in '51 when you came in?

Smathers: Well, I think the Southern Conference of Governors, or whatever it was, was influential. It had no affirmative power, but it had a lot of negative power. They could stop, they could convince people not to do things, and they could convince the convention that they would not take somebody, but they really couldn't get a southerner up there, so their negative value was enormous, but their affirmative value was almost nil.

Ritchie: Of course, the southern caucus in the Senate had most of the committee chairmen in those days.

Smathers: That's right, in those days it was much stronger than it is today.

Ritchie: It was quite an array, and to become a junior member of that by being elected from a southern state was a good entre, I would guess, into the Senate.

Smathers: Oh, yes. Well, [Sam Ervin](#) was good. He came along about the time I did. Willis Robertson was there by the time I got there. He was the North Carolina senator, got elected the same time I did. He had beaten some so-called liberal from his state, and he had been president of the American Bar Association, that was the most impressive thing that I could figure about him--[Willis Smith](#)

was his name, not Robertson. [Willis Robertson](#) was from Virginia. I saw his son Pat on television the night before last. He was saying something about his father, and I thought, you know, he doesn't look like his father,

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doesn't talk like his father, doesn't act like his father. But anyway, that is his father.

Ritchie: One other position that Russell held at that time was chairman of the Steering Committee.

Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: And you had to go before him to get on committees.

Smathers: That's right.

Ritchie: I've heard that the Finance Committee was one of the hardest committees to get on.

Smathers: That's right, that was a hard committee to get on.

Ritchie: And the two requirements, they say, was that you voted right on cloture and you voted right on oil and gas.

Smathers: That's right. I think that's right. You had to do that. See, Johnson protected oil and gas. When I went on it, I don't know who was the majority leader, I've forgotten.

Ritchie: It was in '55 you went on, so Johnson was majority leader.

Smathers: '55 so it would be Johnson, yes. I wanted to get on that committee. Of course he had put Russell Long on about six months before I did. You couldn't put anybody on that Harry Byrd didn't approve of, either. In other words, you had to touch a lot of bases to go on that committee. It was a good committee. I think Bob Kerr was the most influential man on the committee, because he was the only fellow on the Democratic side of the committee who had ever had any business experience whatever, except for Harry Byrd, who had an apple orchard. Paul Douglas had none. Russell Long had none. I had none. It went on down the line and not a damn one of us had ever been in private enterprise and really didn't know what was going on, except Bob Kerr did. He had organized the Kerr-McGee Oil Company, and we used to listen to him.



Senator Robert Kerr
Senate Historical Office

The two really very influential guys on the Finance Committee, taxation committee, when I was on it, and I was on it I think eleven or twelve years, were on the Democratic side [Bob Kerr](#), and on the Republican side [Wallace Bennett](#). Wallace Bennett had been the head of some big business out there in the west, and then been elected president of the United States Chamber of Commerce. Because of his business practices, when he was elected to the Senate happily they put him on the committee right away. He was a very junior member of the Senate, but they put him on the Finance Committee because that's where he belonged. The rest of us had just come out of the war, or had been a professor,

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or something like that who really didn't know what a business was all about. Here we were sitting there voting on all of these terribly important tax questions, and trade questions. We were pretty good on trade, but we sure didn't know much about the business.

Bob Kerr had made millions in the oil business, and now he wanted to get into politics, so he got to be governor of his state. He was a top-quality governor and he was still making a lot of money, and then he comes to the Senate and he's on the Finance Committee. How he got on there so quickly I don't know, but it's again testimony to his genius. He was a hard-nosed cynical-type fellow.

I remember one day especially when something came up that Paul Douglas had warned the committee was a mistake, and the committee had voted for it anyway against Douglas' advice and recommendation. So when the word came, I forget who it was, the Internal Revenue Commission or somebody it was came over and was telling us about this terrible thing that we had done, and Paul Douglas jumped up. I was sitting between. . . Bob Kerr sat here, then Russell Long, and then I, and Paul Douglas was junior to me on that committee. He had been the professor. He jumped up after the Internal Revenue reported, and he said, "This was a bad mistake we've made." And it looked like there might have been a little bit of shenanigans, maybe some little bit of corruption had resulted by virtue of

this loophole we had opened up. And Paul Douglas jumped up and pointed his finger at Bob Kerr and he said, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself! You the senator from Oklahoma, to think that you would be a part of this combine, this conspiracy, this outrageous mechanism to take in the American public and taxpayers. Aren't you ashamed of yourself!" Went on like that, and Bob Kerr finally looked up at him and said, "Senator, I'm ashamed of every combine and every conspiracy that I'm not a part of." And just broke up the whole meeting. Everybody just laughed so hard. That's a better story than that. It actually happened. I didn't use the right words. Russell Long tells that story better than I do, but it really happened. It was just so funny.

But we listened to Bob, because while he was a cynic, and he was obviously for the money interest, he also was smart. He had worked his way up from nothing, from being raised on an Indian reservation, which was his home. He moved off the Indian reservation and began to go to work and elevated himself up to be this great oil man. He was impressive, and he was smart. Anyway, those were interesting days.

Ritchie: I wanted to ask just one more question about Richard Russell. You were on several committees before you went on Finance. You were on Interior, Post Office, and Interstate Commerce.

Smathers: Yes, I was on Interstate and Foreign Commerce.

Ritchie: Did you actually have to go down and sit in with the Steering Committee, or did they just tell you that they had appointed you?

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Smathers: No, the Steering Committee was mostly a Lyndon Johnson-Dick Russell type of a committee. In other words, if somebody that they didn't particularly like but they didn't want to make an enemy out of him, but they didn't want his bill to come up, then they'd call the Steering Committee and have the Steering Committee tell him that his bill wasn't going to be taken up. If it was somebody that they liked, I can bring up, or even Senator Holland probably could, but somebody who was on the inner circle with these fellows, you could get it on the calendar by just calling Lyndon Johnson's office and telling Bobby Baker that you'd like to get this put on, and it would be on. The Steering Committee was a mechanism that was created primarily to act as a buffer, to hold up legislation which the leadership did not want to have brought to the floor, but they didn't want to assume responsibility for stopping it. So they would, by dividing up the responsibility among ten guys, why then the fellow couldn't get mad at the leader. That's all that ever was.

Ritchie: But Johnson really did need Russell's approval on all of this?

Smathers: Johnson would get Russell. Every now and then Johnson and Dick would come to loggerheads about something, and invariably Johnson would back off. The only guy that ever would make Johnson back off was Dick Russell. I don't know of anybody else, even Senator [George](#), as wonderful as he was, he was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee before Fulbright. But see, Johnson could con. Johnson had different approaches. He had a whole arsenal of shots that he would use. One of them was sweet talking, the next one was doing a favor for you, the next one was talking rough to you, the next one was appointing him to a committee or something. But whatever was needed, that's what he would use on that particular fellow. Now, Dick Russell knew all of his tricks. See that picture right there [points to wall] is an interesting picture. Johnson is sitting there. That was in his majority leader office. See there's [Symington](#) over there. There's Skeeter Johnston who was Secretary of the Senate. Then there's Dick Russell, then there's Earle Clements, and then [Albert Gore](#). I don't remember what Albert Gore was doing there, but all these other fellows had some job. There's George Reedy, who was really Johnson's publicity man, but he was a hell of a smart guy, and there was me, who was talking. And they're listening to me. You know, I'm standing up and everybody else is sitting down. That was the kind of meetings that we would have sometime. But Johnson was it.

[End of interview #2]

George A. Smathers

United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969

Interview #3: Lyndon B. Johnson as Majority Leader

(Tuesday, August 29, 1989 and Tuesday, October 24, 1989)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie



U.S. Senate Historical Office

Senator Smathers with Lyndon B. Johnson
Senate Historical Office

Ritchie: How was it you became so closely connected with Lyndon Johnson?

Smathers: With [Johnson](#), well, I have to go back now. Johnson had been in the House before he went to the Senate. Everybody knew about Johnson, because he made his mark immediately over in the Senate. He knew what he wanted to do and he went about doing it. When I went to the Senate, [McFarland](#) was the leader and Johnson was the whip, and for all practical purposes, Johnson was the acting leader, because Johnson was never known at any time of his life not to try to be the top dog, or not be the top dog. McFarland was a sweet, nice, pliable guy from Arizona, whom everybody liked, but who was not a particularly outstanding leader. He was just a hell of a nice fellow. So by 1951 Johnson was almost running the Senate.

Johnson, for some reason which I don't and can't account for, liked me, apparently thought I had some leadership abilities. So he pretty much took me over. It was rather him taking me over than me courting Johnson. We were both

tall, we were both from the South, we both had I guess a type of an accent. We both liked pretty much the same things. I got to know Lyndon very well. But it was primarily because of his selecting me, rather than me doing anything spectacular. I think he saw in me a prospective leader.

So that's how it started out, and then he just took me around with him, and gave me, as I've already reported to you, all the little difficult jobs that nobody else wanted to do. He made me go talk to all the new senators about political matters, their reelections. Then it got to be on legislative matters, why Johnson would look to me and give me a list of say twelve guys, for example, that I had to personally go see about this particular legislation, how they were going to vote, what it was they didn't like about the bill, if there were any things they didn't like, what it was they would agree to, and so on, and try to get everybody lined up. So Johnson, as was his historic tendency, he would pass on all the ugly part of his job to somebody else. When I say ugly, I mean the hard-working, tedious part that wasn't very glamorous, and he always did that.

He always had a lot of fellows that he from time to time would call gophers, who he would send to do certain things, and I was one of that group. When I say a group, it sounds like a lot of them, but actually I don't recall that there were very many. I know I was, and I know [Earle Clements](#) was. But beyond that I don't know who else that he worked on like he worked on us. But in any event, because Johnson was the type of guy he was, and then when shortly after

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I got to the Senate, I forget what year it was and whether McFarland was defeated or whether McFarland retired, or what happened, I don't remember.

Ritchie: He was beaten by Barry Goldwater in '52.

Smathers: In '52, so I was there just two years when Johnson succeeded him. That means in '53 Johnson became the minority leader, and at that point Earle Clements and I moved up with Johnson. Then when Clements was defeated, Johnson wanted me to take Clements' place. That's when I've told you that story about how my wife didn't like it, and I didn't like it, and it was so difficult working for Johnson that I just didn't want to work for him any longer. But anyway, it was that procedure through which I became a very close friend of Lyndon's. I've always liked Lyndon.

He was a difficult fellow, as everybody has told you, and as we all know, very difficult to live with. But he could turn the charm on you. He could turn it on and off just like a fellow can turn on a spigot, and when you knew him and were with him, as we were, the fellows who were close to him, you would see the bad side of Lyndon about as often as you would see the good side. People who didn't know him as intimately as Earle Clements, me, and Bobby Baker, and people like that,

they didn't get to see Johnson as sometimes he was, which was a real tyrannical, tough, disagreeable, dictatorial fellow. But Johnson would not show that side to most other people. He knew there were some people that he could get to go his way by being charming, okay he'd do that for them. There was a certain group that he could get to do certain things by doing some sort of a little honor, appointment to a special committee of some kind that he would create, and give them a special assignment. There were others that he would just pal around with a little bit. From time to time he would take a couple of senators to dinner and he would slap them on the back and give them a lot of drink and buddy them, "my buddy" and so on, you know, this sort of thing. Johnson was a man of many, many diverse talents. That was the thing that was amazing about Johnson. Johnson had much ability, and driving ambition to get things done.

[Due to a recorder malfunction, this interview was continued at a later date.]

Smathers: I was having lunch with Larry Levinson and told him that the one thing I wanted to get across was the contributions that Lyndon Johnson made. "That's right," he said, "look at the civil rights bill, look at Medicaid, look at anti-pollution, the model cities act, the preservation of the forest." He said, "You know, all that was passed under Johnson." Then he told me about some fellow who had apparently worked for Lyndon, Bob Hardesty, who had accumulated all this information with respect to what Johnson had done. It was very impressive. I said, "Why don't you get Hardesty to send me a copy of that." He said, "Well, I will." So, hopefully I'll get that, and if you know Bob Hardesty you might get that yourself. He's got page after page of what Johnson did from

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the very first day that he got to the Congress as a Congressman, and went through it year by year, and he says its very, very good.

But without that, I can answer your questions by saying that Lyndon Johnson was far and away the most productive legislator that I ever encountered at any time that I was in the Congress, either in the House or the Senate. He passed more significant legislation, the basic Social Security bill, while it had been started actually before he got to Congress, but he's the fellow that put it on a rather sound and sensible basis. There's no question but what he was the fellow who passed all of the civil rights legislation, either as majority leader of the Senate, or subsequently when he was president of the United States. He did all of these things. The Clean Air Act, I had forgotten that he was the father of the Clean Air Act. I knew that he was the man who got the Medicaid bill adopted. When it came to getting things done, there was nobody that was equal to Lyndon, before or since, as far as I could see.

Now, he was an unusual person, and he had a distinctive and different personality, and he was very, very difficult to work for, because he demanded not

just one hundred percent of your time, but he demanded more than that. That's why he ran people off a great deal, and had a lot of people angry with him. He used to say, "I want only 'can do' people." That was one of his favorite expressions, "I only want 'can do' people around. I don't want anybody who tells me that they can't do something. I don't want them around." That was the way he was, all the time that I was around him.

As you know, the record shows that I was his assistant after Earle Clements, who had been the whip or the second leader, the assistant leader. I was the third, and then when Earle Clements ran in Kentucky he didn't come back to the Congress, so Johnson elevated me to his spot. What made that rather significant was that was the time when Johnson got sick, so it ended up with my in point of fact having to run the Senate for about five or six months. We got things done, but after Johnson had recovered well enough to get on the telephone and call you, why I spent more time talking to him than I did getting out on the floor, and trying to get senators to vote for or against whatever it was that we were for. But Lyndon was really a great man, and I hope that in time he will receive the credit which I think he very richly deserves.

Ritchie: What was it that really drove Lyndon Johnson? Did you have any sense of what motivated him?

Smathers: Well, I think that Johnson came from a very--modest is not the right word--how shall I say it? He came from a background of utmost poverty. His family did not have anything. Nobody in his family had ever achieved very much, certainly not in a material way. I think that as much as anything else motivated Johnson to lift himself and all those around him out of those very bare bones surroundings in which he grew up. He frequently talked about the things that they didn't have when he was a young boy. They didn't have fire wood on certain occasions when they would get cold. I remember one

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time when we were in Florida and it suddenly turned cold. We were out on a boat and we couldn't get warm, and I remember Johnson saying something to the effect that "I haven't been this cold since I was a kid living back on the Pedernales, back in Texas." I said, "My God, did it get this cold?" "Oh, sure it got this cold," but he said, "the thing about it was we didn't even have heat of any kind. We just had to huddle up around whatever firewood we could gather." He said, "That was pretty tough getting warm when six of you were trying to back up to one fire." He would talk about things like that.

I think he was very much inspired to lift himself and his family out of those conditions in which he grew up and to really achieve something, that's why he had this enormous ambition, and this enormous drive. That's what he did, he did that. So, you say what drove him? I've heard people say [Lady Bird](#) did, but I don't

think that at all. Lady Bird was sweet and thoughtful and kind and helpful to Lyndon, but I don't think that she tried to inspire Lyndon to do bigger things. Lyndon didn't need any of that! Nobody needed to talk to him about why it's important to get ahead. He was preaching that all the time to everybody. "Man, you've got to get with it. We can't be sitting around here doing nothing. We're not just going to sit here scratching." He used to have a lot of vulgar expressions, you know, "scratch your ass, and pick our nose, and spit." "What the hell! Damn it, we're not going to do that." He would go along like that all the time. He brought that with him.

Ritchie: He came out of a poor family, he went to a really small college, and yet he was in the Senate with a lot of men who were born to wealth and who went to Ivy League schools. Do you get the sense that he was trying to prove that he was as good as or better than the people he was dealing with.

Smathers: I'm sure. I think that's true. The eastern establishment was generally the establishment that he didn't particularly like. He respected them. He knew that the guys who had gone to Yale and Princeton and Harvard and all that were pretty smart guys, but he was damn well determined that the guy who came from southern Texas and didn't have much, and if it hadn't been for the C.C.C. he couldn't even have gone to college. He was going to damn well prove that fellow was not so handicapped that he couldn't accomplish a great deal for himself and for his country. He was determined to do that. To get back again, I think it was that background which had a lot to do with Lyndon's ambition. He wanted to prove that with guts and determination, and if you're reasonable smart--which of course he was--you could get away from that background you had. People say, "Well, how come Johnson did so much for the poor people?" Well, Johnson was poor. He understood it, that's why he passed much of this legislation which enabled kids to borrow money to go to school. That's why he passed legislation which made it possible for poor people to get medical assistance and medical care. He saw the evils, in a way, of the poll tax system, and the basic evil of the old civil rights laws that we had. I think Johnson saw these things as a young man, and as a poor man, and as a guy who never had anything in his life that he didn't have to earn for himself.

Ritchie: When Johnson took over the leadership of the party in '52, he followed after [Lucas](#) and McFarland. The leadership was a pretty weak position in many ways then--they were both defeated for reelection. How did Johnson make the position so powerful if it had been so weak under his predecessors?

Smathers: Again, it's the personality of the man and the drive and ambition of the man who has got the job. As leader, you had the opportunity to be a real leader, or you could be like Scott Lucas or McFarland, who were kind and sweet and nice guys, but who really were not motivated to the extent that Johnson was.

That job was pretty much what the fellow who was leader made of it. Neither Scott Lucas or McFarland, both of whom I served with--I don't think Scott was leader when I got there, I think McFarland was. I was in the House when Scott Lucas was the majority leader. I went to Europe with him and [Fulbright](#) on a trip one time. But they did not have the drive nor the ambition nor this constant urge to really get things done that Lyndon had.

When Lyndon got into that position, that was the biggest position in name that you could have in the United States Senate. That was bigger than being [president pro tempore](#). It was infinitely more powerful than being vice president of the United States. The president, obviously, as we all know, couldn't pass anything. He couldn't get his program through at all if the majority leader, as strong as Lyndon was, if the majority leader didn't agree with his program. Because Johnson could get the Senate to do most anything he wanted. Consequently, when [Eisenhower](#) was president, Johnson had as much to do with running the country as Eisenhower did. Now, people didn't know that. Eisenhower always had been a great general, everybody liked Eisenhower, and everybody had the highest respect for him. But as far as a legislative artisan, or a legislative architect, no he was not that. Nor were the leaders of his Republican party in the Senate after [Taft](#) had died. I think [William] [Knowland](#) came in after Taft died, and Knowland was not Robert Taft.

Robert Taft was a strong, able leader. I recall very well when I first got into the Senate one of the first votes that I cast was, in reflection, a mistaken vote. I shouldn't have voted the way I did, but I voted because Taft was leading the fight against statehood for Alaska and Hawaii. He made the very strong point that here we are with Alaska who's got less people in it than any one of the small counties in Florida, or as he would say, in Piqua, Ohio, or some reasonably small town, why they had more people than Alaska did. And yet Alaska was going to become a state of the Union and have two votes in the Senate. It was a disproportionate representation for the few people who lived in Alaska. The same was true pretty much of Hawaii.

I recall how when Bob Taft was leading that fight against it, I had just come to the Senate. I think it was 1951, and he came over to me. He was not a fellow with a great sense of humor or anything of that character. There was nothing about him that relaxed. He was more like Johnson, but he didn't have Johnson's charm. Johnson could turn it on when he wanted to. I don't think

that Taft ever even thought in terms of charm. I think Taft was a totally dedicated political figure who was so honest and so honorable that whatever he believed he had to do. It didn't make any difference whether it was partisan or not. He didn't feel that those two possessions should become states, and he spoke out against it. As I started out to say, he was handling the opposition to that, and he came over

to me, I was a freshman senator and I was much impressed with him. He said, "Young man, how much time do you want to speak against this bill?" I said, "Well, I don't know that I really want any." He said, "Oh, we've got plenty of time. It's agreed that each side has three hours, and we've only got four or five people to speak. You're going to have all the time you want." I said, "Well, I'll make a little speech against taking in these states."

I recall very distinctly the first speech that I made after I got to the Senate, I was called on to make the speech by Bob Taft. Anyway, we were unsuccessful, and I think time has proven that we were wrong in opposing it, and that the people who voted for statehood cast the right vote. I don't know, I mean, it's going that way. Someday we're going to think about taking Puerto Rico, who knows?

Ritchie: When you mentioned Robert Taft, that reminded me that Taft was only majority leader for a few months. He really didn't want to be majority leader.

Smathers: That's right, he didn't want to be it.

Ritchie: And Dick Russell didn't want to be majority leader.

Smathers: Dick Russell didn't want to be majority leader.

Ritchie: A lot of the powerful senators would prefer to be chairmen of committees.

Smathers: That's right. I think this would be fair to say, at least I don't know of anybody who made of the majority leadership the powerful post that Lyndon Johnson made of it. [Dick Russell](#) wanted to stay with the Armed Services Committee. He liked that, it was big in Georgia. They had a lot of military installations in Georgia and everybody had been thinking about the military, we had just gotten through with World War II and God knows it looked like we were going to have to fight the Russians, so that was a terribly important committee. Senator [Walter George](#), he was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, he didn't want to become majority leader. [Harry Byrd](#) probably would never have wanted it. I'm sure he much preferred being chairman of the Finance and Taxation Committee, because, at that time before Johnson came in, those powerful committee chairmen could actually control whether or not any money got spent.

Dick Russell was chairman of military appropriations and he could control who was going to get money and what the size of the army, navy or anything was going to be. He could do it. Same thing was true of Walter George as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. That was infinitely more important because all the foreign countries of the world who wanted to deal with us, they had to deal in a

way with Senator George. Those committees were still important, but after Johnson made such a powerful majority leader, Johnson in a way over-leaped them. He leap-frogged over them in terms of importance.

I think he became as important as let's say the Speaker of the House of Representatives, who obviously was more important than any of the chairmen of those committees in the House. The reason why was because with his authority he could control what legislation was coming up, he could make recognition of whatever Congressman he wanted to, he was the fellow who was expected to the party leader at that time. Johnson became in effect the Speaker of the Senate. He either took unto himself these powers that the Speaker had and by making himself a one-man Rules Committee, so to speak, who would schedule what legislation was going to be brought up, what would be considered, and then he picked a lot of guys and put them on his various committees. That picture right there with Dick Russell and Earle Clements and me and so on, [Stuart Symington](#), we were all head of some committees. Of course, I was Lyndon's assistant, standing there talking.

But Johnson elevated the majority leadership to a much more powerful position than it ever had been before, there's no doubt about that, just because of his own driven personality. I haven't seen anybody since Johnson who has been quite as powerful as Lyndon. Today we have [George] [Mitchell](#), and we had [Mansfield](#), who was nice but not of the driven leadership that Johnson had.

Ritchie: How did Johnson operate in terms of the lieutenants that he had? What was his staff structure, using other senators?

Smathers: It was a very personal thing with Johnson. Johnson just sort of picked out the people he liked. I happened to be one of those apparently that he liked. He picked me out and he wanted me to be much more ambitious than I was, and he got very angry with me when I refused to become his whip after Clements was defeated. I've told you that story, that's when I suggested Mansfield. Johnson picked his people just exactly why I don't know, but I know that I was considered one of his favorites. I know that he liked [Hubert](#) very much, even though he disagreed with Hubert about everything almost. But he liked Hubert's personality. Johnson did not particularly care for [Albert Gore](#). Why, I don't know. I always liked Albert. Johnson didn't like [Jack Kennedy](#), even from the start. But Johnson had his definite favorites. I happened to be one of them.

Johnson liked [Barry Goldwater](#). It was very peculiar about the fellows that Johnson really got stuck on. He liked [Bernie Maybank](#), who was a senator from

South Carolina. He always liked Bernie. Bernie was chairman of the Banking and Currency Committee, and Bernie could get most anything he wanted from

Johnson. Johnson was a fellow who picked his friends. Why he would pick certain people, I couldn't tell you. And he didn't pick them just because they agreed with him, because Humphrey never did agree with him. But he was crazy about Hubert.



Johnson and Humphrey at work
with Senator Harrison Williams of New Jersey
Senate Historical Office

Ritchie: Now, would Humphrey be included in the circle when Johnson would gather people around to plan strategy?

Smathers: A good deal. When Johnson first became president, before he ran in his own right, right after Kennedy died, Johnson always invited Humphrey over to the White House when he invited anybody. And of course, later Humphrey was his vice president. But Johnson really liked Hubert. He didn't like Mansfield that well. He liked Mansfield all right, but Mansfield was a fellow that everybody liked, so it was easy for Johnson to go to Mansfield because everybody liked Mansfield, and everybody still does. As you've heard me say, Mansfield's probably the most saintly guy that I know. He and Lady Bird Johnson, if ever there's a special place in heaven for human angels, there's got to be Lady Bird sitting up there as well as Mike Mansfield.

Ritchie: What role did Bobby Baker play in Johnson's team?

Smathers: Bobby Baker was as close to Lyndon as anybody could possibly be. This was the thing in a way that was Bobby Baker's downfall, because when Lyndon handled him the way you would a young colt, he had a bridle on him and he had a saddle on him, and he guided Bobby. He'd tell Bobby exactly what to do, and how he wanted it done. Bobby was a young man with unlimited energy, unlimited ambition, and very intelligent. He didn't have good judgment, because he was a very young guy, but he saw and appreciated the fact that Lyndon was the most powerful man in government almost. He met constantly with Eisenhower, he controlled Sam Rayburn over in the House, so he ran the government. I have to say that Bobby Baker was as close to Lyndon Johnson as anybody in the whole Congress. Bobby, through Johnson, was very powerful.

A lot of people didn't like Bobby, because Bobby sometimes wouldn't handle that as well as he should, see. But he was constantly with Lyndon, knew what Lyndon thought, and was quick. He could just dart around. Lyndon would say, "Get so and so on the telephone." [Snaps fingers] Bobby would have it. "Get so and so." "Let's do this, let's do that." Johnson was never asking him, "Bobby, what do you think we ought to do?" It was none of that. Bobby was never anything other than an employee of Lyndon's, but a trusted employee, and the hardest working employee that Lyndon Johnson ever had. He was never at the level where he could tell Lyndon, like Dick Russell, or Walter George, or [Bob Kerr](#), or me, or the people that Lyndon liked, Bobby was never at that level where he could sit down and say, "Now, I think you ought to do this," because

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Lyndon wouldn't permit that. He was an employee, there wasn't any doubt about it.

But he was close, and everybody knew he was close, therefore when Bobby would call you, as a senator, he was always very polite. He'd say, "Senator, the majority leader has asked me to ask you to do so and so." And you knew that was it, he had sent him to do that. It went on like that. Now Bobby, after Lyndon was gone and Mansfield wasn't the type to control Bobby like Johnson was, so Bobby got power struck suddenly. He thought all of a sudden that he was Lyndon Johnson, Jr., and all he did was get himself in a lot of trouble, a lot of criticism, and finally big trouble and out of the government.

Ritchie: Would you say that the major thing that people like Bobby Baker did for Johnson was to provide him with information, count heads?

Smathers: Oh, sure, that was it. Johnson would ask Bobby, "How's so and so going to vote?" Republican or Democrat, Bobby would be back in fifteen minutes telling you how the guy was going to vote. That's what the whip was supposed to do, that's what I was supposed to be doing all the time. That's why I knew the way it went, but I would be busy, I would be in my little committee, whatever the committee was at that time, usually the Commerce Committee, holding a hearing, so Johnson knew that he shouldn't be calling me, taking me out of the committee to ask me how was Harry Byrd going to vote on something. He just would get Bobby to do it.

Bobby knew how to be very apologetic, and he knew how to be very polite, and he'd say, "Mr. chairman, the majority leader is trying to make up a list of those people who will be for this bill or those people who are going to be against it. Hopefully, if you have made up your mind, he would like to know whether he can count on you to support this, or whether you're going to be against it." Usually, everybody would say, "Well, Bobby I'm going to be against it," or "I'm going to be for it," whatever the case was. Bobby would report that back to Lyndon. He was

constantly running errands for Lyndon. So he was powerful, and everybody knew that. He wasn't the best liked guy, but I liked Bobby. I felt sorry for him when he got in his trouble, but he was his own worst enemy.

Ritchie: What was the role of Bob Kerr in all of this?

Smathers: Bob Kerr, Lyndon loved Bob Kerr. See, the reason that Bob Kerr was so powerful was that Bob Kerr was a guy who had made himself many, many millions of dollars. He was without question the richest guy in the Congress, certainly in the Senate, and he had made all of his money himself. He was born on an Indian reservation in Oklahoma. He had fought his way up tooth and nail and had become head of Kerr-McGee, one of the great modern oil companies. Then after he had made all the money that he wanted, he decided to get in politics, so he ran for governor of Oklahoma and got elected, and was a good governor. Then he decided he'd run for the Senate, so he got elected. Everybody knew about his story, having come from total poverty and living on

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an Indian reservation, never knowing really who his grandparents were, and having achieved this high stature. Bob had all this money, and he would help many other senators in their reelection campaigns, which gave him additional power. Johnson knew who Bob Kerr was, and he knew how much money he had, and he knew how smart he was. Bob Kerr had a tremendous influence on Lyndon.

I served on the taxation committee with Bob. He was smart, tough, absolutely a bull dog, afraid of nothing. He would help everybody who came to him and wanted campaign money. He'd just open his pocket up and give it to them. That gave him a lot of influence. That's one of the reasons that I want to get my bill going again that people cannot contribute to campaigns if they don't live in the state from which the senator comes.

Ritchie: Talking about campaigns, and finances, and Bob Kerr and Bobby Baker, what was Kerr's influence on Baker?

Smathers: Tremendous. Next to Lyndon, Bobby was Bob Kerr's gopher. Some people would call it an unholy alliance. I don't call it that at all, but there was no doubt that Bobby Baker knew about Kerr's wealth and Kerr I think made it possible for Bobby to live in a better house, and he could do things with his wife and children, things that he couldn't do without Bob Kerr. Bob Kerr was a very generous fellow. He had made all of his money. I think it's safe to say he was the richest guy in the Senate. [Theodore Francis Green](#) was supposed to be pretty rich, all those guys from Rhode Island, [Claiborne] [Pell](#), you know, they're all very wealthy, but I think that Bob Kerr had more spendable money than any one of these family moneys. Family money like Pell's money, and Theodore Francis Green's money, and the [John] [Heinz](#) money, and the Kennedy money, that's all

tied up pretty much in a trust, so that while they have plenty to live on, they don't have plenty to throw away in other people's campaigns. Bob Kerr had made it all, and he had it all, and he carried around with him a wad of dough all the time. He had always four or five thousand dollars in his pocket. So he was powerful, he was powerful.

Ritchie: In what ways did this influence Baker, just to over-extend himself?

Smathers: That's right. See, Lyndon and Bob got along well. I think Bob voted for most everything that Lyndon was for. On economics, Bob was very conservative, but on the other issues, the civil rights issues, the social issues, Bob was surprisingly liberal. Of course, that was what Johnson was. Johnson was much more liberal than people ever thought he was, because he was from Texas and they thought he was some sort of a redneck. But Bob Kerr helped Lyndon on all those, what we'd call today progressive pieces of legislation. Bob Kerr was big, he was big. I liked Bob, but everybody was a little scared of Bob, because he had a very sharp tongue. In a debate, he was an impatient fellow. He'd get up and say what he had to say in fifteen minutes, where other people would take an hour to say the same thing. He didn't make

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a lot of speeches, but he would get up and ask two or three questions and he would say some very rough stuff to whomever he was debating with. It was always very rough.

One of the interesting stories about Bob, [Russell Long](#) tells this a lot better than I do, but it happened in our Finance and Taxation Committee. We had [Paul Douglas](#) on the committee. Paul was a great Democrat from Illinois, and a great liberal, and a great purist, and scholarly, but somewhat impractical, having been a -- this is not to condemn all teachers, or anything -- but having been a professor most all of his life. Anyway, he was on that committee, and Bob Kerr knew all about every business angle there ever was.

I forget what the specific piece of legislation it was, but somehow, it had passed and Bob Kerr had been the guy who was responsible for it passing. It had some sort of tainted overtones, some special interest type thing. When that fact was finally brought out in our committee one day, Paul Douglas was the guy who first learned about this thing having opened the gate to some sort of quick claim deal, or something while it was not totally dishonest, it was questionable. All of a sudden, this piece of legislation which Bob Kerr had sponsored and we'd all voted for, with the possible exception of Paul Douglas, Douglas jumped up and said, "Mr. Chairman, is the senator from Oklahoma not ashamed of what he did with respect to this legislation? This conspiracy, this combine of dirty people who get together to profiteer off the backs of the good people of this nation. Is he not ashamed of himself? Why isn't he embarrassed to death? Why is he sitting here

smiling? He ought to be ashamed! Shame on you!" And then Bob Kerr stood up, he said, "Let me say this to the senator from Illinois, I am ashamed. I'm ashamed of every combine, I'm ashamed of every conspiracy, I'm ashamed of every get together of this kind that I'm not a big part of." And everybody just broke up laughing. It was so funny the way he said it. He didn't back off a bit. But everybody laughed. To this day, people who were on that committee, Russell Long particularly, they remember that.

But Bob was a strong guy, a tough guy, and good. People would listen to him because he was the only big businessman we had in the Senate. We had a lot of wealth as we do today, the Heinzes and the Kennedys and the Pells and the Theodore Francis Greens and all that.

Theodore Francis Green, let me tell you a story about him. He was old, he was about ninety years old, and he was on the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate. As was the case, all those people on the committees get invited to the embassies, the Japanese, the Chinese, the Indians, the Latins, whomever, they're out there every night. You can go somewhere every single night if you want to. Here I walked into this embassy out there on Cathedral Avenue, I forget which one it was, but here was Theodore Francis Green who was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, he had those thick glasses on, he couldn't see very well. He was looking at a piece of paper and studying it very carefully. As I came in late, he looked like he was going out, but he had stopped to examine this. I thought to myself, well he's looking to see where he's

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supposed to go next. I said, "Hello, Mr. Chairman, how are you?" He looked up and said, "Hello, George." I said, "Are you trying to find out where you go next?" He said, "No, George, I'm trying to find out where I am now." It was so funny. That was typical of Theodore Francis Green, a wonderful, sweet guy.



Senator Theodore Francis Green, leaving the Russell Senate Office Building
Senate Historical Office

Ritchie: When you talk about some of these figures from the Senate, like Kerr, a lot of people have called them wheeler and dealers, and there's a sense that there's a pejorative on that, as opposed to the Paul Douglasses.

Smathers: Well, most of the people who say that are all the liberals. Bob Kerr was not a great liberal, but he was a great thinker in this sense: he had experience running a big business. He knew the tax consequences of certain legislation we were proposing. There was not another man, with the possible exception of [Wallace Bennett](#), who had been president of the United States Chamber of Commerce, who was on the Republican side, and Harry Byrd knew a little bit about it because he had a lot of apple orchards, but Harry Byrd was not the businessman that Bob Kerr was. So when these complicated tax problems would come up before us, there would be nobody who really knew. Paul Douglas didn't know what they were all about. I didn't know what they were all about, as far as experience is concerned. Russell Long didn't know what they were all about. [John Williams](#) of Delaware didn't know what they were all about, and I forget who else was on that committee. Nobody knew except Bob Kerr.

Bob would say, "Now, let me tell you what the real world is. Let me tell you why this piece of legislation opens up the door for a lot of this that shouldn't happen. You're giving benefits when you don't know what you're giving, because that's not the way it works." What happens is, all the staff people too--see, none of those people ever have had any business experience to amount to anything. They come out of college, they're bright as they can be, there's been all kinds of scholarship awards, they then go to work for the government, and they have really never known what it is to be out in the business world competing with your fellow man.

After I retired from the Senate I used to get invited around the Chamber of Commerce making speeches and they used to love to hear me say that "I retired when I was fifty-six years old, and I'm standing here before you today,"--let's say at the Tallahassee Kiwanis Club--"and I'm glad to see you gentlemen. Let me tell you a little bit about my experience. After I retired in '69 and went to open up an office, I went down and said, 'What's it going to cost me?' And the guy said, 'You've got to pay fourteen dollars a square foot.' I said, 'What does that mean?'" I had never in my life paid any money for an office space! I had been a United States attorney, I had been a Marine, I had been a Congressman, I had been a senator, all my life, thirty some years, never paid rent, never bought a yellow pad, never had paid for a paper clip, never had paid even for a stamp. Okay, that's what these guys over there are.

[Teddy Kennedy](#)'s never paid for one. He don't know what it is. He don't know what it is to have to run a business, and pay people, and argue with people about what it costs to do certain things, the government's always done that. And in his case, he even has it worse than that. He's like Heinz and those others, they have

the money coming in and they don't have to worry anything about that. They don't know what the business community is all about. And that's why Bob Kerr and [Stuart Symington](#) also--I should have put Stuart in there.

Stuart and Bob Kerr were the two guys whom people used to listen to when it came up to really a business type of a question, because both of them had been in business, and both of them had been eminently successful. Stuart had been the president of the Emerson Electric Company. He was first in New Hampshire and then he went to St. Louis. Then he decided to get into politics. But he knew a lot about business. He was the first guy, and Bob Kerr, who used to talk about the imbalance of trade in those days, and people paid absolutely no attention to either one of those guys about that. But this is what I've learned, after having been out of the Congress for twenty years, my God, it's amazing that we get along as well as we do! Because there are very few business people over there.

That's one reason why we never seem to get the budget balanced. These fellows don't really appreciate, to the extent that they should, the danger of the continued imbalance in the budget. Now, a businessman has learned it, because he goes broke. He has to take bankruptcy, or he has to give up his business. These fellows have never had that experience. Russell Long is just like me, never had one day of experience. He was chairman of the committee for twelve years, okay, never had that experience. So this is one of the weaknesses of our system.

Ritchie: I was curious about--when we were talking about Kerr and the other Democrats whom Johnson could count on--what was Johnson's relationship with the Republicans, like [Knowland](#) and [Dirksen](#)?

Smathers: He got along great with Dirksen. Johnson was a fellow who was not partisan. He appeared to be partisan, he traded on it when it was valuable. He could go to the Democratic convention and make the most partisan speech you ever saw. He could sit down the next night and go with his rich Texas friends, who were all the Bass brothers and others, all of whom were Republicans. He went with this fellow [George] Brown, of Brown, Root, which was at that time the biggest construction company in the United States. That's where he was when he had his heart attack, at Brown's estate in Virginia. Johnson could go either way on that. He was really not a partisan, except he had to be. He had to have an identification as the Democratic leader, therefore he had to lead the Democratic party. Now, Hubert, on the other hand, never had a moment's hesitation about being a great liberal. He was always that way, and very consistently so. Johnson voted liberal on most of these things, and basically underneath was liberal, but the people in Texas I don't think really

understood how liberal Johnson was. Because he would have had a hard time getting elected probably had they known that he was really that liberal. Hubert

was one hundred percent; Johnson, he knew what he wanted to do, what he wanted to achieve, and whatever it took to do that he would be that way.

Ritchie: What was your impression of William Knowland?

Smathers: William Knowland on a scale of one to ten I'd have to give him a five. He was a conscientious, honorable, pedestrian type guy. There was nothing about him that I felt was especially attractive. He'd been a newspaperman, except that he was the soul of Republicanism. He had no humor, no sense of humor. Not a particularly good speaker. I just didn't think too highly of him, like I did of Bob Taft, like I do of [Bob Dole](#), like I do of some other Republican leaders that I know. I didn't think that much of him.

Ritchie: I got the sense that Johnson could dance circles around Knowland.

Smathers: Oh, my God, Knowland was kind of on Johnson's team without Knowland realizing it. Johnson just led him around by the nose. And everybody used to laugh about it. Republicans used to talk about it. Bill was always up acting like he was fighting something. He never made a speech that I remember wasn't a fighting speech.

Now, Johnson couldn't do that with Dirksen. See, Dirksen was very much like Johnson. They were kind of two of a kind. They thoroughly understood each other, and I think greatly admired each other. They were good friends. Dirksen could get very outraged when it was advisable to do so, about what Johnson was doing, and Johnson could get outraged about what the Republicans were doing, when it was the kind of thing that Johnson felt like it was time to do. They would speak against each other, and then pretty soon in Johnson's office here would come Dirksen and we'd all sit around and have a drink. This happened night after night. No, Dirksen was a delight. I think Dirksen was genuinely almost as popular with the Democrats as he was with the Republicans.

He could make a beautiful speech. He liked to make speeches. He had a great sonorous voice, and he loved to gesticulate. He was an orator and an actor. He could do it all, and Johnson could not make a good speech. But Johnson made up for that in other ways, just plain hard damn work. Dirksen was a marvelous speaker and everybody recognized him as a speaker. I don't ever remember hearing Johnson make what I thought was a real good speech. Even when he came before the Congress as president I didn't think he made a particularly good speech. He'd try hard. He would try to pick up these other fellows' gestures, and he would try to make it dramatic, but he just wasn't in the same league with Dirksen, wasn't in the same league with Jack Kennedy, wasn't in the same league with Bob Kerr. Wasn't even close.

Ritchie: That whole period, 1952-1958, the Senate was always maybe one or two votes different between the two parties. There was never much of an edge. When the Republicans were in the majority they had one or two votes, and the Democrats had one or two votes when they came back.

Smathers: Right.

Ritchie: Does that require a lot of coalition building between the two parties?

Smathers: Sure. That's right. That's why the organization, the Bobby Baker deal, we were supposed to know who was going to vote on a bill before Johnson would ever let it come up. Johnson was a fellow who never wanted to be defeated. He never wanted to get a bill defeated if he thought by playing it the right time he could get it through. He would wait till he heard that two guys were going to be out of town. Right away that would go into Johnson's calculated mind and he would think: I'm going to bring this vote up at that time because those guys have already committed to make a speech at the University of Southern California, on a certain day at ten o'clock; I'm not going to agree to any sort of date to vote on it; I'm going to bring it up then. And he'd bring it up and pass it. That was constantly, always Johnson: how can I get this done? And all these other factors out there, that you would think would have nothing to do with the vote, man they'd go into Johnson's computer. He would think: this is the time to do it; or this is not the time to do it.

He'd think: I'm going to need so and so to do something, so now I'm going to appoint a committee. Let's say there had been a new break-out of relations over the Panama Canal. Now, he'd sit there and he'd think: who is that I can send to the Panama Canal who would be grateful for me appointing him? Who's the guy that I need to have on a certain vote. Maybe a Republican. Okay, he wasn't supposed to appoint Republicans, but he would go to Bill Knowland and say, "Bill, I've got Smathers and Gore going down and they would like to have these two guys that you've got. They would like Wallace Bennett and John Williams to go. So why don't we just have a little committee?" So John Williams would go, and Johnson would let him know in advance. Johnson had already told Williams about it before he had even gone to Knowland. Johnson would go walk right over and sit down beside him, "How would you like to go down to Panama?" "Yeah, I'd like to go." "Okay, I've got a committee coming up, I'll see what I can do. I'm going to get Bill--you may have to ask Bill to put you on it, but I don't think so. I'll let you know later on." You know, he's building, building, building all the time, where he could say, "Look, I need your vote, I need your help." He constantly did that.

Ritchie: There weren't that many issues that came up in that period that really were party line issues either, were there?

Smathers: No, we didn't have them. There were not a lot of party line votes. There were big things, Medicaid, there were a lot of Republicans and

Democrats. It was a very conscientious vote. Civil rights, all those things, model cities, District of Columbia [home rule] those were just sort of no party line votes.

Ritchie: In the fifties, the two most divisive issues in the Senate probably were [McCarthy](#) and later the civil rights act. Johnson was minority leader when McCarthy became so important. Do you have any sense about what Johnson thought about McCarthy?

Smathers: He despised him. Nobody really liked Joe McCarthy, interesting enough except [Bobby Kennedy](#). And Jack Kennedy liked McCarthy, he was a big Catholic. And Joe Kennedy, the father, thought McCarthy was great. I didn't like McCarthy because he was in the Marine Corps, as I was in the Marine Corps, and he began to tell about all of his exploits out in the Pacific, which I knew was a bunch of crap. He just told stories about what a great hero he was, and I don't think he went on a single mission. I don't think he accomplished anything. He was out there, but he was out there under what they call an AVS program, which is what I was under. We were both older, we didn't have to be there, he volunteered like I did, but he was not nearly in as much action as I was, and I knew that. And so it really offended me greatly to hear this guy talking about he was in the back end of an SPD with two 20 caliber machine guns and Zeros were zooming all around him and he was shooting all these planes down. That was a lot of hogwash. So I didn't like Joe. The Kennedys liked him. Johnson didn't like him at all, couldn't stand him. He was a bully, there wasn't any question about that, he was a bully.

Ritchie: Did you have the sense that McCarthy was a problem for the Republicans to take care of, or did he see him as a Democratic issue as well?

Smathers: No, I think that Johnson thought he was an issue for everybody, but mostly, obviously, for the Republicans. He hurt his own party in time, with these reckless statements that he kept coming in with, "I have this document," "this is happening," "I have just learned this," and all that very dramatic stuff, most of it baloney. No, I was glad to see him go.

Ritchie: The Senate censured McCarthy in December '54, and it's a very rare moment when the Senate censures a member. How did Johnson handle that? Did he try to line up the Democrats against McCarthy, or did he leave everybody to their own conscience?

Smathers: I think that he realized that the Democrats were going to most solidly vote for censure. The only question was whether or not there would be enough Republicans to get the censure vote passed. I don't think that Johnson had to do any lobbying whatever on that vote. McCarthy had succeeded in making everybody mad, and embarrassing the Republicans.

Ritchie: When Johnson became majority leader in 1955, the big issue that he faced, and faced for the rest of his tenure as majority leader, was civil rights. That seemed the most threatening one to his own majority, since his party was so divided on that issue. How did Johnson approach civil rights? **Smathers:** Well, first Johnson was a southerner. He had been just as anti-civil rights in some votes prior to becoming majority leader as had Dick Russell from Georgia, or [Sam Ervin](#) from North Carolina, or Russell Long from Louisiana, or [Lister Hill](#), who was a great liberal on Medicaid, and was the father of Medicare legislation in a way. Johnson had voted with the southerners on that. But I think Johnson really was sincerely opposed to extreme segregation, the Ku Klux Klan position and so on. Nobody liked the Ku Klux Klan that I know of. I've never met anybody that was a friend of mine who was a Ku Klux Klanner. I've had people tell me that so and so was, but I didn't know it, and I've never seen one.

But I think that Johnson down in his heart had more compassion for the black people than anybody. I think it mostly came from the economics of the situation, that they had not been given the opportunity to make money in anything other than intensive labor work. They had not been given the opportunity to open little stores, even. They had not been given the opportunity to go to school. I think that Johnson basically had a greater feeling in his heart for the predicament of the black man than did half of these people, or more than half of the people from the North who were constantly preaching about it.

I think Hubert Humphrey who preached about it all the time--as I used to say to him when we debated, "Humphrey, you don't know what the hell you're talking about." In the whole state of Minnesota at that time they didn't have five thousand blacks living out there. In the state of Florida, at that time we had a population of five or six million people, we had two, three million blacks. We knew blacks all the time. In Alabama they probably had a greater percentage. Georgia had a greater percentage. It used to irk me to hear Hubert, and I'd say this to him, "to hear you talk about how we've got to take them into home and so on, and we've got to desegregate, and you don't even know what that problem is, you don't even see a black."

I told him about going to Rochester, Minnesota, to the hospital out there, at Lyndon Johnson's suggestion I was out there for about a week. I never saw a black the whole time I was traveling, from Minneapolis all the way to Rochester. Never saw a one! "And here you are trying to tell me, when down in most of the rural area of Florida, northwest Florida, the blacks outnumber the whites. You see less white people than you do black people. You're telling me that these people have got to take these folks into their home? You don't know what it is, it's ridiculous." But you could debate that with Hubert and it was not personal.

Now you asked me how did we handle that? Johnson believed that it was coming, that blacks should be given rights. And Senator [Holland](#), my senior colleague was very liberal on this civil rights thing, as I was, having been born --

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not that New Jersey had a damn thing to do with it--I was born in New Jersey, I don't remember seeing anything there, but as I told you before, we grew up with a black family. When we got to Florida we had a black family with us for twenty-five years, we all lived in the same house. James, till we got to high school, I didn't realize that there was hardly any difference until we went to high school, and then it suddenly dawned on me that poor James couldn't go. He couldn't do certain things. He couldn't go to certain restaurants. But as kids, you know, we never even thought about, played ball, he was a wonderful athlete, as a lot of them are, and a hell of a nice guy. I never was fearful in my area. Where I came from North Carolina, my people, mother came from Virginia, we always had black people around all the time, grew up with them.

Johnson was for black people, I think that economic circumstances were what convinced Johnson to be for them, that they had not been given a fair shot at making a good living. And some of his people had also suffered that same stigma. He had not had a big education, he had not gone to the University of Texas, or Dallas, Houston, Southern Methodist or all that. He'd gone to a little half-assed school, and he knew that. There were blacks there. I think Johnson had a warm spot in his heart for them. He was genuinely a leader in the civil rights movement.

Ritchie: And that was considering that most of the chairmen of the committees were pretty conservative southern Democrats who were opposed to civil rights.

Smathers: That's right. To just summarize a little bit, I went to Congress in 1946, I got elected, went there in '47. I stayed there till January '69. During that period of time, the one man that I could point to that did more in passing important legislation, which moved the nation forward, civil rights, Medicare, Medicaid, did a lot with finances, the tough things, civil rights, Social Security, and Medicare--which the doctors fought very bitterly--those were the things which socially moved us forward and opened up opportunities for a lot people who had never had it. In the field of education, Johnson was far and away the leader. He did more than anybody during those twenty-two years that I was in the Congress, and I don't know of anybody who has had that impact since then.

He was much bigger, see, as a senator than he was as a president. He was much bigger. That's the way the cookie crumbles. Kennedy was not big as a senator at all. I don't know that anything he really ever passed that was of great significance. He had a couple of pretty good ideas that he talked about, but I don't know of anything that he was associated with as a sponsor. I at least was associated with

Social Security. I was at least associated with H.R. 11, which used to be called the Keough bill, it was originally the Keough-Smathers bill. [Eugene J.] Keough passed it in the House and I passed it in the Senate. In the time, I say I'm Mr. Roebuck of Sears, Roebuck. They dropped off Roebuck and it became Sears. Like the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings bill, [Ernest] [Hollings](#) now has been successfully dropped out of that.

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Johnson really accomplished a lot; Kennedy didn't do much. But Kennedy was on his way to becoming really a big and important president. Had he lived I have no doubt that Kennedy would have been a historic president, because he thought big. Kennedy in a way was above the wheeling, dealing. He was never a wheeler-dealer like Johnson was. He was just as different from Johnson as day and night. I, of course, knew both of them intimately, and they were different, absolutely different.

Ritchie: Here's Johnson in 1957, leading the fight for civil rights legislation, with all these powerful southern committee chairmen from his own party filibustering against it. How does he keep from having the Democratic party split into fragments?

Smathers: Just the genius of Johnson. There were guys that got awfully unhappy with him. [Strom Thurmond](#) left the Democratic party and went to the Republican party, my guess is as much because of Johnson as anything. There were those hard-nosed guys, but there weren't too many. Again, Johnson knew how to play upon Sam Ervin, who came from North Carolina but a very progressive fellow. He knew how to do it to me. He knew how to get along with Holland, we were from Florida. He knew that deep down in his heart Lister Hill was really a closet liberal if there ever was one, and he did everything he could to get himself defeated in Alabama. And Russell Long, he's not anti-black at all. Russell Long is one of the most open-minded guys you ever saw, and he would go as far as he could. Johnson got the legislation passed in such a way that he didn't put us guys on the spot by making it tough. He would let the vote come up in such a way that it would not be spotlighted too much, that we could pass a civil rights.

When Holland and I passed whatever that amendment was that eliminated the poll tax, that was Holland who originally did it. I joined up because I liked it, I thought it was a good bill. Johnson let us pass that just like that [snaps fingers]. It was no big deal. Dirksen same thing, no big deal, "Go ahead, sure, the poll tax ought to be eliminated." I think that two speeches were made on that on the floor, and that was all. Nobody ever spoke against it; I mean, nobody got up and spoke for the poll tax, no southerner. Johnson and his little team, I helped him there a lot, we just eliminated all the opposition by talking to them in advance, saying: "This is what we're thinking about doing. This is going to happen." We would say,

"Let's do this so we can avoid something else for the time being." You knew you had a holding action in there.

Ritchie: If you had been whip in that period, if you had taken the job after Clements, would that have put you in a difficult position in your state, to have to support civil rights legislation?

Smathers: No, not in Florida. There was a time when I ran in '50 that I couldn't afford to have my picture even made with a black guy. [Claude Pepper](#) accused me of tricking him into that. I didn't trick him into that. He and I in that race, we hardly ever discussed civil rights. Later he accused me. There

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were a couple of redneck people who were supporting me, the DuPont group of Ed Ball, who ran a separate campaign against Pepper from that which I ran, and that was just based solely on civil rights. I didn't really have anything to do with that, but I got credit for it, needless to say. But civil rights, I never had any problem with that. People expected me to be liberal, I was from Miami. I was the first fellow to ever get elected to a statewide office from south Florida. Nobody from south Florida had ever been elected to a statewide office. The people in north Florida were suspicious of everybody from south Florida.

Ritchie: One other group in the coalition that I'm interested in is the role of organized labor. Were they strongly for Johnson, or did he have many ties with them?

Smathers: Yes, they were strongly for Johnson, but Johnson had enough sense to keep them quiet around him. Johnson kept telling them, "Back down, back down, we'll get this stuff passed for you." See, what would happen, the minute that organized labor would come out and say in a big speech that they were for something, if Walter Reuther got up and said, "I want this to be passed," that would kill it. That would kill it.

Johnson knew Reuther and them, and he would call them in there and say, "Look fellows, you want this bill passed? Let me tell you what I want you to do. I don't want you to say one damn thing for it, okay? You go back to Detroit and shut up. Now, you might pass the word among your union members in the South that if any of them can support it, you'd like to see them do so, but don't make any public speech about it. I don't want you and John L. Lewis and these people jumping up and down about these kinds of things. You'll kill it. Stay out of it, I'll pass it for you, but I've got to do it my way, which is we're not going to emphasize that there's a big difference here. We're going to talk about the pluses of it, what's fair. We've got to make certain moves forward. These are little minute steps," he would say. "We takes these few minute steps so that we don't get overwhelmed. But let's do it this way." Boy, he'd call those guys, and he'd play this fine tune so

that stuff passed just like that [snaps fingers], that you would have never thought could pass. All to his credit.

Ritchie: What do you attribute to Johnson that he figured out how to pull all the strings and use all the mechanisms of the legislative branch?

Smathers: He was just smart. Some people could say he was underhanded, he indulged in subterfuge and all that. Yeah, he did all that, but his motives were to accomplish certain things. And his motives were pure and good. He was a real smart, clever, clever, clever guy. I don't want to use the adjective that some people would use, like "tricky." They would say that he was a type of charlatan. They would say that was devious. He was to an extent, but I say that he only did that because he was smart enough to know that he had to do it that way. You couldn't pass these things standing up beating your chest and saying, "the time has come to give these people the right to this stuff," he wouldn't have gotten to first base. No way to get it passed that way. He

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had to do it the way he did. That's all to his credit. He was smart enough to know that there's no chance of getting through if you were going to try to meet it head on. No way.

Ritchie: Do you think any majority leader could duplicate Johnson's skill?

Smathers: I haven't seen anybody. I haven't seen anybody that even came close.

Ritchie: Do you think the institution, the Senate as a whole, would tolerate another Lyndon Johnson?

Smathers: Oh, I think they could. I think they probably need one. You know, I haven't been over there in twenty years. I think the problem today is that they don't have a Lyndon Johnson. They don't have enough strength over there. It's too dissected, too subdivided. Every guy over there has got a committee and a staff and so on, and he's running off doing his own thing. It used to be that you could get two or three guys lined up and you know you could pass something. That's what made the government infinitely more efficient. About five fellows could run the government: the president of the United States, the Speaker of the House, the majority leader when Johnson was there, and two or three important senators, and you had it. You could get anything done. And we got along fine.

Now, everybody has to make a speech about everything, and we haven't been able to balance the budget since Lyndon Johnson was there. That's pretty hard to think about. Haven't been able to balance the budget. Why? Because everybody has got enough influence and they can hold things up and there's no two or three overwhelming strong guys who can put people in line and say, "Look, we've got to

balance this budget and we're going to have to cut a lot your programs, and you're going to have to hunker up to it and accept it. But we'll give you something else here, we'll give you something else here. But we've got to cut this budget, and we're going to have to save some money." That could be done under Johnson.

Ritchie: When Johnson was majority leader, he was once quoted as saying that the only power he had was the power his office had was the power to persuade.

Smathers: That's right, but "persuade" needs definition with Johnson. What did he mean by persuade? That meant doing favors. That meant making campaign contributions. That meant sending guys on trips. That meant giving a fellow recognition. I know a guy that he brought down to Texas and got him an honorary degree. He said to me one time, "Can you arrange for me to get a couple of your colleagues an honorary degree at Rollins?" I said, "Why Rollins?" He said, "Because there's a senator here who's daughter is going to Rollins." I

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said, "I don't think I can." But that was the way Johnson did things. Some people became so grateful to him that they couldn't say no to him.

There was never any fear. I don't know that Lyndon Johnson ever frightened anybody particularly, by saying "I'll cut you off," or something. He wasn't that crude. He was a pretty crude guy about some things, but not about legislation. He was a consummate artist. He was the painter. He was the Andrew Wyeth of the Senate. He was the Rubens, whatever the great painters are, Goya, all those. He was it. He was an absolute artist at getting these done. How he did it, a color here, a little red here, a little purple there, beautiful. If you were pretty close to him and saw him do this, you just kind of amazed yourself.

Senator Holland was the most honorable man who I ever knew in my life except my own father, but Lyndon Johnson sometimes would take Holland--I'd know that Holland didn't want to vote for a certain thing, and he would tell me a week ago that he was not going to vote for it. I'd be waiting and Johnson would say, "Don't worry, I'll get Spessard." And he'd have Spessard in and the first thing you'd know, pretty soon, Spessard would say to me, "How are you going to vote?" I'd say, "Well, senator, I think I'm going to have to--you know, I've got a little more liberal record than you do, so I'm going to vote for it." He'd say, "Well, I'm thinking about it." You'd see Johnson talking to him a little later, and here he was voting for it! No, he was great, he was great.

Ritchie: Well, senator, you've painted quite an interesting picture yourself, a word picture of all of this.

Smathers: Yeah, well, Johnson was really something. So, all right, doctor, thank you.

[End of interview #3]

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George A. Smathers

United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969

Interview #4: Kennedy and Johnson (Tuesday, September 5, 1989) Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie



Senator Smathers with John F. Kennedy and Senator Stuart Symington, 1960
Senate Historical Office

Ritchie: We talked last week about the 1950s, and throughout most of that period the Democrats and Republicans in the Senate were pretty evenly divided, until the 1958 election when the Democrats won a big sweep. I wanted to know whether or not it was easier to work with a small majority or a large majority? Did things change much after the 1958 election?

Smathers: I don't think they changed a great deal. [Johnson](#) still ran it all very much as he had been doing. I suspect that in some ways Johnson wasn't as interested in a large majority as other people might be, because I think he was the kind of man who could persuade a lot of Republicans to do that which he wanted them to do. He was almost as persuasive with the Republicans as he was with the Democrats, that is, the senators. I know that there were a number of Republican senators who thought more highly of Johnson than they did even their own leadership. I don't want to particularly name any names, in fact I can't remember off the top of my head, but I do know that was a fact. So, just the mere fact that we the Democrats picked up more votes I don't think had any great material effect on Johnson, or the legislative program.

Ritchie: I wondered if party discipline was harder to maintain when you had a large majority.

Smathers: Well, it would seem so, and actually I'm sure that it is, and in most cases yes, but I can't over-emphasize the uniqueness of Lyndon Johnson as a leader. Johnson spent almost as much time, and in my view as much time talking with Republicans as he did with Democrats. He got what he got done not on the basis of Republican versus Democratic platforms. He could sell them on the idea that this needed to be done for everybody's benefit. He was not a particularly partisan fellow. I know that [Barry Goldwater](#) thought a great deal of Lyndon Johnson, and Johnson could get his vote on lots of things, and nobody else would have ever thought about trying to get Goldwater, no other Democrat would have thought about getting Barry Goldwater to vote with them. But Johnson could. He was a unique leader, and he was a leader of the whole Senate, and the whole Senate knew it. So, back to the point that you raised, the fact that we picked up a lot of Democrats I don't think made a great deal of difference.

Ritchie: You mentioned previously how close Johnson was to [Eisenhower](#), and how much Eisenhower relied on Johnson. When that new Congress came back in 1959 one of the first things they did was to turn down

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Lewis Strauss to be Secretary of Commerce. I wondered if you could tell me the background of that. Was that something of a declaration of war with the Eisenhower administration?

Smathers: I don't think so. I have a feeling that probably Eisenhower wasn't greatly in favor of this fellow anyway, and that they had to send a name over, and they sent a name over, and for some reason one of the Democratic senators didn't like the fellow, and didn't think he would be good, and thought they might make an issue out of it, so it was easily done. On those types of nominations, during the eighteen years that I was there I don't remember a real bitter fight with respect to a presidential nomination. Now, since then, in recent years, with this Republican administration and the people that [Ronald Reagan](#) has sent over there have been continuous fights about that. Because I think Reagan was much more partisan as a president than was Eisenhower, certainly much more so than Eisenhower. I guess if you went on to follow it, Reagan was probably as partisan a president as we have had since possibly the days of [Harry Truman](#), who was a great Democrat, and talked about it, and went down the Democratic line solidly all the time.

But Eisenhower was above politics. When he sent somebody over there, why you either liked him or you didn't like him, and it didn't make a great deal of difference to Eisenhower. I don't ever remember hearing about Eisenhower putting pressure on anybody really to vote for anything, except some of the major appropriations bills, particularly the military appropriation bill. As I look back, I don't think those things were really that important.

Ritchie: In that period, 1959 and 1960, there were a lot of members of the U.S. Senate who were positioning themselves to run for president. It seemed like the Senate was the main battleground.

Smathers: That's right. It was the undergraduate school for potential presidents. Of course, [Hubert](#) got into it, Hubert was well known. [Kennedy](#) got into it, he was well known. There was Johnson, who was well known. Then you had the second degree of [McGovern](#)'s and [McCarthy](#)'s and fellows like that who really in those days nobody ever gave very serious consideration to as a presidential candidate. They were nice enough fellows and had great personalities and that sort of thing, but they were not looked upon as any heavyweights insofar as the Senate activities were concerned.

Ritchie: How did you see the 1960 campaign shaping up, from the point of view of a senator?

Smathers: Well, Kennedy started out early on and his father had made up his own mind that he was going to spend a lot of money, if that was what it would take, to see that Jack had a real run at the presidency. He was the fellow who first utilized the polling system. In those days nobody really ran polls. I don't ever recollect seeing any large number of polls, even in magazines, *Newsweek*, or *Time*, or the *Saturday Evening Post*, or whatever, it was very rare

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that you would see a poll by anybody. Pollsters had not come into their own. Joe Kennedy already had the pollsters, though. He started that with the Merchandise Mart out in Chicago, by sending out through his advertising agency, they developed some sort of a polling system as to what it was that people liked. What was it they would buy. He started out as a pollster actually in the merchandise business, and much before anybody ever thought about it in politics. But then he's the fellow that began to understand that running these sort of inventories as to what people were thinking, in addition to what they would buy from the Merchandise Mart, which sold most everything as you know. He began to use it to find out what were the political issues they were interested in. He had the big advantage of running polls for his son Jack Kennedy long before people in general knew that polls were ever being taken.

I recollect that I kept telling Jack that "you don't have a chance to beat [Henry Cabot Lodge](#)," [in 1952]. He would say, "Yes, I'm going to beat Henry Cabot Lodge; and here's what percent I'm going to beat him." I said, "You've got to be crazy, man, you can't do it." And lo and behold, he did it. And then he got ready-- I don't think they ran a poll on the vice presidential contest in 1956. I don't think they had a poll on that at all. But I do know that in 1960, when the race began to get started, that Jack Kennedy had the insight as to what were the issues in these various states in which he ran in the primaries. And he would beat Hubert

Humphrey where he had actually no business beating Hubert Humphrey. But he knew just exactly what were the issues. In Wisconsin, he knew exactly what the issues were. When he went to Maryland to beat [Danny Brewster](#), who was a very popular senator, but the Kennedy group had run a poll and they knew what the issues were and they had run Jack Kennedy on a very secret basis against Danny Brewster, and figured that he could win.

They ran a poll in West Virginia, and this was when Kennedy let me get myself suckered into making a lot of bets and a lot of big statements that there's no way that Jack Kennedy, a Catholic, would beat Hubert Humphrey in a highly unionized state like West Virginia, a highly anti-Catholic state like West Virginia, no way that Kennedy would win. Yet Kennedy won. He had exactly the right issues, he knew how far to go on everything, and he won.

Now, we had a primary in Florida, this is a rather interesting story, it was going to happen the first Tuesday in May. Kennedy decided that he wanted to run in Florida. At the same time, Johnson also decided that he would now bestir himself and he felt that he had a lot of friends in Florida, which he did, and that he would run in that Democratic primary down there against Kennedy. He felt as though he could win, but he did not have the benefit, necessarily, of a poll. But Kennedy was very confident. I didn't know what he had. This poll business only became clear later, after this Florida primary was the first time I really began to understand how Kennedy was doing all these things by virtue of the polls. I did not know about those polls prior to the Florida primary.

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Anyway, so here I was caught between Johnson on the one side, who was my leader, I was his whip, and here was my dear friend, personal friend, Kennedy, and they're going to go into my state and ruin it. What am I going to do? All of my friends are going to say: "Who do we vote for?" Obviously the Catholic votes would go for Jack, and the West Florida people would vote for Johnson, and they'd divide the state very much. So I said, "I don't want you guys to run." I went to Johnson and I said, "Now, Lyndon, I don't want you to run." He said, "I think I can beat him, if you'll help me." I said, "Here I am, I'm a close friend of both of you. I've worked for you, on your team, and yet Jack Kennedy is personally my best friend here in the Senate. So the only thing that I can finally do is I'm going to run myself and keep you guys out. Because I don't think either one of you think you can beat me in my own state." I think that was true. Kennedy beat them in Indiana, he beat them in Maryland, he beat them in Wisconsin, and so on. But to make a long story short, I decided that I was going to run, and I announced that I was going to run for president in Florida, I would be the favorite son from Florida, and that would stop Johnson and Kennedy from dividing up the state.

Johnson was pleased with that, he didn't really want to run anyway, but Kennedy kept after me: "You've got to back out, you've got to back out." So let's say the day

is now February, the election was going to be the first Tuesday in May. If you're going to file, the filing date expires on let's say February the 16th, or whatever the date was, I've forgotten. I had filed, Kennedy had also filed, and so here we were getting ready to run against each other. I didn't know anything about the polls. I said, "Now, Jack, I think I can beat you." He said, "I don't want to run against you." I said, "Well, I don't want you to." To make a long story short, he kept after me to withdraw. "I want you to withdraw. I want you to withdraw."

The day came on the 16th you had until twelve o'clock to withdraw. I got a call from Evelyn Lincoln, Kennedy's secretary, who said, "Senator Kennedy would like to see you." So I went over to his office, and he was sitting there. He said, "Old pal"--he was always starting off that way--"old pal, you've got to do me this favor. You're my best friend, you were in my wedding, and you've got to withdraw. I can win, easy. I'm going to get the nomination. But I don't want to run against you. It's now a quarter of eleven, and you've got until twelve o'clock. I've got a fellow in Tallahassee, in the capital, in the secretary of state's office, waiting to withdraw your name." He said, "You've got to do this for me." I said, "Well, I can't do it. I'm not going to do it." Well, it went back and forth, and finally he got mad and said, "Damn it to hell, what kind of friend are you?" And so and so. I said, "Look, I'm not going to stand here and take all this abuse, so I'm going to go out. I'm leaving. I'm just sorry. If you're going to run, we're going to have a hell of a race, that's all I can say. But I don't want you down there dividing our state. What I will do is after the first ballot, I will instruct my delegates they can go for whomever they want to vote for, either you or Lyndon. You've got Grant Stockdale, who will be on my slate"--you had to put in a slate already--"and he loves you as you know, and he'll be making big speeches for you. Scotty Peek and some of these kids will be

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probably for Lyndon, but you're going to have fine representation and I think possibly you would get the majority of our delegates, after the first ballot. But I'm going to run." "Oh, no, that won't do it."

Anyway, so I left. I got a call in about fifteen minutes, said, "Would you come back over, Jack wants to see you again." So I came back over, and there was about fifteen minutes before you could call and withdraw your name. He said, "Old pal, you've just got to do this." Then he'd rant and raved and raised hell and cussed me out. He said, "Well, son of a bitch, you are the worst guy." I said, "Well, I can't do it." It got to be twelve o'clock. "Okay, I'm in it. We'll have a good race." And I walked out. I said, "I'll see you on the battlefield." I got about as far as Evelyn's office, and Kennedy hollered, "George, come back here, I want to show you something." I came back in, and he said, "You really are a no damn good friend. You really ought to have gotten out of this thing, I could win easy." But he said, "I don't know that I can run against you." I said, "Well, did you file?" He said, "I didn't file." I said, "Okay, well then that makes it easier." He said, "I'm going to

show you something, come around here." And he pulled out his drawer, and here it was, Joe had run a poll of him against me in Florida. And I would have beaten him. He showed me that, and I said, "Now look at that, there's my buddy, bullshitting me, trying to get me out of a deal." He'd run this poll. "I didn't think you could win against me down there, but I didn't know. But look at that." "No," he said, "you were pretty good, but I want to tell you something, you're not as good a friend as I thought you were." I said, "Well, you're probably going to get it anyway," which as a matter of fact he did. When we released the delegates, on the second ballot he got them all. But that was very interesting that he had run that poll even against me, his good friend, to see whether he could win. And I'm sure that if the poll had indicated he would have beaten me, he would have gone ahead and run. So that was an interesting insight into the Kennedy mind.

Ritchie: You were very close to Kennedy all during the years he was in the Senate. What was your impression of him as a senator?

Smathers: He was not an outstanding senator. You have to remember this much that, when you say that, he really was not well much of the time. He never let you talk about that fact, when I say that, he did not want people to talk about that. He did not want to have that written up. He did not want to let people know that he was absent from the Senate, which he was a lot. But he had this very serious back operation, a very serious painful back. It bothered him even while he was president. Several times when I went over to visit him in the White House in the bedroom there he could hardly get out of bed. So he had these problems. While he did from time to time make some brilliant speech about something or other, usually about some foreign relations matter, but he was not what you would call a really effective senator. He was not very senior, neither one of us were very senior at that point in time on the committees. On a scale of one to ten I'd have to give him about a six or a seven at most, as a senator.

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I thought he became a much better speaker. I've never seen anybody--I've said this many, many times to many people--I have never seen anybody in my life develop like Jack Kennedy did as a personality, and as a speaker, and as an attractive person, over the last seven, eight years of his life. I mean, it was just a miracle transformation. He studied all the time, he was that kind of fellow. He took a rapid reading course, and he wanted me to take it. I should have taken it with him. He said, "You don't have time to read all this stuff, but we ought to be reading all this business. You've got to learn how to read rapidly." You skip certain lines and you do certain things, but you get the sense of it. He was in that course for about six weeks, and as I say he wanted me to do it. I should have done it, I didn't do it. But he was still basically thinking about being a writer. He was good at it. He loved to surround himself with people who were good writers. But as a senator he was not in the top echelon at all, in my judgment, as an effective senator.

Ritchie: How early on did you have a sense that he was running for president?

Smathers: Let's see. In 1956 I went to the convention in Chicago. That was the first convention I'd ever gone to. Senator Holland and I were the heads of the Florida delegation. At that time, Adlai Stevenson had pretty well locked up the nomination for the presidency. [Kefauver](#) had tried to beat him, take it away from him in several primaries, but Adlai had won all of the primaries and beat Kefauver. I think maybe Kefauver had won one, I don't remember what state it was, but he won one or two. We get to the convention and it's pretty clear that Stevenson is going to get the nomination. Then the question was: who was Adlai going to put the finger on to be his vice president. Well, it was fairly well agreed that Kefauver was going to withdraw and not run against Adlai Stevenson for the presidency, but he suddenly decided he wanted to be vice president. Now that happened let's say on the night before the nominations were to start. I didn't think that was too exciting or anything. I thought maybe Kefauver probably would get the nomination for vice president, and there was nobody else particularly pushing for it, maybe a governor or two, but I don't think that there was anybody too serious. I thought that would be an easy way to resolve the fight which had been going on between Kefauver and Adlai Stevenson, which had been dividing the Democrats in all these states where they had run against each other. So if they both appeared on the same ticket that would be an amicable solution to this problem, and put the Democrats all on the same side.

I'm in the hotel there in Chicago, which is right next to the stockyards where the convention was being held. Kennedy was staying there. A lot of other people. I was not particularly aware that Kennedy was there, I just knew that he said he was going to the convention with his group, and I knew I was going, since I was the chairman of our Florida delegation. Along about one o'clock in the morning, my phone rings. The nomination is the next morning for vice president. The phone rings and it's Jack Kennedy. "Old pal, you've got to do me a favor." This was always his opening line. "I said, "My God, man, it's

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one o'clock in the morning. What's up?" He said, "You've got to nominate me for vice president." I said, "For vice president! You're running for vice president?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "My God, when did you decide that? You know Kefauver has got it locked up." He said, "No he hasn't. Adlai Stevenson is not going to anoint him, or say that he wants him. Adlai Stevenson made an announcement at nine o'clock tonight that he was throwing the convention open for anybody to be vice president whom the convention nominated and elected." He said, "So I'm running." I said, "You've got to be kidding." He said, "No, I'm running."

He said, "I've got thirty minutes, ten minutes each for three speakers. I want you to go down there and nominate me, be one of them." I said, "My God, man, you don't want to get me. I'm a redneck southerner. I'm down in the South, I'd

probably hurt you." He said, "I know, that's all right, you're my friend, you'll do it. I've got to have it." I said, "Why don't you get [John McCormack](#) from Massachusetts, the majority leader of the House, get him to do it?" He said, "Well, I've tried to get him, but he doesn't answer the phone." I said, "Well get [Abe Ribicoff](#)." He said, "Abe Ribicoff doesn't answer either. The only fellow who's answered has been you." He said, "You've got to do it." I said, "Well, let me just say this, I don't know what the hell I'll say, but I'll go down there and say something." He said, "You may have to take all the thirty minutes." I said, "Do you have anybody who can get me out of this?" He said, "No, it's too late." Here it is two o'clock now in the morning and the thing starts at ten in the morning.

So I went down there about nine thirty and I'm trying to think about what I'm going to say about Jack Kennedy, why he ought to be vice president. When the time comes, [Sam Rayburn](#) opens the convention and I go out there and here are all these twelve thousand people or so sitting out there. I had never really seen that big a crowd in one place before in my life. Later on I saw some big crowds--the one Billy Graham had me introduce him to one time was the biggest crowd I ever saw--but this the biggest crowd I'd ever seen inside of a building. I never had been in a situation where the rostrum would go up and down, just by touching a button. Nobody explained any of this to me before I went out there. And they had teleprompters over here which the speaker could see but the crowd couldn't see. Every now and then something would come up they'd have a note, they'd almost write the speaker a note: your time has expired, go sit down, and this sort of thing. I never had seen anything like that. So I went out to make my speech and oh, my God, I didn't know but the rostrum kept going up and down and I thought, "I'm getting sick."

All of a sudden I had this terrible sharp pain in my back. I thought, "I'm having a heart attack!" I was out here trying to tell about Jack Kennedy and PT Boat 109 and what a great courageous young American he was, and how he had risked his life blood for the benefit of this great country we all were enjoying, and all this business, and I couldn't really think of anything he had done except he was very strongly for education. He had helped sponsor some of Fulbright's bills and one thing or another. All of a sudden I had this very

sharp pain in my back, and I thought "I'm having a heart attack right here in front of fifteen thousand people." And I was sick, the rostrum was going up and down like this. What in the hell is going on here? I'm going to die right here on live television. About that time, I heard a voice saying, "McCormack is here! McCormack is here!" And I looked around, and here was Sam Rayburn who had taken the gavel, the great big gavel, and reversed it and had pointed it, sticking me in the back. That's where my heart attack was coming from, the sharp pain was Rayburn trying to get me to shut up and get off so that McCormack could come on. McCormack came on, and then Ribicoff came on, and so he was

nominated. And he got quite a large number of votes on the first ballot, but it was pretty evident that we couldn't have gotten any more. I think that's when Jack decided, "I could really be president with a little more planning." That's when Joe and Jack decided that they ought to do that.

We went out that day, when we lost and Kefauver got the nomination, we all went over to the steakhouse which was right behind the convention center, where Jackie was staying. The Kennedys had a whole suite over there. And Jackie cried, she was very disappointed, and Eunice was crying some. I don't remember seeing [Teddy](#) or anybody like that, he was so young at that point. He was not in the Senate or the House or anything like that, just a nice young guy going, I guess, to the University of Virginia at that point. But anyway, Jackie said, "Why don't you and Jack take a trip to the Mediterranean? He wants to go." And I agreed to go with him. I actually did not go, but in certain memos I see where it's recorded that he and I went to the Mediterranean and went out on a boat in the Mediterranean and stayed for ten or twelve days, and a lot of things were supposed to have happened. Actually, I didn't go on that trip. What really happened was that I couldn't go, and I got a good friend of mine whom Jack really loved, named Bill Thompson, and Bill Thompson went in my place, and Teddy joined them, and they sailed up and down the Mediterranean for a week and a half or so.

Ritchie: Was that the occasion when you had to contact Kennedy to come back?

Smathers: Well, that was the occasion, yes, when we had to bring him back. Jackie got sick.

Ritchie: She had a miscarriage.

Smathers: It turned out to be a miscarriage. She was very emotional, you know, and you couldn't tell just why. When you stop to think about it, she was very pregnant. But anyway, I got him to come back. I told him "you ought to come back," which he did. But nobody had actually told the guy a lot about it. So he came back, and Thompson came back with him. They had really a great time, but I was not on the trip. Although I notice that some of the records have me as being on the trip, I didn't go. So, let's see, where were we now?

Ritchie: I wondered about someone like Kennedy running for president, does that affect a senator's relations with the rest of the Senate, when the senators look upon you as a presidential candidate?

Smathers: Oh, I think so. You know, it's a funny thing about it. You remember how Truman said when he first got to be senator, he said to himself, "How is it that an inexperienced guy like me whose been a haberdasher and a county judge,

can suddenly find himself a United States senator?" He said, "You know, that's what I thought, and I was so humbled. But after I had been there about six months, and listened to these guys, I kept looking around and wondering, how in the hell did these other guys get here?"

I think what happens is that when a fellow begins to talk about being a presidential candidate, that you look at him a little differently. The first thing you know is he's got a lot of nerve, he's got a lot of guts, because it's not easy to stick your neck out, and it takes some guts to do that. George McGovern, I recollect very distinctly one day we were down in the Senate bath, and we had gone into the steam room together, and we were sitting there sweating, which was what I did three times a week, and I think McGovern did that about three or four times a week. A lot of fellows went there regularly. [Jennings Randolph](#) never missed a day, [Jack Javits](#) never missed a day, [Strom Thurmond](#) never missed a day, [John Stennis](#) never missed a day. You'd go down there and take a little exercise, and you'd always tell your constituents that you were in some very important committee meeting. I went there fairly regularly, because they had marvelous massagers. I never had a massage till I went to the Senate, but they had some great guys there, who had come over from Sweden to become the massagers at the Senate bath.

Anyway, I was in the Senate sweat room one day, sweating before I was going to take a swim and then get a rub-down, and George McGovern came in and sat down beside me, and started sweating, and we started talking. He said, "You know, I'm not in good shape out in my state." He said, "You know what I'm going to have to do to get reelected to the Senate?" I said, "No, George, what are you going to have to do?" See, his state. . . one thing that the senators do is they look at each other's state and figure: do they have a hard state or an easy state? We all looked at South Dakota and figured hell, they don't have as many people in the whole state, Jack Kennedy would say, as they've got in greater Boston. I look at South Dakota and think, gee, a bunch of Indians out there, a few nice people, farmers, but it's not a big state, doesn't have a lot of people. I've got more people in Dade County, which is the Miami-Coral Gables district. I've got more people in my congressional district than they've got in their whole state. You think pretty much in those terms.

Anyway, here was George, a sweet, nice guy, everybody liked George, and he said he had real trouble. I said, "Well, George, what are you going to do about it?" He said, "You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to run for president." "What?" "I'm going to run for president." He said, "If I start running for president, my people in my state will think I'm so important that they should

let me go ahead and try to be president. They've never had a president from South Dakota. That may save me, but otherwise I'm in deep trouble." And you

know what? That's exactly what that guy did. He said he was going to run for president, and that got him renominated in the Democratic party and nobody offered to run against him who amounted to anything in the Republicans, so he won reelection easy, and actually he got on his way to thinking seriously about becoming president. And eventually, as we know, got a nomination. But he did that originally to get himself reelected to the Senate.

So you ask me what do people think about fellows who are going to run for president? Well, there are all kinds of reasons. It increases your respect for them in the sense that they've got plenty of nerve, plenty of guts to want to do it, because it's obviously a very difficult assignment to give yourself. It requires money, it requires time, it requires giving up your family life, it requires all kinds of sacrifices and you're really got to want to do it, have a burning desire to do it to be successful at it. So when a guy says he wants to run, on the one hand you kind of look at him and laugh, and think he ain't got a chance, what the hell's the guy thinking about. But on the other hand, I've got to admire his guts.

That's the way I was with Jack. He wanted to run, but I kept thinking Joe put him up to it. Then after the vice president thing two years went by, he didn't mention anything about being president. Then '60 comes up and he begins to run. In the interim I don't ever remember him ever saying anything to me, or any of his good friends which were my good friends, about the fact that he's going to run for president. But apparently he had been thinking some about it. I know Joe had, definitely. Joe was determined that one of his kids was going to be president.

Ritchie: What were Kennedy's relations with Lyndon Johnson during the '50s?

Smathers: They abided each other, but they didn't like each other really. Jack Kennedy didn't really like Lyndon. He thought he was a little bit uncouth and somewhat of an oaf. I know Jack Kennedy admired Lyndon's drive. I know he admired Lyndon's cunning. I know he admired Lyndon's dedication. But as a personality, he wasn't a Kennedy-type at all. And if it had not been for the strange set of circumstances where Kennedy had to take Johnson as vice president, why he would have never done it. At the convention he had to take Johnson, or his polling had showed him that he couldn't win without Johnson. And that's a fact, he would not have won because he would not have carried Texas. He only won, you know, by a very, very small majority over Nixon. If Illinois had changed, 12,000 votes in Illinois, Kennedy would have lost it, Nixon would have been elected president in '60.

But you asked the question, how did he like Lyndon? He didn't really like Lyndon, and Lyndon really didn't like Jack. They had come from totally different backgrounds. Kennedy an affluent, eastern top-college, Harvard, prep

schools, everything, Johnson down there in the backwoods of Texas, went to some little school nobody ever heard of, had to work his way up, had a CCC job, that sort of thing. He came from an entirely different background. That's why I say, Johnson when he passed all this social legislation, to help people, to help the blacks, to help education, give people an opportunity to borrow money to go to school, it came from Johnson's heart. He had been there. He knew what it was. Kennedy was for it, but it was strictly an intellectual matter of being fair with him, it wasn't a burning need that it had to be done because there was so much frustration with these poor people. No, they didn't like each other too well.

As a matter of fact, after they got elected in '60, I was over at the White House a couple of times and Kennedy would say to me: "I cannot stand Johnson's damn long face. He just comes in, sits at the cabinet meetings with his face all screwed up, never says anything. He looks so sad." He said, "I don't know what to do about him. I've tried to do everything we could to make him happy--I've put him up front whenever I can." But he said, "You've seen him, George, you know him, he doesn't even open his mouth." Here was a guy who was dominating everything three or four years ago. I said, "Well, Jack, you know what you ought to do with him, you ought to send him on a trip." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Send him off on an around-the-world trip." I didn't mention India, it ended up with him going to India, but I said, "You ought to send him on a trip so that he can get all of the fanfare and all of the attention and all of the smoke-blowing will be directed at him, build up his ego again, let him have a great time." He said, "You know, that's a damn good idea, I'm going to do that." And sure enough, Jack Kennedy, by virtue of my having suggested it to him, he sent Johnson on that trip to India. And Johnson had a wonderful time, got all that smoke blown at him, and ended up bringing some kind of bull back. He loved it. It was a very successful trip all the way around.

It was the first time Johnson had done anything about foreign affairs. He was really not much into foreign affairs at all. He was strictly a domestic guy: school books, farms, labor unions, taxes, this sort of thing. Hardly ever talked about foreign affairs till he went on that trip.

Another thing he did was, I never quite will ever forgive Johnson for it, he talked Kennedy into making the vice president the head of the satellite program, the head of exploring space. And the first thing that Johnson did, which I will never forgive him, was he took half of what we had at Cape Kennedy--we called it Cape Canaveral at that time--and moved it over to Texas. That's the first damn thing Johnson did. He and I had a big argument about it, big fight. Senator [Holland](#) was outraged, and I was too, and Johnson tried to act like he didn't know, that the generals and all these other people wanted it over there. It never has made sense to have a big operation at Cape Canaveral and another great big operation in Texas. But that's what we got, and we got that because Kennedy allowed Johnson to become the theoretical head of the space program. Johnson moved half of that thing out of Cape Canaveral over there! So the only thing we have in Cape Canaveral now, we shoot it off, it lands in California of

course, but all the intricate reporting, and all the information is siphoned into Texas. Anyway, that's how that came about.

Ritchie: In the period when Kennedy was overtly running for president, Johnson was apparently just beginning to think about it. What was it that spurred Johnson into the race?

Smathers: Well, Johnson kept thinking to himself--I know that he thought to himself--how and the hell is it that this guy Kennedy, who cannot carry my glove when it comes to being a senator, and getting legislation through the Congress, and really getting things done, why should this guy be president of the United States when here is Lyndon Johnson who has run the government in point of fact for the last four to six years? Why shouldn't he be it? I think he just kept thinking along those lines to the point where he began to have some of his buddies promote him for the presidency, and he got to thinking more and more about it. Then of course in the meantime he'd had a heart attack, which set him back, but it did not diminish his ambition. It did not curtail that ambition very much. But it slowed him down, and I know that the reason that he finally gave up the idea of being president and accepted to be on the ticket as vice president is because Lady Bird Johnson actually made him do that.

I recollect that at the convention, we were all in the same building, Johnson, Kennedy, I had my favorite-son headquarters there too. On one afternoon, Sam Rayburn, [Bob Kerr](#), George Smathers, John Connally, and I think [Harry Byrd](#) was there, I don't know exactly, but anyway I know that group was there, and probably I think George Brown, Johnson's friend from Texas was there. It was decided, it was just agreed that Johnson should not take the vice presidency even if offered to him. We were not necessarily saying that, but Johnson was pretty much saying that himself. Frankly, Johnson said, I do distinctly remember him saying, "Well, I would much rather be majority leader of the Senate than vice president, because as majority leader of the Senate the president has to deal with me on a personal basis almost every day, about whether or not his program gets through the Congress. So why do I want to take an empty, nothing job like vice president?" That was in effect what he said, and what everybody agreed with.

That's one of the reasons why Kennedy wanted Johnson, to get him out of the majority leadership, so that he wouldn't have to kiss Johnson's ass every day to try to get his legislation through the Congress. If he got him over as vice president, he's got him out of the way. That was one of the reasons that he wanted Johnson; the other reason was that he knew from his own polls that he had to have Johnson to even make a showing in some of the southern states and particularly carrying Texas. He could not carry Texas unless Johnson was on the ticket, and he had to have Texas. So it was an intellectual thing as far as Kennedy

was concerned as to why he would take Johnson, because he didn't like Johnson. [Bobby](#) couldn't stand Lyndon Johnson. But intellectually he said he

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knew he had to have him, and offered it to him. That's what brought about these discussions.

In the morning we were there about nine o'clock in the morning in his hotel suite and it was pretty much agreed--I've talked to John Connally since then, and John remembers it pretty much like I do, that there was no way Johnson was going to take it. Lo and behold, I get a call from Kennedy like at four o'clock in the afternoon, and he says "Come on up here." So I went up to his room, and he said, "Well, you know who's going to be vice president?" I said, "[Stuart Symington](#)." I was trying to get him to pick Symington. He said, "Oh, no, Lyndon." I said, "You're crazy, man, no way." He said, "It's all settled." I said, "There is no way, Jack. We were down there talking to Lyndon Johnson just hours ago and he flat said he was not going to take it." He said, "You're just not up to speed, George. You're as usual behind times." He said, "We've got television in this hotel, and Johnson's going to make a statement at four o'clock." About that time, Bobby came in the room and said it was all set, we helped Johnson write his acceptance speech. I said, "I can't believe it." Sure enough, we turned the television on and here was Johnson saying, "I'm proud now to be running with my dear friend, and we're going to win," and so on, and so, "this great guy from Massachusetts, Jack Kennedy." There it was!

What happened, I don't ever know, but Bob Kerr told me later that Lady Bird went to Lyndon and said something to the effect: "Now Lyndon, you have had two heart attacks. Being majority leader is too tough a job. You've got the responsibility of passing all the legislation. You work day and night at that job. But if you got elected vice president, it's a ceremonial job mostly." You sit there and preside over the Senate, which they don't ever do, they do that once a month if there's a tie and that's all. The rest of the time you just attend funerals and meet visiting dignitaries, and that's it. "That's the job that you've got to take, because your health will not permit otherwise." And she, as I understand it from Bob Kerr, I never heard this from her--as a matter of fact I'm going to see her in about two weeks and I'm going to ask her about that--but anyway, she's credited with having made Johnson take the vice presidency. So, there it is. All right. What else do we want to talk about?

Ritchie: After Johnson became vice president there was a brief movement to try to make him the presiding officer of the Democratic caucus, and a lot of senators rebelled against the idea of Johnson in that post.

Smathers: I'd say so. Johnson didn't want to leave the Senate. You remember, what happened was, instead of having an office downtown in the vice president's

normal place, which was in the old State Department building where they had a regular office for the vice president, and they had a little office for the vice president always up at the Senate so he could come up there in the event of a tie, and preside and break the tie. Theoretically, he's supposed to be the [presiding officer](#), but as you know from observation he's hardly ever, if ever there, except when he's called on to break a tie, or there's some visiting dignitary whom he has to introduce to the Senate. So what happened was that

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Johnson immediately said, "I want to keep my old office," which was the biggest, best office there in the Capitol. Johnson wanted to be vice president, but he still wanted to be majority leader, and that didn't set too well with some of the senators. They said, no, Johnson just can't keep doing it. "You're now vice president, so be vice president and quit trying to be majority leader." That's the reason there was a little flap about that. He wanted to maintain the same offices and maintain all the things that he had as majority leader in the Senate and still have all the things that the vice president had, all the perquisites that went with the vice president's job. Johnson loved those little perquisite things.

Ritchie: Did he ever express any unhappiness to you about being vice president?

Smathers: No, he never really just said "I'm not happy with being vice president." He was just grouching about something all the time. He didn't say, "I don't like the job," he was always grouching about something that was going on that he really didn't approve of. He didn't like the way Kennedy was handling this, and he didn't particularly like the way Kennedy was handling that. He would say, "Well, I don't think that's the way to do it." And it was pretty evident, see Kennedy had all his group around him, who had grown up with him, and none of those guys liked Johnson. Johnson just never fit into that group. If Kennedy had lived and run again in '64, I think Johnson would have come back and be senator again, I don't think he would have been vice president again. I think by mutual agreement they would have said the hell with it, it was not satisfactory in either camp.

Ritchie: Why was it, do you think, that Kennedy had such poor relations with Congress when he was president? His programs just didn't seem to get anywhere.

Smathers: Well, I think the first reason was that [Mansfield](#) was the majority leader. There's not a nicer guy alive than Mansfield, but Mansfield was a fellow who was never a strong, hardnosed, you-gotta-do-it-or-else-we'll-get-even leader. He wasn't one of those guys at all, like Johnson was. Kennedy had a lot of good ideas, but very little legislation if any passed while he was president. He just was not an effective president as far as getting legislation through the Congress, or as a domestic president. He did the Alliance for Progress, and student exchange programs, and in foreign affairs he was good. As far as any of the domestic

programs that he initiated, I don't think they went anywhere. I remember we'd go to breakfast with him every Tuesday morning. Larry O'Brien was the big guy at that time, the legislative man for Kennedy. Larry was good, but other than the routine things we just couldn't seem to get anything going. Why? Without Johnson we just didn't have strong enough leadership.

Ritchie: I wondered if some of the old-time chairmen, who had been there when Kennedy was a junior senator, didn't take him that seriously when he became president.

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Smathers: I think that had a lot to do with it. It was hard for them to look at this young guy, who had suddenly been plummeted all the way up the ladder to the highest job in the land, and he had really never cut the mustard as a member of the House of Representatives or as a senator. That's a little harsh, I don't mean it like that, but he had not been an outstanding senator at all. So it was hard for the fellows who were older and been there a long time. They just suddenly went and did their own thing. You know, if it wasn't their idea, they didn't want to pass it. And they wouldn't pass it. I think that Kennedy made this mistake, looking back at it, that he had Kenny O'Donnell, and he had Larry O'Brien, and he had Dave Powers, and he had four or five guys like that, and then he had some intellectuals. [Robert] McNamara was a guy who was not a part of the Washington scene until Kennedy brought him in as having been the genius at Ford Motor Company and a great businessman.

Some of the guys that Kennedy pulled in there were not politically savvy fellows, so it was hard for the Kennedy people to get things through the legislature. Bobby was attorney general, and God, everybody knew Bobby as just a guy who had been the counsel for the [McClellan](#) Committee, that's really all he had ever done. He was a big [Joe McCarthy](#) fan, and now here he was, all of a sudden he's now attorney general, but that didn't cut a lot of mustard with people. So Kennedy had a hard time.

I think Kennedy would have overcome it, because I think Kennedy had demonstrated in his life over and over again that he could figure out ways to finally overcome all the obstacles that confronted him. He was just beginning, really, to get going, at the time he was assassinated. So I think he would have been different, but I think that in the short space of time he was there he didn't have a running start, like Johnson would have had. And in a way Johnson did have. Johnson picked up his programs, and then when Johnson became president in his own right more civil rights legislation, more poor folks legislation was passed during that time than had ever been passed. And it was done under Johnson.

Ritchie: One of the committees that gave Kennedy the most trouble was the Finance Committee.

Smathers: Yeah.

Ritchie: On issues like Medicare and others. It seemed like Bob Kerr was an obstacle that Kennedy really couldn't get around.

Smathers: You're right. Nobody could get around Bob Kerr on the Finance Committee really. We would try to do it, but he was a very smart fellow, and he controlled Harry Byrd pretty well. When I say controlled I don't mean it in any sort of an unethical way, but intellectually Bob Kerr was the brightest fellow that I ever served with on the Finance Committee. The two brightest guys ever were [Russell Long](#) and Bob Kerr, but Russell Long had no experience in business, and Bob Kerr had all the experience in business, and was

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a bright guy on top of it. Russell Long is a great dreamer and a great thinker, and the smartest guy I ever served with on the committee. I was on the committee twelve years and nobody ever came close to the ideas that Long would come up with. ESOP today is enormously important in this country, and that was Russell Long's baby, he put that through. He put through a lot of other things too, he put through your presidential charge-off on your income tax, for the presidential campaign, which meant that the contributors were not quite as important to the presidential campaign as they would have been had taxpayers not themselves all given a dollar. But Bob Kerr was smart, and it was hard to get anything through the Finance Committee, unless Bob Kerr agreed with it.

Ritchie: Why was it that Kennedy seemed so unable to deal with some of these people? Was it that he wouldn't bring himself down to their level?

Smathers: No, Kennedy would let himself down. Kennedy was a likable, charming guy, and everybody liked him. I never took Kennedy anywhere that people didn't like him. I took him out and introduced him to the people that cooked at my house, and the fellows that worked in the yard, and Kennedy would shake hands and couldn't be nicer. He liked people. But he had this aura, of Joe Kennedy the rich ambassador who had the control of all the scotch in the United States, who also had the Chicago Merchandise Mart, who had the RKO movies and all this other stuff, and Kennedy grew up in this atmosphere of Harvard, and great affluence, and it just sort of overwhelmed people. They'd say, oh, my God, this is this rich, good-looking Kennedy guy. Kennedy would be charming, but you still thought that about him. People didn't look at him as a guy who they felt was sincerely interested in really helping them improve their conditions. I think that he was, but it was hard for him to get it over, whereas Johnson could talk about it. He grew up down in Texas, he knew what it was to work for the CCC.

Ritchie: Well, when you were a senator and Kennedy was president, you voted against his programs on a number of occasions. Was he ever able successfully to change your vote?

Smathers: Well, not successfully. He called me up to the White House one day. I'd been down making a speech, I had to run again in '62, and Kennedy wasn't too popular then. I went down and made a speech to the Florida citrus convention, and I separated myself somewhat from Kennedy, even though everybody knew we were friends. I said, "Well, I have not voted with the president on this, I have not voted on that, and the reason I didn't vote for them was I didn't think it would work this way, and so on, and so and so." The *Tampa Times* carried a pretty strong story the next morning on that, which inferred that I was separating myself from Kennedy, because I was preparing to run for reelection in Florida and Kennedy wasn't too popular in Florida at that time. I don't know that was totally untrue, or true. There's a little bit of truth in it, because Kennedy was not that popular in Florida in early 1962.

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I made that speech in Winterhaven, Florida, and the Tampa paper carried it the next morning. I flew to Washington the night after I'd made the speech, I hadn't even seen the Tampa paper. I got a call to come to the White House, that the president wanted to see me. I went over there and he was up in his bedroom. He and Jackie slept in different rooms. I went to his bedroom, and he had on a bathrobe, I'll never forget it, he had been taking an afternoon nap. When I got in there somebody had just waked him up. I think it was Dave Powers, or he was just getting up. It was about three o'clock, I guess, in the afternoon. I had arrived here in Washington about two o'clock. The president wants to see you, I went right over there.

I go up to the bedroom, he's getting up, puts on the bathrobe, and he said, "What the hell kind of friend are you?" I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "You took my jock off." I remember that expression so well, "You cut my jock off." I said, "What do you mean?" He said "damn" one more time, and said, "Look." He reached into his bathrobe pocket and he pulled out this thing from the *Tampa Tribune*, which I hadn't seen, which was in the Tampa morning paper. How in the hell he got it up here that fast I don't know. "Look at it there! Smathers says that he does not agree with President Kennedy. What the hell kind of a supporter are you of mine?" Oh, he was furious. He just gave me hell. I said, "Look, Jack, I've got to run, and you're not that popular down there in Florida at the moment, and I don't agree with some of these things that you're doing." Well, anyway, we had a real knock-down, drag-out argument. I didn't hardly get to argue too much, but he was really furious. He was pissed off no end. He told me that, and he was sort of mad for about another two or three weeks, till something came up where he kind of needed my vote again, and he called me and we made up. But I had

separated myself from him, somewhat, figuring that. . . well, some of the things he was for, I was not for. I can't remember specifically at the moment what it was.

Ritchie: Well, you had reservations against Medicare.

Smathers: But I finally voted for Medicare. Senator Holland and I voted for that.

Ritchie: Wasn't that under Johnson?

Smathers: Was that when Johnson proposed it later? Okay, well, you have it right. I have forgotten. But I know that at one point I voted for, Senator Holland and I voted for it. See, the doctors had been a great support for me back in 1950 when I had beaten Pepper. I felt some sympathy with the doctors, and I was not for what we call socialized medicine at that point in time. I never was, and I'm not today, not socialized medicine. But I recognized the fact that we have to have some kind of program which will take care of people who are frankly unable to take care of themselves. You just can't turn those people out, we've got to take care of them. But it never had been explained to me how we were going to do that.

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Ritchie: As a senator, how would you describe the difference between when President Kennedy wanted you to vote for a bill, and when President Johnson wanted you to vote for a bill?

Smathers: Well, there was a great deal of difference. What Kennedy would do, he would have Larry O'Brien, Kenny O'Donnell, and Pierre Salinger, and people like that call you and ask you this. Kennedy was not a hands-on person like Johnson. Kennedy was in a way embarrassed, I don't know if this is the right word, but Kennedy was reluctant to ask people to do things. Johnson had grown up asking people to do things. Kennedy didn't like to ask people to do things. He had never asked people to do anything in his life except vote for him, that's the first time he ever asked anybody to do anything. The rest of the time he had been able to do whatever he wanted to do, or his family had been able to do everything they wanted to do for themselves. They didn't have to ask anybody anything. But when you're president, you've got to ask people to help you. If you don't come and ask them, why they're not going to help you.

I recall telling Jack Kennedy one time, this really did happen to me, after I ran for Congress we had a meeting of our people, maybe fifty or seventy-five good friends from the Junior Chamber of Commerce, they had a banquet and they had me. Somebody got up and said, "Well, we all of us voted for George except Tommy Thompson." "Well, Tommy," I said later, "you didn't vote for me?" Everybody kind of laughed. He said, "No, George, I didn't." I said, "Tommy, my God, we

were on the same high school football team, you were quarterback, I was the halfback. Golly, I can't believe it. I saw you all the time, you were in our group." He said, "George, let me tell you something, you never asked me to vote for you." And that taught me a great lesson. If you want people to do something, you've got to ask them to do it.

Johnson had no hesitancy about asking people to do anything he wanted them to do. Kennedy was like me at some point in my life, it was a little embarrassing to ask people to do things. It might have been a little inconvenient for them, or to put up money or something. Wouldn't do it. Well, you had to learn how to do it. He had to learn how to do it. I did too. Johnson had been asking from the time he was about eight years old, I think. So Johnson would call up these people and say, "I'm expecting you to help me on this. If you've got any problems, tell me what they are now and maybe we can resolve them. But I'm counting on you, old pal." He'd call Republicans and Democrats and say things just exactly like that. "I'm counting on you. Man, you've got to help me." Kennedy couldn't do that. Eisenhower couldn't do that. I don't think Truman did that too well. I don't know what other presidents would do that like Johnson, but that was why Johnson got things done.

He would pick up the phone and call you himself, he wouldn't have all these assistants call you. That's why he was always working. He was the hardest-working guy that ever served over there. He was on that telephone constantly to somebody, calling people like me, and getting us to call people. If he'd call

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somebody and the guy was absent, or couldn't be reached, he'd say to me, "Now, you go tell him I called him first. This is what I want him to do. You just take it from there. Ask him." That was the big difference, that's why Johnson was effective. Now that I've been out in the business world and tried to run an automobile dealership, tried to run a law firm, I've learned that you can't be a successful business man unless you're a hands-on fellow. You've got to know what the hell's going on. Johnson knew what was going on all the time. He knew all the departments. He stayed in touch with all the departments. That's why he was effective.

Ritchie: One of the most important votes I think you gave to Kennedy when you were a senator was on the Telstar Communications Satellite bill. There was a liberal filibuster against the bill, [Paul Douglas](#) and [Wayne Morse](#) and others were filibustering. And you and Senator Holland voted for cloture on the filibusters.

Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: You were the first two southern senators I think ever to vote for cloture; got quite a bit of publicity at the time.

Smathers: Did it?

Ritchie: I wondered what the story was behind that.

Smathers: Well, I'm sure we thought the program was good. See, Senator Holland and I were not the deep southerners, as were the guys from Georgia and Alabama, South Carolina, Arkansas. We had it some better in the sense that we had a more liberal constituency, we were not the Deep South guys. And I'm sure we thought it was the right thing to do. I didn't mind voting for cloture, even though as a southerner you were supposed never to vote for cloture so that they would never apply it to you in trying to fight off a civil rights bill. But in those days it began to be pretty evident that the civil rights bill that we had been filibustering against previously. . . that day was gone, that day had passed. The time had come to begin to move into the twentieth century with respect to letting the blacks have the vote. Holland and I sponsored an anti-poll tax bill, which was a minor thing, but which on the other hand it was one of those impediments to the black vote, which we voted to eliminate. We're glad we did, it didn't hurt us in Florida particularly. Some people didn't like it, sure, but most of the people recognized that blacks were entitled to vote.

Ritchie: That break in the cloture ranks was cited in '64 when they were trying to break the filibuster, that was the first time that a cloture motion had been enacted. What was interesting too was that a lot of other southern senators never showed up at all, people like Harry Byrd and others.

Smathers: Yes, they didn't even show.

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Ritchie: I figured there had to be a lot of persuading to get some of those people not to go down to vote at all.

Smathers: Was Kennedy president then?

Ritchie: Yes.

Smathers: That had something to do with it too, I wanted to help Kennedy. I probably got Senator Holland to vote for it, to kind of protect me.

Ritchie: I assume with the space industry in Florida it was a logical issue for you.

Smathers: Sure. We had to begin to move forward and did. The space industry in Florida was big, we knew it was going to be enormous. All right. Well, brother Ritchie, what do you think? Have we had a pretty good session?

Ritchie: A very good session, and this time I can tell the machine is working.

[End of Interview #4]

George A. Smathers

United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969

Interview #5: The Senate in Committee

(Tuesday, September 12, 1989)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie



Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, ca. 1954.

From left to right: Senators Frank Barrett, Thomas Kuchel, Henry Dworshak, Arthur Watkins, George Malone, Guy Cordon, Eugene Millikin, Hugh Butler, James Murray, Clinton Anderson, Russell Long, George Smathers, Earle Clements, Henry Jackson, and Price Daniel.

Senate Historical Office

Ritchie: Today I thought we could talk about some of the committees you served on in the Senate, and I wanted to start by asking: as a senator, how much time do you spend in committees?

Smathers: I think the committee is really the most important assignment that a senator has, and it doesn't take a senator long to realize that it's the committee that he serves on that gives him stature and importance. And I think that most senators have in their mind that they would like to have at least one committee that has a lot to do with their state. That's why you see so often fellows who come from states where there are big military establishments, they love to be on the Armed Services Committee, so that they can be certain that the navy base or the air base or whatever it is that is in their state, or in their district if they are a congressman, that it stays there, it's not removed. So that's a factor which is important.

I think there are other factors, for instance the late [Claude Pepper](#), he wanted a district when he ran in 1962 and got elected to the Congress, he came from a district which was made up almost exclusively of elderly, retired people. So right away he went on the Aging Committee, which was the smart thing to do. And in time he became the head of it. His whole career was pretty much patterned after the makeup of his constituency, and I think that's true even for senators. In Florida you have such a diverse makeup of the state population that you go from the elderly people that we just talked about in Claude's district to the Cubans, of which there are many, who are in [Danny Fascell](#)'s district--that's why as chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House he likes that job very much, and it's very helpful to him with his constituency, which is like fifty percent Cuban, or Hispanic. Charlie Bennett up in the northern end of the state, Charlie's on the Armed Services Committee. He has been for golly I don't know how many years, but let's say thirty years. Charlie has the biggest military bases in the state. He has the Jacksonville Naval Air Station, which is the biggest naval air station, with the exception of Pensacola, it's the biggest in our state and it's one of the biggest in the country. He also has a big army base there in his district. He likes that sort of thing.

So your question was what committees are the most important, and what were the committee assignments I had. Well, when I first went to the Congress I was lucky enough to become a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, which was a very, very desirable committee. When I first moved from the House to the Senate, they gave me a very unimportant committee, which nobody really wanted to be on in those days, which was the Post Office and Civil Service

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Committee. The other committee which they put me on was the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, which was actually a very good committee, and which I enjoyed very much serving on. Later I became the chairman of the Aviation Subcommittee of the Commerce Committee, and then at a later date I was chairman of the Ground Transportation Subcommittee of the Commerce Committee, being in charge of barges and railroads and trucks. So I got to know the trucking industry rather well, I got to know the railroad industry very well, I got to know the other ground transportation industries, because I was the guy that sat listening to all their problems and dealt with them as they had to deal with the Interstate Commerce Commission and with the CAB and with all the other governmental agencies. That was a very helpful committee for me.

I had aspired always to be on the Finance and Taxation Committee, because that was the committee which not only had as its principle jurisdiction the passage and consideration of all tax measures, income tax, all kinds of taxes, domestic, foreign tax, whatever it was it had to go before the Finance and Taxation Committee. I finally got on that committee. I think [Lyndon](#) arranged for me to be on it. When on it I went on right behind [Russell Long](#). Russell Long subsequently

became chairman of that committee because he was senior to me in going on the committee. But that was the main committee which I served on, and which I enjoyed mostly in the last twelve years that I was in the Senate. Because I did like the discussion of economic matters, and of taxes, and whether or not they were conducive to a growing and greater economy, or whether or not they were not just stabilizing but had some disadvantageous attributes. But then all the people in big business, they all come to see you because they're all very concerned about their taxes. So you get invited to the Business Council, which is made up of all the important men who are CEOs, chief executive officers of the various big corporations of the country. Chamber of Commerce people want you to come and make speeches to them about what's going to happen to taxes and what the economy is going to look like, and so on. Good committee. I very much enjoyed it.

I also enjoyed the Commerce Committee--interesting enough how did I get off the Commerce Committee? One way or another after I had been there as long as I had I should have been able to become chairman of one of those committees. The reason that I was unable to become chairman of the Finance and Taxation Committee is that I did not get on that committee as quickly as I would have liked, and that Russell Long, who is my dearest and closest friend, and I'm happy to report still is, spent the weekend with me just last weekend, still one of my intimate close friends. He was two years younger than me in point of age, but he was a year and a half older than me in terms of service on the committee. So I was always behind Russell. And I could see that I could never become chairman. I could have been chairman of the Commerce Committee had I stayed on it, because I went on it before [John] [Pastore](#) went on it, but Pastore and I were of the same vintage, I think he probably came to the Senate the same year I did. He had been governor of Rhode Island, or maybe he was behind me, I think he was behind me, but in any event, I was very

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senior on that committee and should have been chairman. And Russell Long was on the Commerce Committee too.



U.S. Senate Historical Office
Senator Russell Long
Senate Historical Office

What happened to me was that after [Kennedy](#) got to be president, he called me and said, "Old pal, I want you to do me a favor," always giving you the "old pal, I'm counting on you." "I want you to give up one of your committees and go on the Foreign Relations Committee, because I need some hawks on the committee. We've got too many pacifists on the committee." [Wayne Morse](#) and [Bill Fulbright](#) and [Frank Church](#), these guys, they were just for giving away everything in the view of Kennedy and me and others. They had their beliefs and we had our beliefs, and I was a sort of a militarist and a strong defense man, and these people were always seeking ways to resolve problems through peaceful methods, which is not wrong, but anyway there are more that are more militant than others, and I was one of the more militant. Kennedy talked me into giving up my position on the Commerce Committee and moving to the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate, which automatically caused me to give up my seniority on the Commerce Committee and have to move and start at the bottom of the ladder on the Foreign Relations Committee, but that's what I did for my friend Jack Kennedy. And he talked Russell Long into doing the same thing.

So Russell and I were on the same two committees, on the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate as well as the Finance and Taxation Committee. The problem was that Russell could see that eventually when [Bob Kerr](#) retired and when [Harry Byrd](#) retired, that he Russell Long would be the chairman. And I could see that I could never be chairman, because Russell was in good health and two years younger than me. That was one of the reasons that made me, as I have said previously, decide to retire from the Senate, because I could have stayed there for many, many years. If I had stayed there until today, for example, rather than [Lloyd Bentsen](#) being chairman I would be chairman. But that depended upon Russell Long resigning, and Russell Long stayed there, and Russell's in good shape today. He visited me over this past weekend and he was in great shape. I didn't know he was going to retire, and he didn't either in those days. He thought he would stay there forever, which he could have, because in Louisiana he was a surefire reelected guy anytime he wanted to run. Had I known that he was going to retire, maybe I would have ventured to stay on and become chairman, in place of Lloyd Bentsen, however at the time it looked like Russell was going to stay. And he told me, he had no intention whatever of retiring from the Senate.

So that's when I decided: I can't be chairman of the Finance Committee. I can't be chairman of the Commerce Committee, I've given that up. I never would be chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, I'm behind everybody on that committee--I was about the tenth ranking fellow. So there I was. And I had fallen out with Lyndon Johnson's leadership, so there was just really no place for me to go, other than just to be there and be another senator, which I could have been, and very happily I guess. I could have gone back into the leadership had I so chosen, I guess. I'm the guy who put [Bob Byrd](#) in, in a way,

I started him on the road to leadership. But I could have done that for myself. But there was that combination of things.

I got off the point here a little bit. Your question was about the committees, I think the Finance and Taxation Committee is the most desirable committee in the United States Senate. It has an overview of all economic matters, and it has sole jurisdiction to pass tax legislation, lower and raise taxes. In addition it has all the jurisdiction with respect to trade. All trade agreements with other nations have to come through the Finance and Taxation Committee. I was very helpful in working out a lot of agreements between the United States and the Latin American countries on sugar. I was the guy who helped them get good sugar quotas, even against sugar growers of Louisiana and sugar growers of Florida, and the beet sugar growers of Iowa and the midwest. I was always very partial to creating, and I still believe that the future trade for the United States is north-south more than east-west, more than our trading with Europe. I think we are going to have difficulty when the European Common Market finally has no barriers amongst themselves, but only a big barrier around them as opposed to the United States, the Soviet Union and Japan. I think that at that point in time we are going to see much of the trade we have with Europe diminish, and they'll be trading more with each other and protecting each other. We're going to wish at that point that we had done more for Latin American trade and Canadian trade, the north-south trade rather than the east-west trade.

The Finance Committee has all of that jurisdiction, so I liked that committee, needless to say. The Appropriations Committee is of course a tremendously important committee because no money is appropriated for any government projects, or any of the Defense Department activities, without the approval of the Appropriations Committee. The guy who controls the purse string in a way, obviously he's a tremendously important fellow. Bob Byrd, one of the reasons why he was willing to give up his leadership of the Senate, was because he could swap it for the chairmanship of the Appropriations Committee. It's not quite as hard work as being majority leader. But it's a tremendously important committee. There are other good committees, the Judiciary Committee, all of them are good. I briefly was on the Judiciary Committee, I forget for what reason I got on it, and what reason I got off it, but I was on it I think for maybe one term, I've forgotten just why.

Ritchie: You resigned from Foreign Relations and you went onto Judiciary.

Smathers: Oh, did I? I guess that's when I was going to retire from the Senate, and I thought I'd better get my thinking straightened out. Kennedy had passed away and Johnson was in, so I thought I'd better get back to some legal things, because I'm going to have to go back into private life where I'm a lawyer and where I will appear before judges, and the judges will hopefully know me and I'll be able to know them, and maybe that will get me in a better tune. That was studied in the thought that I was going to retire, and I would be a lawyer, and I might as well go on the Judiciary Committee and begin to get once

again familiar with the language of the law, the legal language, and the judicial codes and that sort of thing.

But committees are the things which make the senator. That's the road you have to go, unless you're the leadership. Either its the leadership role or its your committee work which makes you a distinguished or an undistinguished senator.

Ritchie: Russell Long once said that he went on Foreign Relations and Finance and found that they were a very poor mix of committees. I was never quite certain what he meant by that, and I wondered if you found the same situation?

Smathers: Well, he went on the Foreign Relations Committee because he was asked to go, just like I was. Now I wanted to be on the Foreign Affairs Committee when I was in the House, but I was very happy with the committee which I was on, because as a matter of fact I was doing more foreign relations work as a member of the Commerce Committee because [Warren] [Magnuson](#) who was then chairman of the Commerce Committee, he appointed me as the chairman of the Foreign Trade Subcommittee. As a matter of fact, I think I made two or three trips into South America as a member of the Commerce Committee, promoting trade and commerce, which was the same thing as foreign relations as far as I was concerned.

Foreign Relations is a fascinating committee, but the truth of the matter is that under the constitution the president is supposed to be the almost sole leader, that's not the right word, but its the presidency which has the jurisdiction and the power to deal with foreign countries, make treaties and that sort of thing. Originally, the only power that the Senate had was to approve of treaties, that was it. The president did it all. And I think that's the way it should be, very frankly, and I think one of the sad things we see today is no matter who's the president I think that the Congress has cut into his authority so much that it's very difficult for the president, and the secretary of state's people to run the foreign affairs of the country. A wonderful illustration of that, it's not a happy illustration, but it's an illustration, is the Nicaraguan deal today. Ronald Reagan and his State Department wanted to go one route, and the members of Congress wanted to go another route, and they were mostly Democrats. They were playing a lot of politics--not that Ronald Reagan didn't play a lot of politics himself, but at least he did have constitutionally the authority to do what he was trying to do. The Congressman who introduced--I can't recall his name, I know him very well, from Massachusetts.

Ritchie: [Boland](#).

Smathers: Eddie Boland introduced that amendment which would not let the administration do what they wanted to do with respect to the treatment of the

Contra forces in Nicaragua, but it in effect said that you may say that you are going to do it, but you can't do it because we won't give you any money to

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do it. So the effect was to totally negate the authority and the power of the presidency to run foreign affairs. I think that's happening more and more today.

That brings me back to your question. The Foreign Relations Committee, and the Foreign Affairs Committee, of the House and Senate, were mostly debating societies, and should have been. Being on the committee you had all the information, but you were really not supposed to be running the foreign affairs of the country. That's supposed to be run by the executive branch of government. However, the Congress has succeeded by virtue of its power to control the purse, control the money, to so restrict the activities of the executive branch that the executive branch really can't do much of anything without getting the approval of the Congress. Whereas originally it was intended that the only time the Congress would ever appear would be to declare war, yes, surely, but the president would have to be the one who recommended it. They couldn't declare war without the president asking them to declare war. And the only other thing was that they approved treaties. But through the power of the press they slowly began to get control of the foreign affairs of the nation. That was, I think, a misadventure. It was then, and it is today.

The Foreign Relations Committee is a very important committee, but I heard Kennedy one time say something about it being mostly an intellectual debating society rather than an actual administrative, constructive committee which actually can do things. They can do it in a negative way. It's a great committee, and I thoroughly enjoyed being on it, but it wasn't exciting for me at all. It wasn't as exciting to me as was the Finance and Taxation Committee, which I still say is the best committee there. Then there's the Judiciary Committee, the Armed Services Committee, the other administrative committees, they're all important, but I was fortunate to be able to serve on--except for the Appropriations Committee--I think I was on the two most important committees.

Ritchie: What was your impression of Senator Fulbright as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee?

Smathers: Fulbright is one of the genuine intellectuals that I really know. He can be the most obstinate, obdurate, difficult fellow that you've ever seen. But on the other hand he was one hundred percent sincere. He is a most admirable fellow. He played less politics than most any other senator I ever knew. He had gone to Oxford, after he had graduated from the University of Arkansas, and [Truman](#) called him an "over-educated son of a bitch." But Bill Fulbright was one of the truly independent thinkers that we had during the days that I was in the United States Senate. Fulbright, he was Fulbright. He did what he conscientiously

believed, which we all did, but he had sound reasons in his own mind for doing the things that he wanted to do. Being a very well-educated person he was essentially a pacifist. By that I don't mean he was weak, but because he was so cerebral, and so intellectual, he could not understand why people could not sit down and work out their problems, even though it may be the Chinese versus the Soviet Union, even though it might be

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the United States versus Stalin and the Kremlin, he still couldn't understand why reasonable people could not but then would not sit down and resolve their problems. Therefore he was opposed to most any type of military action.

He was the first fellow, of course, who ever really spoke up opposing the Vietnam war. He voted against the Tonkin Resolution, which was the big vote that we had in the Senate, which actually got us committed to further enlargement of our activities in Vietnam. Fulbright was the one fellow more so than anybody else who spoke against that at the time, when it was rather unpopular to do that. But Fulbright is a genuine intellectual. He believes--and I believe it somewhat too, but not to the extent that he did--that if you could get people to start talking to each other you could resolve all problems. That's what his whole ambition and his whole career was all about, as far as I could see. He developed the Fulbright Scholarship program, which was a student exchange program with all the people in Europe, and in South America, he thoroughly believed in that.

I think he got that from his own personal experience when he graduated from the University of Arkansas and got an opportunity to become a Rhodes Scholar, studied at Cambridge, traveled over Europe, spent many of his impressionable, youthful years in Europe. He saw that these people were really just like other people just like we were, they liked to eat, they liked to sleep, they liked to wear clothes, they liked to have their independence. He saw that, as anybody does who travels to these countries. You start talking to people on the street and except for the language barrier, most places, certainly in Europe, they're just like we are. They just speak a different language. But they want exactly the same things that we want. They'd like to eat three good meals a day, they'd like to have a little vacation time, they'd like to have a little fun. Their ambitions in life are pretty much like ours. In other words, the human race is pretty much the same, even though we're some different colors in some places, and we're different stature, and that sort of thing. But Fulbright appreciated that more so than anybody else. And he firmly fought for that philosophy throughout his whole career.



Senator James William Fulbright
Senate Historical Office

You ask me what kind of a chairman was he? I got mad at him as chairman because he cut me off when I was trying to interview Castro, wouldn't let me talk. When Castro came in he was adored by the press and everybody else, but I knew that he was bad and I tried to point that out to people, for which I got severely criticized by the *Miami Herald* and the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* and all the other papers. They took me to task for being a horrible reactionary. I sat with the committee, I was the last man to get a chance to ask questions, I wasn't on the committee at that time, I got permission from Fulbright to do it, because I wanted to ask Castro these questions. After [Frank Lausche](#) got through--Lausche took forever, Wayne Morse took forever, talking to him. But Fulbright cut me off.

Castro said he had to go, he was speaking to the National Press Club at twelve o'clock, and it got to be about five minutes of twelve and I said, "Well,

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Mr. Chairman, let me just ask two or three questions. Fidel Castro, when are you going to have an election? When are the people of Cuba going to have an opportunity to vote for who should be their leader rather than have somebody like you take over?" And he said, "They would reelect me, overwhelmingly." I said: "Well, in that case, why are you afraid to set a date?" He said, "I'm not going to answer that question." And about that time, Fulbright said, "Well, the time's all up. The meeting is adjourned. Mr. Castro has to be at the Press Club at twelve thirty. So he adjourned the meeting and I got no answer. I was always a little unhappy with Fulbright about cutting me off and never getting an answer from Fidel. Which would not have been an answer anyway, he would not have given it, he would have avoided it, but at least I would have put him on the spot.

But I liked Fulbright, because Fulbright is just what he is. There is no pretense about Bill Fulbright. He is an honorable, smart, dedicated, wonderful guy.

Ritchie: He worked fairly well with Johnson when they were both in the Senate.

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Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: But not when Johnson went to the White House. What happened?

Smathers: What happened was that Johnson was caught up in the war. Fulbright had already made his position that he was against the war in Vietnam. Fulbright was that way before anybody else talked about it, Fulbright had already made several speeches on the floor that it was a mistake ever to get into it. We shouldn't do it, and so on. But then Johnson got caught up with the military, which I know from personal experience. I have been there in the Oval Office, with Johnson, with [Humphrey](#), with [Mansfield](#), with the Republican leadership, not [Knowland](#).

Ritchie: Dirksen.

Smathers: Everett Dirksen. And had General Westmoreland and others come before us. We weren't a committee, Johnson just called the leadership group over there. Westmoreland and all the other generals would say: If you'll just give us two more divisions. If you'll just allow us to use ten more air groups. If you'll just turn us loose and let us bomb these places, and do what we have to do, we can win the war. They would say that meeting after meeting. I was at, let's say at least six different meeting, and others attended maybe more, where the military would tell Johnson that. "We can win this." And Johnson would say, "I don't want to be the first president of the United States to ever lose a war. I don't want to do that. I want you sons of bitches to win it. Now what do we have to do it win it?" Then he would get pumped up by guys like [Goldwater](#) to do more.

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But I will say this in Johnson's defense, he was told not once but maybe a hundred different times that with the amount of troops that we kept putting in there, that they were finally going to win. What happened was every time we put in more the Chinese doubled it. They just put in more, and they had a hell of a lot more troops than we had, or than we wanted to expend, so finally it became evident that you couldn't beat China in a manpower type thing unless you're willing to drop the atomic bomb, unless you're willing to do something really very, very drastic. Johnson didn't want to do that, and I don't think any of the rest of us did. That's when we began to sort of figure out a way to lose the war, to get out of it. [Nixon](#) came along and he saw the wisdom of quitting it real quickly, and to his credit he finally had enough courage and enough good sense to finally call it off. As old [George] [Aiken](#) of Vermont said, the thing to do is to pull out and say we've won the war, claim victory, that's what sort of happened.

That whole war, of course, destroyed Johnson. The reason Johnson didn't run again was I think mainly because of that. Johnson was such a proud and vain fellow he could not have accepted the fact that the American public would not

have voted for him again for president. It was just too much. He couldn't have stood it, and he knew he couldn't have stood it. He couldn't risk running again. That's when he made that sudden announcement: I will not be a candidate. That's what did it.

I've got a good friend named Clark Clifford, I really do like Clark. Clark is a very smart fellow. Johnson made him Secretary of Defense, and I know Clark was in on some of these meetings that we had, he was always in as a matter of fact, because he was Secretary of Defense. The policy that Johnson had, it was presumed to be, and I think rightly so, that all of his people whom he had appointed, like Clark Clifford, Secretary of Defense, and everybody else, that they were really supporting that position. As a matter of fact, I think Clark was one of those that encouraged Johnson to keep putting in more troops and more planes and more battleships, because he was Secretary of Defense.

After Johnson said he wasn't going to run anymore than that administration got out, Clark wrote an editorial in *Life* magazine in which he said that all along he was opposed to the Vietnam war, and that he was one of those that tried to get Johnson out of it, long before Johnson did get out of it. I didn't think that was really correct. I didn't think that was really appropriate for Clark to say that, after he had accepted Johnson's invitation to become Secretary of Defense, and after he had served Johnson. He didn't retire from the secretaryship until Johnson gave up the presidency. I just didn't think that was the type of thing to do. Clark is a very able fellow and a very fine man, but I thought that was the one spot on his record that I certainly did not approve of. I think that he owed it to Johnson to support him, I think he should support him all the way through: Yes, I was a part of that, it may have been a mistake, but it was an honest mistake. We thought we could win, and God knows the military kept telling them they could win.

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I'll tell you another funny thing that happened when Johnson was president, that I will never forget as long as I live. One day we got a call to come over to the White House and see Johnson right away, an emergency call. When I say we I'm talking about we guys who were kind of running the Senate, Humphrey, Mansfield, me, [Dirksen](#) and so on. The question was: what should we do about the Dominican Republic? Trujillo had been assassinated, and a fellow was about to take over.

Ritchie: Juan Bosch?

Smathers: Juan Bosch had been in, but the president's name was [Joaquin] Balaguer. Balaguer had been Trujillo's secretary. So the contest was between those two. Today, of course, Balaguer is the president, and even to this late date, many years later, Bosch and Balaguer are still contesting with each other in the Dominican Republic. But the amusing thing that happened that day was that

Johnson was on the phone. Bosch was a left-wing guy. How left-wing he is, I don't really know, but he had the support of the Communist movement, and was credited with having that support. The more stable people were saying: We cannot have Bosch in here because it will be a Communist dictatorship.

There had been an uprising of the people and there was a lot of shooting back and forth. While we were in the Oval Office, Johnson got our ambassador to the Dominican Republic on the phone, and we could hear their conversation. We were sitting in the Oval Office across from the president's desk. The guy was saying: Mr. President, you have to send in troops, you've got to do something, because this is terrible. Then all of a sudden you would hear "bing," "zing," "zing." And Johnson said, "What the hell are those noises?" The guy said, "Mr. President, I am talking to you from under my desk. Those are bullets that are flying through this damn room." Johnson held the phone out and said, "Can you guys hear that?" We said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, we'll give you some help right." That's when it was decided, Johnson said, "I want to send in the Marines, and I want you guys to agree to it." We said, "Okay, fine." And we did. But here was the ambassador saying he was under the table, and we literally could hear over the telephone these sounds which he said were bullets, and I'm sure they were.

Now let's see, you asked me about Fulbright, was the last question. Fulbright's a great fellow. I see Fulbright a good deal today. We play golf together. He's a great friend of my brother's, he's always visiting my brother. My brother just thinks he's wonderful, and I do too.

Ritchie: One other member of that committee I wanted to ask your opinion on was Wayne Morse, who was chairman of the Latin American subcommittee at the time you were on the committee, and also was the chief opponent of Johnson's policies in Latin America and also in Vietnam.

Smathers: Wayne Morse, there are guys who--you have seen in your life and I've seen them in mine--who never want to be with the majority. Wayne Morse in his life would have considered it a lost day if he had ever been on the majority side of anything. He was a minority stockholder, a minority representative, a minority spokesman, it doesn't make any difference what it's for, he just never wanted to be with the majority. He wanted to be different, and he was different. It didn't make any difference what the issue was, he would go out of his way to be different and argue about it. He would argue, and argue, and argue, and he's was a good arguer and an able fellow. I knew him just like we all knew him. I liked Wayne, you could not help but like him. He was always gentlemanly in what he had to say. He never seemed to carry that fighting difference which he would have with you on the floor of the Senate, he never carried that into his personal or private life as far as I knew. In fact, I don't know anybody who really disliked Wayne as a person. I knew of a lot of people who didn't like his politics, I being

one of them. But as an individual you couldn't help but like Wayne Morse. He could be a pretty charming fellow.

I wish I could think of them, but there were instances where Wayne would change his position just to be in opposition. If his original position was now winning, he'd change it, he'd now go and be on the other side. You know, he started out as a Republican and became a Democrat, and there were days when I thought he was probably going to shift back. He had been a law school professor, and he was a professorial type. His people admired him for his willingness to stand up and oppose overwhelming odds. Many times there was a vote, there would be a hundred senators with ninety-six voting one way and two absent and the other two voting against it would be Wayne Morse and one other fellow. He liked that position. That was his whole style. He would go back out to Oregon, and he would tell the people: "I'm not going to let these people push me around. I'm going to fight for my own positions, and your position," and he would. But that was his thing, that was his bag. He followed that consistently. He was consistently in opposition.

Ritchie: Were you able to work with him on Latin American issues?

Smathers: Frankly, you tell me that, but I don't remember him doing much about Latin America at all. I don't even remember Wayne ever going down there. Now, I could be terribly off base having said that, but I remember Magnuson having a lot of concern about Latin America, but I don't remember Wayne Morse. See I was not on the Foreign Relations Committee at the time that I was big in Latin America. When I was big in Latin America I was still on the Commerce Committee and Magnuson had let me become chairman of the Latin America Subcommittee of the Commerce Committee. As a matter of fact, at my suggestion, Magnuson created that committee, just for me.

Magnuson and I were very good friends, very close friends. I loved him. I mean, some guys you like and some guys you love. Magnuson was a fellow that you just had to love. He was a wonderful, sweet, thoughtful, able fellow. He used to come to Miami and visit me a lot. I've taken him fishing a lot, played

a lot of cards with him. He was a sweet, wonderful guy. But he let me have that Latin American subcommittee on Commerce, which meant all kinds of trade. Most everything on Commerce, I'm the guy that introduced the bill which created the American Development Bank, I'm the fellow that handled all the sugar quota stuff for Latin American countries. But I don't remember Wayne really doing a lot of it. I'm sure Wayne went to the big Latin American conventions when they had them. In any event, we were not in opposition, we were on the same side, at least with respect to Latin America. But until you told me, I'd forgotten that Wayne

Morse was chairman of the subcommittee on Latin America of the Foreign Relations Committee.

The Foreign Relations Committee really didn't do much. They never had any legislation to amount to anything.

Ritchie: Except for foreign aid, I guess.

Smathers: The foreign aid bill, that was it. One bill.

Ritchie: One striking difference between the committees back in the '50s and '60s and the committees now is they had much smaller staff in those days. How did the staff support system work? Did the staff work mostly for the chairman of the committee?

Smathers: Mostly.

Ritchie: Or could you as a senator get any help from them?

Smathers: As I understand it, the staff today is about three or four times larger than it was back in the '60s, which meant that staff then pretty much worked directly under the chairman of the committee. While I had a subcommittee chairmanship, like at the Commerce Committee, when Magnuson was chairman and he made me chairman of the Latin American Subcommittee on Commerce, I was able to borrow a staff member from time to time, maybe two. And if I went on a trip maybe I took the guy. I took a fellow named Frank, I wish I could think of his name, nice guy, south to Latin America with me one time, on one of those trips. But he really worked for the full committee. Today, with this enormous staff that they have, every subcommittee has about four or five staff members, which we didn't have. But we got along fine. I mean, I didn't feel as though I was being discriminated against or shortchanged in any way. As a matter of fact, I felt like I was pretty damn lucky to be able to get some of these people to go with me and work up a report for me, which they did.

I'm not here to say that today they're overstaffed, I don't know. But I know this, that we got along rather well in the late '40s, and '50s, and '60s, during the time I was there all through the '60s, and we didn't have all that big staff. We got along fine. Sure, the population is bigger today than it was, but not that much bigger. I think they've overdone that today. I think the Congress has

gotten too expensive. I think democracy is a great thing, but I think you can have too much democracy in an organization. I think in an organization there has got to be the leaders. The leaders have to lead. And the leaders can't lead because

their leadership is so fragmented and so divided. It's hard for them to get a consensus over there today, and that's why they're so slow in passing legislation.

You take two or three subcommittee chairmen of the Appropriations Committee, well, the chairman of the Appropriations Committee himself he gets so that he's a figurehead, because all the subcommittee chairmen are doing all the work and making all the speeches. They're the ones that are delving into matters a little more deeply than previously had been done. Each subcommittee chairman is arrogating unto himself more power every time he can, to get publicity, because they all live off publicity. By the time they get through, the chairman of the committee is sort of here as a figurehead where all the subcommittee chairmen are getting all the attention. The only guy that seems to be beating that is [John Dingell](#), who's the chairman of the Commerce Committee in the House. He keeps all his subcommittee chairmen pretty well beat down. He doesn't let them get way ahead of him, he's running it.

Now, I don't think that's true so much in the Senate. Maybe Bob Byrd will do that now that he's chairman of the Appropriations Committee, he will insist that whatever it is, if he's got the military versus the procurement program, why he's going to make it come back through him more directly. I don't know, but that's the way it used to be. Consequently, it was easier to run the Senate and run the House because you knew who the leadership was. And the leadership pretty much could deliver what they said they were going to do. Today, who knows? I don't think that's good. There's just too much democracy over there today.

Ritchie: Was that the way the Finance Committee worked? The senior members made the decisions and the rest followed?

Smathers: Pretty much. When Bob Kerr was chairman, the short time he was chairman, it was definitely true. Russell Long no, but Harry Byrd and who was chairman before Byrd?

Ritchie: [Walter George](#).

Smathers: Pretty much. The chairman was such a powerful fellow that he pretty much dictated. And we didn't have any subcommittees to amount to anything. Very few subcommittees. That's the way, if I were chairman of the Finance and Taxation Committee today, I wouldn't have any subcommittees if I could avoid it, to start with. I'm sure that's what Walter George did. Nothing occurred that he didn't know about. And we had a Republican when they were in power.

Ritchie: Was [Eugene Millikin](#) chairman?

Smathers: Yes, Millikin was very good. He didn't let a lot of subcommittees. I remember I tried to get Harry Byrd to create a trade subcommittee, I figured I was about three from the top, and he'd let me be chairman of that. He wouldn't do it. No, said the whole committee will listen to all that. So I was unable to go out and get a lot of publicity to go tearing off on some trade program. But that's the way it used to be, as distinguished from the way it is today, where there are subcommittee chairmen who are as powerful or more powerful than the committee chairmen.

Ritchie: At the time when there wasn't much staff support, did that give an advantage to lobbyists in the sense that they could provide information and support for the senators on specific bills?

Smathers: Well, I would say this: lobbyists always were around, and good lobbyists always provided you with their side of whatever the argument was. I think that they were very helpful. We got much better understanding by virtue of the fact that a lobbyist would say, "Can I submit to you this piece of paper, it's our position?" Yeah, sure, I'd like it, because I can't get it all from just having one hearing, where one guy comes on at ten o'clock in the morning and talks, and in the meantime there are fourteen roll call votes where you have to get up and vote, back and forth, and then you recess for lunch at twelve thirty. You really don't get much from those witnesses who come and testify verbally in front of the committee, because there are too many different questions and you don't have an opportunity to get into it in any depth.

All the time I was over there, and I'm sure it was the case then and the case today, that a senator and a chairman of a committee, he doesn't mind at all having the protagonists present him with their arguments as to why they think they're right. That's a shortcut to having to go out and find out yourself. So you'd just as soon they'd do it. Now, you know that one guy's for something; these are all the for guys, and over here these are the fellows who are against it. You read that for a little while and you say, what's this answer? And it goes back and forth. Your staff has the benefit of that, and your staff takes all of that and redigests it, and rewrites it, and says here are the pros and here are the cons, and gives it to the senator.

I think lobbyists are an essential part of this legislative process. I don't think you could get along without them, because the senators and congressmen themselves do not have the time to go into these very, very difficult and far-reaching matters, to the extent that the lobbyists do, because that's their sole concern, that's their sole issue. They present you with something that they had probably twenty-five people working on that one paper that one guy gives to you. So you get the best of their arguments, but you get of both the pros and the cons, and then your own staff looks at that, and they pass judgment on the pros and cons of that and give you their views. Then you can ask, well, let me see the originals. What did the U.S. Chamber of Commerce really say about this? Let me see that. What did the

shopping group who opposed this, what did the consumer groups say about this. You know, you would ask those questions

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because if you had to cast a vote you wanted to cast as intelligent a vote as was possible to do, and you needed to get as many facts as you could both for and against so you could make up your mind intelligently.

Ritchie: When you were on the Finance Committee, who did you find to be the most effective lobbyists?

Smathers: Well, that's a hard question to answer, because I don't remember who was the most effective lobbyist. I would guess that the National Association of Manufacturers group, they had some top-quality people. I'll tell you an interesting fact, when I was in the Senate, and on the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, and chairman of the Aviation Subcommittee, I remember coming in the morning to the office from my home, about eight thirty, and I had a secretary named Juanita Thomas, who was a wonderful girl, who had been in the navy herself, smart as hell. She had a list for me of the people who wanted to see me before I went to my committee meeting at ten o'clock, this was now nine o'clock, so here's a list of people that there's no way I can see fifteen of these people in the next hour. So I'm looking over the list and I suddenly see the name on there of [Scott Lucas](#), former United States senator from Illinois, former majority leader of the Senate who got defeated. I said, "Well, Juanita, here's Scott Lucas, now you call him and tell him I'll see him in the next fifteen or twenty minutes." And here's another guy I know, and so and so, I'd see them.

This is why guys who have been in there, who have been part of it, they're far and away the best lobbyists, because they are fellows who can get your attention. I look at Scott Lucas, I think: there's a guy who's been defeated, he's been majority leader and everything, there but for the grace of God go I someday. Sure, I'm going to see him. He's going to be able to come and present to me his problems. I'm not going to say no. Because in ten years I may be trying to do the same thing. So, to the extent that a former member of Congress comes to see you, he's got to be the most effective lobbyist. Next, I would say it's the fellows you know. If he was in the administration before and let's say assistant secretary of Commerce and you knew him, you'd see him. He's now representing the National Bankers Association. Okay, it doesn't make any difference what he's representing. He wants to see me, and he was part of the government, and I know him, and I know he knows his way around. Sure, let me see what he's got to say. Now, some guy named Timbuktu, you never heard of, who in the hell is this guy? He represents so and so. Oh, well, put him off, I can't see him.

So there is a lot to be said for the concern they have about former members of the government lobbying the government, because they do have a better in, there's

no question about it. That's why I think that it's a sensible thing that we've now got rules that won't let them lobby back on something where they were on the committee and they now are representing the other side. They have to wait a certain period of time, I think that's a healthy thing. They still have an advantage, however. Now, once you get to know a guy real well, if you know

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the Ralph Nader's of the world, if Ralph Nader wants to come to see you, you know he's a pretty sound, logical guy. He knows the Congress so well that he's not going to take twenty minutes when he can get his job done in five minutes. And time is so precious over there. You just don't have time to sit and chat with anybody.

So you say who's the most effective lobbyists? It would depend upon that individual, how well you knew him, what you thought of him. We all shied away from the bankers. We all shied away from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, we shied away from those things because normally they didn't get you a lot of votes. Labor unions in certain states, they could get in to see anybody. They weren't as important in Florida as they were in other states, but when the head of the AFL-CIO from the state of Florida wanted to see me, why sure I'd see him. Head of the Citrus Commission wanted to see you, yeah, I'll see him. Citrus was big in Florida. It goes along that line, so it's hard to say who is the most effective.

Ritchie: You were in the enviable position in 1956 of not having a Republican opponent or not having any campaign expenditures, but in those days, was there a stronger connection between the lobbyists and campaign contributions?

Smathers: No, it wasn't near as strong as it is today. See, we didn't have PACs in those days, Political Action Committees. Your money always came, really, from individuals. I would venture to say that ninety percent of the campaign contributions which I had in 1950 were individuals. In '56 when I didn't really have any opposition I don't know whether I went out and raised a lot of money. In fact, I didn't. I didn't have to. But it was mostly individuals. We didn't have a system in Florida, which I'm glad, where you had to get the United Mine Workers, because we didn't have any organizations of that character. We had the Right-to-Work law in Florida, which Labor had fought against. When I was a member of Congress, we had the Hartley bill, which was one of the bills which tried to restrict the Right-to-Work law. I voted wrong as far as labor was concerned, because I voted for the open shop, which meant that you did not have to join a union in order to get a job. They were the only ones that were organized, the labor organizations, in my state. The citrus people, as a group they wouldn't give you any money, but you could go to them individually and they'd help you. In Florida, it has not ever yet been a big organization state, in terms of support or in terms of financial help.

Ritchie: I wondered about the year 1956 when you were chairman of the Democratic Campaign Committee?

Smathers: Well, Johnson made me that. I went around and raised money. I went to all the organization but not any of them in Florida to amount to anything. I don't think we got any money from Florida. I went to the usual things that Johnson told me to go to, that had been historically Democratic. I went to the Automobile Workers Union, the United Mine Workers, the Teachers

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associations and those sort of things that were well organized. We'd go and I'd ask for money for the Democrats, because we'd give it to all kinds of Democrats. It was Democrat versus Republican rather than individuals. We collected all this money, and then Johnson would send me out to give some to [Howard Cannon](#), I remember going to Nevada to take him some money. I remember he sent me to North Dakota, the boy's still in the Senate.

Ritchie: Oh, [Quentin Burdick](#).

Smathers: Burdick. Took Burdick some money. But Johnson would say, "George, how much have you got collected?" I'd say, "Well, we've got now a hundred thousand, hundred and fifty thousand dollars." He'd say, "Well I want some to go here, some to go here, some to go here." He was pretty much the boss. We'd argue with him from time to time. I'd say, "Look, we've got help some of these southerners." He'd say, "Oh, those Democrats, they're going to win anyway, we don't have to give them any money. We're just going to give money where we can keep a Republican from coming in." But that was the way it went.

Ritchie: Some of the recent studies of Johnson say that one of his successes was his ability to tap into oil money for campaign contributions.

Smathers: Oh, he got the oil people, no question about it. Johnson got all the oil people. I don't know how much they gave the Republican party, I'm sure that they did, but Johnson got more. I'll guarantee you he got more than the Republicans ever got, because they were afraid not to give to Johnson. Johnson was a terror. He was the strongest individual in this whole town of Washington for ten or fifteen years. There just wasn't anybody who could compare to Lyndon Johnson in terms of sheer power, and it came from the fact that he was smart, shrewd, and never stopped working. Never stopped working. Had no play habits, none, never liked to play golf, didn't play gin rummy, didn't chase women, nothing. Johnson really ran things.

Ritchie: But he was able to get oil money into the Democratic campaign funds?

Smathers: Oh sure. He'd just call them up. Johnson would call them up and tell them. "I know you guys, I know you well." Bob Kerr of course knew them. Johnson would go to the Cattlemen's Association, oh my God he got money from them. He got money from all of them.

Ritchie: I've heard stories about envelopes being handed out in the Senate with the campaign contributions inside.

Smathers: That's right. It would be almost like that. Johnson did not let me make the decision as to who was going to get the money. Now, I would have some input, but Johnson was damn sure that he approved, and most of the time he told me where he thought it ought to go. There was nobody else that

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made that decision but Johnson. The next guy was me, and I would go out to get the money. He sent me around the country picking up the money, I'd get the money and bring it back and keep it, but Johnson was the guy who passed it out.

Ritchie: And I suppose they knew that it came from Johnson too.

Smathers: He would never let you do it any other way. He wanted them to damn well know, because if they came to the Senate he expected them to get right in line with him and vote his program, just like he wanted. That's why he wanted to do it that way. He wanted to be able to say, "Look, I did a lot in helping you get elected, now you get in line and be on my team."

Ritchie: Along those lines, do you think that the current campaign financing laws get in the way of party discipline and leadership?

Smathers: I tell you what, I think that the campaign laws need to be changed very drastically. I think the political action committees, the PACs, have become a disgrace. I keep wondering what the solution is, because campaign financing is difficult and it's expensive. But what makes it expensive? It's because of the other side. If the other side was not spending five hundred thousand dollars, then you're side wouldn't have to spend five hundred thousand dollars. If the other side would agree only to spend one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, then you could say to your man, "Now look, we've got you on an even plateau. You've got to fight it out here on issues. We're only going to spend a hundred and fifty thousand, and you're only going to spend a hundred and fifty thousand." Now you have to worry about being absolutely obliterated in terms of getting your message out, because your opponent is on the television every night at prime time for two or three minutes for five weeks, and you're not on at all. The guy who's on the television is going to win, obviously, because he's the one who's getting to the people.

The money has gotten too big, the PACs have gotten too important, and you have to say, what is the solution? It costs money when you look at an add in a daily newspaper, like the Miami *Herald* for example. If you wanted to have a whole ad on one sheet of paper it would cost you forty-five hundred dollars--it used to be, today it probably costs seventy-five hundred, I don't know. But if you had a half a page, it would cost you more than half of that, and if you quarter page it would cost you more than a quarter, because it got more expensive the less you used. Well, to run these ads and to get on television, it's really expensive. It costs you five thousand dollars for one minute. So the fellow says, "I can't win if the other fellow's doing it." It's a kind of a contest that feeds itself in its grossness, because one fellow spends a million dollars and then the other fellow feels like he's got to spend a million if he can get it.

There's got to be a limit. There's got to be several types of limits in these campaign contributions, and one of the limits that I think we ought to start with is a limit that would say if I'm running in Florida, only Floridians can

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contribute to my campaign. Why should the United Automobile Workers in Detroit be financing my campaign, so that I would be voting more because of the Detroit influence than I would be because of Florida's interests? Why should the Cattlemen's Association of Oklahoma be contributing to a New York senator's campaign. Why don't we limit it to a state? New York, [Mario] Cuomo, he only raises money in New York, and the people he runs against, they only raise money in New York. They don't come down here to Washington and get the Republican Committee or the Democratic Committee which has raised money from all over because what happens is that then you make all these senators and all these congressmen forget their own states and their own congressional districts.

They become more concerned with this national picture. They're all involved in nationwide problems rather than problems of their own state, and the problems of their own congressional district. That's not to say they aren't concerned with them, but they become more concerned with other things, because if all of their money came from the United Automobile Workers in Detroit, and this guy's running in north Florida and he's getting a big hunk of dough, he's thinking: Well, I don't have many automobile workers down here, so I'm going to vote with the United Automobile Workers' program up there. It distorts what was the intention of the founding fathers to have representative government, meaning that each man who went to Washington was representing the thinking of the people in his community where he came from. If he came from the state of Florida, he represented Florida. If he came from Oklahoma, he represented Oklahoma. If he came from New York or wherever.

One of the best ways to do that is to not let them contribute. Then you get a true picture of how strong the guy is in home state. He's not getting elected in New

Jersey because of money that came from Los Vegas, came from the United Mine Workers in West Virginia, came from the Detroit automobile people, he's getting elected from the people of the farming communities of New Jersey, and the gambling people in New Jersey, or whatever, but it's New Jersey people. If they'd put that law in, I think that would go a long ways toward settling the politicians down. The politicians wouldn't object to much, very frankly, because they're all operating from a level playing field, so to speak. They're operating from within their state. They're running in their state. That's where all the players ought to get their money. That's the first thing I would do if I were president. I would eliminate the power of these big political action committees, whether it's the United States Chamber of Commerce, or whether it's the National Automobile Dealers, or whether it's the Manufacturers' Association, they wouldn't have any influence except as they went through their states. Then you'd have a lot more representative government.

Then I would stop this business where you can accumulate money. When you retire you take all that money with you. That's not right, and I think the Congress has already recognized that it's not right by not letting people do that who were elected after 1980. So they'll eliminate that, and that should be eliminated. I think that there's got to be a limit on how much is going to be

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spent on advertisement. We need to take politics and put it back maybe fifty years, so they do what I had to do when I first ran. You had to go out on the corner and meet with people. You just didn't go to the television studio and make two or three broadcasts and have your face all powdered up, and have a television prompter that you're reading off of, and have music and a staged thing.

I think you need to put the politicians back out on the street, where they have to shake hands with the people and come in direct contact with them, whenever they run. The only way to do that is to limit how much money they can spend on television. If they have a limit on that, why then they're going to do the other thing. They're going to get out of the television studio and go back out on the street corner. [Lawton Chiles](#), he got elected wonderfully, he walked the state of Florida. It was a fantastic thing that guy did. It was wonderful. He waved at the people. He didn't shake hands with all of them.

I know this, when I ran in 1950 and a couple of times after, I would get calluses on my hands from shaking hands with people so much. Shaking hands, shaking hands, finally you get calluses here. You press the flesh, you got to know the people. You had a feel of the people. You just weren't in the hands of some advertising agency. So I think that there's much needs to be done in that area. Much, much. Limit what they could spend.

I don't know that I would ever be just for government financing. I don't think that's particularly healthy either. I think that if a fellow's going to run for office, and he's going to run in a state like Maryland, he's got to have some following. He's got to go around to every county, to every community in the state of Maryland first to see whether he's got any support. If the local Chambers of Commerce, and the people at the local unions say yeah, we don't like the guy that's in there, we'll support you, okay, that's when he decides he's going to run. But if he says: if I can get this advertising agency, and I'm going to get all my money out of New York and out of Detroit, I don't ever have to go to see anybody because I'm going to sit here and have the best television ads and the best radio ads that are on, and I'm going to win, just by that. That's a frustration of the democratic ideal, as far as I'm concerned. I'm against that. I think that ought to change.

Well, doctor. Okay, you think I've burnt your ear enough today?

Ritchie: I think this has been very interesting.

Smathers: Well, I appreciate the chance to visit with you, and get to talk to you, I really do. It's a source of happiness for me.

Ritchie: Well, it's a great source of information for us. When people come to visit the Senate they sit in the galleries and they expect to see debates on the floor, and they don't. The activities are off in the committee rooms, the part that's probably the least understood by the public.

Smathers: That is one of the biggest disappointments of all the visitors. They get up in the Senate gallery and they think, boy, now I'm going to hear a great debate, between two great senators. And they go there and there's a guy making a speech, he's the only fellow there. The presiding officer is scratching his head up there, he's half asleep, and pages are walking in and out. That's it. And he thinks: what in the world is this? Well, the fact is the work is being done in the committees. That's where all the senators are. Until there's a roll call you don't ever get to see them. Then they come in and turn around and go back out.

I don't know what you could do about having better debates on the Senate floor. But if you hang around and look for them, you finally get some pretty good debates on the Senate floor. These fellows are all professional speakers in a way, but they're not professional listeners. They don't like to listen to anybody else. That guy's against what I'm for, that's all he wants to hear. The bottom line is he going to vote with me or oppose me. I don't want to hear why he's going to vote against me. He's going to vote against me, well, I'm not going to waste anymore time with him. That's the attitude. I've got to get somebody who has not made up

his mind that maybe I can convince, so to hell with the fellow who's already made up his mind, we know how he's going to vote.

But if they go to committees they really see what's happening. And I do think television has been helpful in that respect. I'm for televising the hearings, I think that's very healthy. I think that gives the public a participatory feeling that they otherwise wouldn't have. I think it's well that they see how the Congress and the Senate works, and that's how they work, in those committees. When they're approving somebody or disapproving somebody for the Supreme Court, the public can see how it's really happening. That's infinitely more beneficial to everybody than it is to go listen to them making a set speech on the Senate floor. So I'm for that.

But I could talk for an hour on campaign financing. It's gotten so gross. We need a clean, big new broom and sweep that whole system out and go back to the basics. If you're from Kentucky, you're going to raise your money from Kentucky. You're going to be a Kentucky senator. You're not going to owe a damn thing to the National Automobile Association. You're not going to owe anything to the oil people in Texas. You're only going to owe your allegiance to the folks who elected you from Kentucky. That's the way it ought to be. Florida the same way.

Ritchie: Well, thank you senator, and I'll look forward to coming back and continuing.

Smathers: All right.

[End of interview #5]

George A. Smathers

United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969

Interview #6: Senate Democratic Leadership

(Tuesday, September 19, 1989)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

Smathers: A fellow asked me recently, "Was Joe Kennedy alive at the time that Jack was assassinated?" I said, "You know, what, I don't really remember, I hope he wasn't for his own sake." But the guy said, "I think he was." But anyway I had to ask my wife who said, "Oh, no, Joe lived until 1969 or something."

Ritchie: Yes, he outlived both [John Kennedy](#) and [Robert Kennedy](#).

Smathers: Yes, I wonder how lucid he was at that.

Ritchie: It's not clear. He couldn't speak.

Smathers: I saw him when he couldn't speak. He would try to say things and he would slobber, "tu-tu-tu-tu-eh-eh-eh," and his face would get all red. I remember seeing him two times like that. But I don't have any other recollection with respect to him. But I do remember, Jack would say, "He's trying to say these word." And Joe would look at him and say, "ya-ya-ya-pu-pu-pu," and just slobber. It was pitiful.

Ritchie: Considering what a powerful man he had been before his stroke.

Smathers: That's right, just tremendous. But the poor guy, it was pitiful. So, but you've been all right?

Ritchie: Yes, sir.

Smathers: That's good. We had an election down in Miami, which the Republican girl won, took [Claude Pepper](#)'s seat, which was not surprising in a way. There are a lot of Latins there and they obviously are going to vote very much together. They voted together and got out a big vote. The black community voted solidly for the Democrat, but they didn't get out their vote at the percentage level that the Cubans did. The anglos voted pretty split, almost half Republican and half Democrat, so it was a very interesting makeup of the vote. But this girl will be good. She's the first Cuban-born who will have ever served in the United States Congress, so that gives her quite a distinction. All right, sir.

Ritchie: I wanted to ask you today about your service as secretary of the [Democratic Conference](#). I wanted to ask you, what the post involved and why you were interested in that position.

Smathers: Well, regrettably, I have to keep coming back to the fact that [Lyndon Johnson](#) ran the whole operation. Anybody who writes anything about that period is going to miss what really happened if they don't emphasize that Johnson was the alpha and the omega of the whole deal there. I was secretary of the Democratic Conference and I had several other jobs with names but it was because Johnson wanted me there. He figured that I was his friend and his confidant, that he in effect could mostly control me. I don't like to say that he told me exactly what to do, but it was always very difficult for me to oppose Johnson about anything. That's why, when I finally rebelled and just refused to become the whip officially, it was a sort of traumatic experience for me and my wife. My wife was the one who said that she just couldn't stand it any longer, and I couldn't either.

But to go back to your question, Johnson wanted me to be secretary of the Democratic Conference, so I became secretary. When the Democrats met to elect a secretary of the Democratic Conference, Johnson had [Mansfield](#) or [Humphrey](#) or somebody nominate me and that was automatic. I didn't go around asking people to vote for me, anything of that character, because Johnson ran the Senate. For several years, he ran the United States government. He was the government, and it's hard for people to appreciate that and understand that, unless you were there and knew Lyndon Johnson and went through that experience that I went through. Johnson was the single most powerful person, even more so than [Eisenhower](#). Johnson talked to Eisenhower on the phone regularly. I know that Eisenhower relied on Johnson much more than he did on his own Republican leadership. Johnson was it. He was totally it. That's why he was so sad when he was vice president. I think that's why, prior to that, that he decided to run. He thought, "I've been running the government, why should I let Jack Kennedy or Hubert Humphrey get the Democratic nomination and take it away from me when I'm the guy that deserves it?"

But the short answer to your question is that Johnson decreed it.

Ritchie: What exactly was the job? What did being secretary involve?

Smathers: Nothing. Nothing to amount to anything. As secretary of the conference you're supposed to have the conference meet from time to time and discuss various issues. Johnson would call the fellows in, instead of having anybody meet. The main thing I was to do was to see that they were lined up and ready to vote the way Johnson wanted them to vote. That was the purpose of it. If any of them needed help of some kind, if they had a tough race coming up, why Johnson wanted to help them. He was very helpful in those terms, because in turn he knew he could call on them. He would raise money. Many times he would call up H. L. Hunt, or the contractor George Brown, called up all these well-known names and got money from them for guys who were running in Nebraska,

Illinois, some Massachusetts people he never did do anything for them, they never did need it, never did want it. I know he raised some money for some of [John] [Pastore](#)'s reelection campaigns, because I was

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the guy who helped raise money for them. But Johnson played the whole game. He was the man.

So, what did the secretary do? He didn't do anything, other than just meet with the group on an irregular basis. Actually, the problems that we had were getting the senators to show up, to have crucial votes, to get them there, to get the Democrats there.

Ritchie: Why was that?

Smathers: Well, they'd be off. I recall distinctly that when Johnson was majority leader and the Senate went into recess for Christmas, Johnson called us back on three different occasions. I remember distinctly that I was in Honolulu, Hawaii on two of those occasions and I had to leave my family out there and fly back to Washington, because Johnson wanted us to meet about something. On another occasion I was in Florida and we had to come up, after we had previously voted that we would stand in recess until January of the next year at such and such a time. But this was Johnson.

Ritchie: Why was it that Johnson never called meetings of the Democratic conference? I think he had maybe one a year.

Smathers: He didn't deal with them as a group. He dealt with them individually. Or he had me deal with them individually. Or he had Hubert deal with them individually. Or he had Bobby Baker deal with them individually. Or [Earle Clements](#) would deal with them individually. We three would report to Johnson what had happened, and there was no need to have a conference. He expected us to convince x numbers of guys to be present and to vote a certain way on certain things that were coming up. So he didn't have to have a conference to discuss things. And he didn't want to discuss things, have it where four of them would get up there and say they didn't think it was a good idea, or something. He didn't want to hear that. If individually we would tell him we were having a hard time with, for example let's take, who would be we have some problems with, [Spessard Holland](#) my colleague was much more conservative than I was, and much more conservative than Johnson. I would tell Lyndon, "Lyndon, I don't think we're going to get Spessard to vote this way." Then, what would happen? Johnson would see him himself. He would only see the guys that were hard to convince. That's the way he did it.

He didn't want to get them all in a room, because he had enough sense to know, enough experience to know, that if four or five guys stood up at one time and said "We don't like this," they would be giving each other support to such an extent that maybe some other fellows who were on the fence would go with them. That's not the way he wanted to do that. He fragmatized it so that he would get each individual's vote and he could finally say to an individual, "We want you to know that you're the only Democrat that's not going to vote for this. And you don't want to be standing out there all alone by yourself, so you'd better come vote with us." Whatever was necessary. But by doing it on an

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individual basis he didn't face the possible gang concept, group concept of opposition. He fragmatized it and divided it so that it was all saucered and blowed.

Ritchie: Do you think he was more concerned about the liberal bloc in the Senate or the conservative bloc?

Smathers: That's a good question. That was a good question. Johnson, I think, in some ways was more concerned about the conservative bloc. The Senator [Georges](#), the [Harry Byrds](#), the Spessard Hollands, the [Lister Hills](#) (except for the health thing), they were very conservative. [Sam Ervin](#) was conservative. I think he was more concerned about them than he was with the liberals. His programs generally appealed to the liberals more than they did to the conservatives, because as I say over, and over, and over again, Johnson was the guy who really did pass the significant, important social legislation during the twenty-two years that I was in the Congress.

Ritchie: Of course, the criticism he got came from people like [William Proxmire](#), who stood up and said the Democratic leader never calls a conference and he never takes us into his confidence.

Smathers: That's right, and he didn't want it. He didn't want guys like [Wayne Morse](#) and Proxmire, who were independent guys, who wanted to be independent--they would be embarrassed if they were ever with the majority. They never wanted to be with the majority. Their whole bag was to be known as an independent. It had appeal back home, and it gave them a lot of latitude to go whichever way they wanted. They were not team players. I mean, you couldn't get Proxmire to vote any way except the way Proxmire wanted to vote to start with. He was not a team player, nor was Wayne Morse. They were strictly independent guys, and they liked to be that way. This is not to criticize them, that's just the way some people are. They were not team fellows. I had always been and still am, all my life, I've been a team player. Some day I'll get to be captain and I'll have a team, but I'm on a team before I get to be captain. You were on Johnson's team,

but Johnson didn't need to get you on there, he had already had you contacted personally, to know where you were and what you were doing.

Ritchie: Now, when Mansfield became majority leader he started calling a lot of conferences.

Smathers: Yes, Mansfield was much more normal in that sense, much more, what's the word? usual. That's not the right word. He was conventional, I guess. He was a conventional leader. He did what you would expect a normal leader to do. He would call a meeting and say, "Fellows, we've got this problem and here's what it looks like. Here's this side of it, and here's this side of it. So far as I can understand the Republicans are going to be here, and the president is going to be here, now what do we want to do? Johnson would never do that. Johnson didn't believe in that kind of business. He had the Johnson

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program for all of this. When Johnson was majority leader the president wouldn't send over anything that Johnson didn't like, if they expected to get it passed. It was that or else. It made him an unusual, different leader, but the single most impressive and strong leader I guess that there's ever been in the United States Congress, certainly during my lifetime or during the times that I've read about.

Ritchie: Did holding conferences produce anything positive when Mansfield called them?

Smathers: Under Mansfield? Not particularly. Well, everybody was happy, everybody loved Mansfield. Mansfield would say, "I'm not trying to push my views off on any of you." Mansfield was a consensus man. Johnson was the consensus. Johnson himself was the consensus on all the other legislation. I don't know that anybody ever had a bill that came out of any committee that was of great significance that before it came out of that committee they hadn't taken it up with Johnson, as to whether or not he would even put it on the floor, on the calendar. It was a different ball game completely when Johnson was the majority leader.

Ritchie: Would you say that by 1960 the Democrats were glad to get a different type of leader, or did they regret not having Johnson around?

Smathers: No, I think it was a relief. I think a fair assessment would be that there was a big sigh of relief when Johnson departed the Senate. Not that they didn't like Johnson, I liked Johnson in his way, but he was so strong, and so difficult, and so tough, that it was a relief to get him over to the vice president's office. But he was still around a lot.

Ritchie: In the '60s you continued as secretary of the conference. What types of things were you doing in that role at that time?

Smathers: Doctor, I wish that I could tell you that I was doing a lot of things differently than had ever been done, but I can't. I just wish that there was something that I could tell you about how we sat around and planned strategy and all that. But no, we didn't do that. We would meet in Johnson's office. I've got that picture on the wall that somebody's taken of us all in Johnson's office. There was [Symington](#), there was [Earle Clements](#), there was [Hubert Humphrey](#), there was [Dick Russell](#), there was me, and that was it. The other senators who were Democrats, each one of us didn't have an assigned guy to go see, but there were people that Johnson knew that we were kind of in charge of. I always dealt with Senator [Holland](#), for example, my colleague from Florida, try to get his vote, try to tell him what's coming up, what's going to happen. Earle Clements would do the same thing, and Stuart Symington did the same thing. We were all out working with our people, because that's what Johnson would see when we'd have those meetings: "Look, fellows, let's go out. I want to bring this up. Now, help me get all the votes. Who is it that you think might vote against us?" That was the way it went. While I was secretary

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of the Democratic conference, and Johnson was there, I was there in name. But Johnson ran the meetings.

Ritchie: What was your role like then when Mansfield was majority leader?

Smathers: Under Mansfield immediately it got more the normal parliamentary procedure. Mansfield would bring a matter to the attention of the conference and we would discuss it. Somebody would say "I like this," somebody would say "I like that." But Mansfield did not require that we all get on one side or the other. He would just say, "I'm going to bring this up. This will be on the calendar next week. It would be good if we could support Kennedy. It would be good if we could support Johnson." But Mansfield was not an arm-twister at all. Johnson expected all of his lieutenants not only to be arm-twisters, but to produce the right results.

Ritchie: So did you, in a sense, lobby senators in the '60s the way you did in the '50s?

Smathers: Sure. Well, not so much under Mansfield, but in a way, yes. I still had the job and it actually became somewhat more significant because I'd sit at the head table when the meetings would be called. But see, Johnson never had any. I don't ever remember Johnson having a meeting of all the senators.

Ritchie: Sort of a perfunctory meeting at the beginning of the Congress, that seems to be about all he'd do.

Smathers: That would be it, and it would end right there.

Ritchie: You were also an ex-officio member of the Policy Committee as secretary. Did the policy committee ever plan strategy of when bills would go on the floor?

Smathers: Again, we'd meet in Johnson's office, five or six of us, and that was it. We'd establish the policy. When I say we, Johnson would be 55% of that vote. I just cannot over-emphasize to you in writing history the power of Lyndon Johnson as a senator. He was really it. He ran it.

Ritchie: Would you say that Johnson left a vacuum when he left the Senate?

Smathers: Well, no. I think that what happened was that the Senate went back to being a normal, legislative, discursive and discussive body that it was intended to be to start with. Johnson had just thwarted the democratic concept of the Senate, because he was so powerful and worked so hard at it. He didn't accomplish this because he was more muscular than anybody else, or because he was the richest man, because he wasn't. But he did this because his ambition led him to do this. He wanted to be what he was. He wanted to be

the strongest guy and the most powerful fellow in the government, and he was. He worked at it. He had no play time at all. I don't ever remember Johnson going on a vacation. He went back down to the ranch, but the minute he got to the ranch he'd have four or five senators down there to visit him. He always had some people there. I was down there four or times at the ranch, and all the time he's talking to you, waving his hand, beating on the table, telling you this is what we gotta do. Incessantly. That was Lyndon. All these other little jobs that I had, they somehow seem to disappear into the woodwork in the sense that they were there only in name, because Johnson ran it the way Johnson wanted to run it.

I've got to say this much about myself, I was there when Johnson would make these decisions. I guess I was as close to him as any other senator. I think the two fellows who were closest to him were me and Hubert Humphrey. Johnson spent more time talking to us--I started to say with us--I guess Humphrey did better with him than I did, because Humphrey never was underneath Johnson. Humphrey was an independent senator. He did not have any of the jobs that I had. By the very nature of my jobs I was subservient to the majority leader. Humphrey didn't have those kind of jobs. But Hubert was a warm, personable guy that you couldn't help but like, no matter that we never did agree on anything.

I couldn't help but feel that if I were ever isolated on an island with one senator, I'd rather have Hubert than most anybody. He was a most personable, delightful,

understanding fellow. His opinions on much of the legislation differed from mine, differed in many respects from Johnson's, but Hubert was the guy who knew how to get along with anybody. Hubert was a top personality at that period in time, and great. Marvelous speaker--spoke too much. Johnson used to say, how did he used to put it? He had sort of a funny expression that if you could cut Hubert down to one-twelfth of the time that he took to explain something, he would be absolutely the most persuasive man in the United States government, because he not only gives you a beginning and an ending, but the body of it is enormous. Hubert did talk a lot, but he was a marvelous talker. Hubert was one of the sweet, kind characters that I knew. I venture to say that Hubert Humphrey and Mike Mansfield are as two nice a men as ever lived.

Ritchie: When Humphrey was Mansfield's whip, did you consider him effective in that job?

Smathers: Yes, I think that Humphrey was everything that you wanted him to be. See, Johnson didn't want Hubert, because Hubert was too strong. Johnson had his own program. Mansfield was ready to let the senators do what the senators wanted to do. He would go by majority rule. If the majority of the Senate Democrats wanted to be for a certain bill, Mansfield would be for that. Mansfield would be their leader, but they would decide. It was the reverse when Johnson was there. Johnson would decide what he wanted to do, then he would get those senators to go with him. Mansfield was exactly the opposite.

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Mansfield was the perfect leader in the sense that he was leading his troops who were solidly behind him, in that they had put him out in front and they wanted him out there. Johnson was out front because Johnson wanted to be out there, and he kept everybody under control by whatever it took to keep him in control. Some he could whip, some he could take with candy, some that he would ignore. He had different ways to handle all these people. But he made the policy, senators didn't make it.

Ritchie: I'm trying to get a grip, I guess, on Humphrey in that role. Was he the type of a whip who could unite the party, or was he still viewed with some suspicion by some of the southern Democrats?

Smathers: He was viewed with suspicion by some of the southerners, politically. You have to look at Hubert always in two ways. As a friend and a delightful person, Humphrey was untouchable in terms of anybody being his equal. He was the best. But in terms of what he believed in, and what causes he would advance, and speak in favor of, many of those causes, many of the senators could not go along with him. Intellectually, they just couldn't go with him. They couldn't go with him politically or intellectually. Humphrey was always on the left side of all of the issues. Some people thought he was an extreme leftist. I didn't

really think that. But I thought Humphrey, coming from Minnesota, didn't know what having a black problem was.

I used to debate with him on the radio on Sunday afternoons. What the hell was that moderator's name? National Forum of the Air it was called, and it went on every Sunday. Hubert and I debated each other so much that he finally said to me, "George, you're not helping yourself, and I'm not helping myself. We're getting the same people to be for us who were for us two weeks ago. All you're doing is digging a bigger hole as far as my people are concerned, and all I'm doing is digging a bigger hole as far as your people are concerned, so let's cut it out."

I used to say, "Hubert, you don't know what it is having black people living with you, because you don't have them. In the whole state of Minnesota there are less black people than there are in one county in Florida. When you live with the blacks, and when you live next door to the blacks, and when you have grown up with the blacks, you have a different feeling about them than you do when there are just a few. Therefore you start telling me about how we in the South ought to treat the blacks, you don't know what in the hell you're talking about, because you've never lived that way. You're going to find," and I happen to have been right on this in a long-term prediction, I said, "you're going to find that when the blacks keep moving north," as they were doing in very great numbers in that day, "you're going to find that there's going to be more segregation up in your part of the country than there is in the South." Which is what turned out to be the case.

"You don't understand the black people. The black people have certain strengths and certain weaknesses. In time, all of that will disappear, but not for

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a long number of years, yet. But eventually, down the road, there won't be hardly any distinction between colors. That's what pure democracy is, as we understand it. But today, with conditions being what they are, we in Florida, and in Georgia, and in North Carolina, and Virginia, we're not going to accept what you guys in Minnesota tell us about how we ought to deal with the race problem when you don't have a problem. It's just a theory with you. It's a fact with us." That's what we would debate, up and down, every Sunday. And Hubert didn't understand. But Hubert was a wonderful man.

Ritchie: In 1964 you gave one of the nominating speeches for Humphrey when he was up for vice president.

Smathers: That's right.

Ritchie: I got the feeling from looking at it that there had been some arm-twisting there.

Smathers: I think that Johnson probably asked me to do that. It didn't help me in Florida to nominate Humphrey for anything at that point in time. Humphrey was never popular in Florida. He was never popular in Georgia. He was always popular in New York. He was always popular obviously in Minnesota, he was popular in California. But he was not popular down in the South. So when I nominated him for vice president, yes. . . but I was strong in my state and I knew that it wasn't going to endanger me in any way, even though people generally would not approve of that. But those things you have to do.

You know, some people look brave when it's easy to be brave. The time it really takes to be brave is when it's tough to be brave, you know that you're endangering your own security to be brave. That's when bravery is really brave. When Kennedy wrote that book *Profiles in Courage*, that was what he was trying to point out. The guys that he wrote about who were very courageous were the fellows who took certain positions and took certain steps that they knew was going to be very hurtful to them, going to cost them a lot, politically, in those instances always politically, but it's going to be very expensive. That's when you test a guy's guts, and when you test a guy's bravery.

But I liked Hubert and I was really glad when somebody asked me to do it. They were trying to make it so that Hubert wouldn't look like he was just a leftish candidate, so they asked me as very much of a rightist guy to nominate him. After a little thought, I said, "Sure, I'll be glad to."

Ritchie: In 1960 and 1964, you had personal friends who were running for president. Did you ever hope that you would get the vice presidential nomination?

Smathers: No. No, I really never did. It was a funny thing, I never did. I don't know why I didn't aspire to that. As I look back on my life from this

perspective that I've now got, I wonder why I didn't. I'm kind of like Lyndon Johnson, I look at these guys who did run and I think, "Gee, you know, I don't remember them in the Senate being as important in the legislative process as I was!" Why should a guy from the Dakotas, [George McGovern](#), or even my dear friend [Eugene McCarthy](#) of Minnesota, they're not half as important as Florida in terms of numbers of people, or in terms of influence in the whole being of the united fifty states. But I don't know, it just never did occur to me. I never have been particularly desirous, I never thought about wanting to be president of the United States. That never has entered my mind, never did enter my mind, never even thought about being vice president. It just never occurred to me. I would have people say to me, "Why don't you do that?" I would say, "Oh, I don't know." If I couldn't have gotten it by acclamation, I didn't want to go out and work for it. I guess that was it, maybe I was too lazy. That could have been it.

Ritchie: I can't imagine that it was easy for Humphrey to be vice president for Lyndon Johnson. I can't imagine it would be easy for anybody.

Smathers: No, it was tough. But again, Hubert was one of the most resilient, bouncy fellows that ever lived. Hubert would lose issue after issue, but it never got Hubert down. That was the great thing about Hubert, he never let himself get down about anything. If he lost some of the legislation he was pushing, okay, he'd fight another day. He was constantly upbeat and enthusiastic. The "happy warrior" they called him, and that's what he was. It was difficult for him with Johnson, I just know that. As a matter of fact, I talked with Hubert a couple of times, and it was difficult for him. As it was for me to be Johnson's boy in the Senate, Hubert was his guy when Johnson got to be president, and it was tough for him to do it. But as I say, he had a marvelous attitude about that. He was one of the most upbeat fellows in all respects that I ever knew. He didn't let anything ever get him down. I don't think Johnson paid a lot of attention to him as vice president.

Ritchie: Would you say that Humphrey went along with Johnson because he was impressed that Johnson could get things done? Even if they may not have agreed on everything, Johnson was someone who could make the machinery work.

Smathers: Yes, oh Hubert knew that. Hubert was a very smart fellow. Hubert understood the real world. He knew the political world, he knew the real world, and he knew what was fiction and what wasn't. He knew about what he could do and what he couldn't do. And he knew that Johnson was the guy who put all the good legislation through. Hubert would not have been able to do that, but Johnson could, being from Texas.

See, being a southerner from Texas it was easy in a way--that's not the word--it was much more effective for somebody from that part of the country to recommend some of the so-called liberal things which Johnson recommended. If Humphrey had been sponsoring those it would have created an instant,

instant opposition, just because Humphrey was known to be a liberal. That's what Humphrey was, he was expected to introduce all these crackbrained, left-wing ideas. Whenever Hubert would come in with something, why it was suspect in the minds of the people in the midwest and the people in the South right away. It was suspect just because Hubert brought it in. He was the leader of the left. That's what he was identified as, and had that label put on him. That's one of the reasons why he had difficulties later. As he got higher and higher it got to be more difficult to carry that label.

Ritchie: When Humphrey became vice president, [Russell Long](#) ran for whip. That was another thing I never quite understood. Why did Russell Long want to be whip at that stage when he was so powerful in the Finance Committee? What was it that attracted him to the job?

Smathers: I don't know. I can't tell you that. I just don't know. I think probably because I had been whip, and Russell and I had been very close--we still are, even to this day. We were just together recently. But I don't know why Russell decided to be whip. Russell's an able fellow, very able fellow. But he's mercurial. Russell is up one day and not so up the next day. But I think he's very much like I am. Russell and I get along great together, and I think one of the reasons is that we pretty much have the same reaction to most everything that we see and hear and do. Our wives are good friends, and we're good friends, and we talk a lot. I think one of the reasons that Russell retired is because I retired from the Senate.

Today as I look at Russell, I think he's enjoying himself, but I really think he would have been happier had he stayed in the Senate. I think he waited too late. I don't give myself a whole lot of credit for this, but I think that I got out at about the right time. I'd been there eighteen years in the Senate, four years in the Congress. Kennedy was gone, and Johnson was gone, and Humphrey was gone, and my close friends there were gone. Russell was the only friend, and he was senior to me and I could never be chairman. You know, there was just nothing else for me to look forward to. So I decided that I would retire, and I'm glad I did. I got out when I was fifty-six years old. Russell didn't get out till he was sixty-seven years old.

Ritchie: I wondered if Senator Long felt frustrated with Senator Mansfield's type of leadership and through that he could be a firmer leader himself.

Smathers: Probably. I don't think there's any doubt about that. I don't know, I can't say, and I don't want to really say that, but I can't help but think that had something to do with Russell's decision to run. Mansfield was so accommodating and such a consensus-seeker that I think Russell wanted to be more like Johnson. Russell admired Johnson, as I did. I don't think that he liked Johnson anymore than I did--he probably did like him more, because he wasn't quite as close to Johnson. But Russell, his temperament, and my temperament, and our politics were very much the same.

Today they would describe Johnson as a closet liberal, but he got by not being identified as a liberal because as his personal friends he was very astute to have [Walter George](#) of Georgia, one of the most conservative fellows ever, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, who was his personal, close friend. Dick Russell, the other Georgian, the smartest guy, was Johnson's close, personal friend. Lister Hill of Alabama, all these guys, [Bob Kerr](#), all these guys were

Johnson's closest friends. And Johnson was ten times more liberal than any one of them. But he cultivated them and he got them to go along. That's how he was able to get them to pass legislation. He would get them to do things they had never thought they would do, ten years before. He got the most out of them. I voted for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a lot of the guys voted for it in '64 that three years before they would not have thought of voting for it.

Ritchie: Did Johnson personally ask you to vote for the Civil Rights Act in '64?

Smathers: I think he did. I have no specific recollection that he did, but I was part of his team and he expected me to vote with him. I guess Johnson would handle me by saying, "George, I've made you my whip, goddamn it, and what the hell I don't want to have any trouble from my own team. What the hell do you think you're doing? We've got to do so and so." So the answer is, I voted that way. I didn't have any problem with it at all. I got Senator Holland. You know, misery loves company, and there's strength in both senators having voted the same way. I got Holland to vote with us. Holland and I put in the constitutional amendment which proscribed the use of poll taxes anywhere, which was sort of a reasonably forward-looking move. It was aimed of course at the southerners, who used to have poll taxes and you couldn't vote unless you paid a poll tax. Many of the blacks would not pay a dollar for a poll tax. They wouldn't pay two dollars to vote. So we eliminated that.

Ritchie: That always surprised me. Spessard Holland pushed that for a number of years. He was very interested in that bill.

Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: And it seems out of character for him.

Smathers: Well, see, Spessard was. . . I think most of the southern senators, this is an interesting thought that I have had all of my life really, they were all much more liberal than they voted. They voted the way they did in order to get reelected. There wasn't any doubt that before 1964 if Spessard Holland or I or somebody had voted for civil rights--even Claude Pepper who later became the greatest of all liberals, when he was a senator, he didn't vote for civil rights. You couldn't do it and survive. It wasn't that the Ku Klux Klan was smarter than anybody else, it was just because the natural progression of breaking down the barriers between the races had never gotten that far by that period of time. You could see it happening, but it didn't happen very rapidly.

But it was inevitable, and it's inevitable today as it will be someday in South Africa. It's inevitable that blacks are going to have every right that the whites' have, and they should.

So Spessard Hollered was really quite a liberal guy in the sense that he was not antagonistic to the advancement of the blacks. As a matter of fact, when he was governor I think he did as much for the black colleges in Florida as any governor that we ever had. The legislature appropriated sums of money for Bethune-Cookman, and Florida A&M, and other prominent black colleges that we had in the state. I think Holland was just coming along. I sort of helped him move along more liberal, and he helped me. We protected each other on that sort of thing. Between us there was never any division.

I went to Holland and said, "Senator, I think"--some people called him "Spessard," but I always called him "Senator"--"we ought to try to help this Civil Rights bill." And he said, "George, yeah, I think we should too." There was never any disagreement. "Well, here's the way it's going to come up," I would tell him. "Johnson tells me that this is the way he's going to bring it up." Spessard would say, "Okay, that sounds reasonable to me. I just want to have an opportunity to make a statement about why I'm going to do this." I said, "We'll guarantee you that. Johnson's going to limit the debate to five hours or something like that, and he hopes that that's what will be accepted by the Senate. There will be a limitation of debate." We used to have filibusters on those types of things. But it moved along, and so now we have full civil rights, political civil rights. But Holland was for it.

Ritchie: To go back, we talked about Russell Long as whip before, I wanted to ask you about when Long was defeated for reelection as whip. What really was the cause of that? Was there dissatisfaction with the way he had been whip?

Smathers: Who was it that defeated him?

Ritchie: [Ted Kennedy](#) defeated him.

Smathers: Teddy?

Ritchie: Yes.

Smathers: What year was that?

Ritchie: It was just after you left the Senate in 1969.

Smathers: I don't know. I just don't know.

Ritchie: And then Kennedy himself was defeated by Senator [Byrd](#) in 1971.

Smathers: Yes, that's right.

Ritchie: And you cleared the way for Byrd when you stepped down as secretary of the Democratic conference in 1966.

Smathers: That's right. Bob came to me asked was I really going to resign. I said, yeah. He said, "Well don't tell anybody for six weeks, so that I'll have time to work up this group." I helped Bob Byrd do that. We did it over the Christmas holidays. I remember I came up here and Bob had a list of senators. We called them all. Bob worked like a trojan. I don't remember how close he was to Lyndon, but Bob really wanted to be like Lyndon. He didn't quite have the make-up to do that, but I know Bob admired Lyndon Johnson very much.

Ritchie: What was it about him that made you work with him to get him that job?

Smathers: What was it about Bob Byrd? I liked Bob Byrd because he was a fellow whose career was about as admirable as anyone I ever knew. He was an adopted child, adopted by a coal miner family, never had anything given to him in his life that was worth very much. He had to work his way through high school, he was never able to go to college for a while. He went to night school. When he went to Congress he finally got a degree from college here in Washington going to night school. If ever there was a fellow who had pulled himself up by his own bootstraps, by just hard work and personal sacrifice, it was Bob Byrd.

I recall one time he came to me and said, "George, I want to tell you something. You have invited me to come to Florida and visit you on at least five or six different occasions and I have never gone. I don't know whether it has occurred to you that was sort of unusual, because everybody likes to go to Florida. I want to tell you why I turned you down." I said, "Yeah, Bob, I hadn't even thought that much about it, but tell me why." He said, "Well, you invited me one time with Jack Kennedy and said 'Come on down to Florida, we're going to go fishing and we're going to play some golf.' I didn't go. You asked to go with you one time when Magnuson was going down, and you said Magnuson was going to stay at the Key Biscayne Hotel and he likes to play gin rummy and we'll play a lot of gin rummy. Another time you invited me to go down you said, 'We're going to take a trip over to Cat Key and go swimming at that beautiful beach.'"

He said, "George, every time you have invited me down to visit you have always said that you were going to do this or that or the other thing. I have never in my life played a game of cards. I have never in my life had a golf club in my hand. I have never in life hit a tennis ball. I have--believe it or not--never thrown a line over to catch a fish. I don't do any of those things. I have only had to work all my life. And every time you told me about swimming, I don't know how to swim." I thought to myself, here's a guy who's never played

tennis, never golfed, never gone swimming, never fished, never played cards. I hadn't thought about it! Now there's a fellow who had done nothing but work all of his life. Worked his way up from a coal miner's adopted boy. Put himself through every bit of school. Learned how to be a butcher, went to butcher school, and did butchering at night so he could make enough money to stay in school. Have you got to be for a guy like that? I do. But that's what he told me, and it was a fact.

Ritchie: I can believe it.

Smathers: It was a fact! He never did any of those things! That's hard to believe. But I saw him a lot afterwards, never did get him to come to Florida with me on vacation. He went down one time with me and made some speeches. But it was unbelievable.

Ritchie: Do you think that helps to account for how he was able to defeat Ted Kennedy?

Smathers: I think that had a lot to do with it. See Ted was off playing. While Ted was away at Christmas, down in the islands, floating around having a good time with some of his friends, male and female, here was Bob up here calling on the phone. "I want to do this, and would you help me?" He had it all committed so that when Teddy got back to town, Teddy didn't know what hit him, but it was already all over. That was Lyndon Johnson's style. Bob Byrd learned that from watching Lyndon Johnson.

I'm glad I thought about that thing about Bob Byrd, because I've told that a lot. I've told it when I've introduced Bob Byrd for a speech. He doesn't mind me telling that. He gets up and says, "You know, that's funny, here it is now, twenty years later and I still haven't done any of those things."

Ritchie: That says a lot about the man.

Smathers: It does, it tells you a lot about him. All right sir, doctor, it's four o'clock. What do you think?

Ritchie: I think we can wrap it up for today.

[End of interview #6]

George A. Smathers

United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969

Interview #7: The Senate and the Press

(Thursday, September 28, 1989)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

Smathers: I want to develop a little bit more if I can on one of the things that I did which I'm proud of, although it never got anywhere. I was the first fellow to introduce a bill calling for a nationwide primary, rather than have these nominating conventions going the way they were. When I first did that was back in the '50s. I thought I made a lot of sense. What put me on it just now, I read an article that some journalist had written as though this were his idea. Other people have done this, and I don't know that anybody did it before I did, it well could have been, but I'm the first guy that put this in as legislation, which we could never get passed.

Of course, the thought being, when I put mine in, we used to have at an earlier time the convention system with the smoke-filled room, the guys smoking cigars and all these big, fat-bellied politicians and bosses from big cities would sit in a room with two or three senators and two or three congressmen, and they would pick a guy. They called it the "smoke-filled room"--that's where that expression really came from--where they would select the next president of the United States, and that carried all sorts of ugly connotations. Nobody liked that. The truth of the matter is, we probably got better, more qualified guys to run at that time than we have since, for the simple reason that those people who did that picked guys who usually had great experience and had some possibility of getting elected. They certainly wanted a winner, but they wanted the best man they could get who could win.

But that was a bad deal, nobody liked that, so then we started this primary system, where we have a presidential primary in every state. Well, that has gotten to be so that Iowa, in order to get a lot of publicity, bring a lot of money in, Iowa, New Hampshire, and some other states, way early, early in the year before the election was to come would hold a presidential primary. So a guy like [Jimmy Carter](#), who was not really a well-known governor, who might have been a nice enough fellow but had no reputation beyond Georgia, he goes out there almost a year ahead of time, spends the whole winter in Iowa, visiting in these small precincts and these little small towns, and when the primary comes, because it's the first primary for president and he's about the only fellow running--the senators have got to stay here in Washington and can't be spending all their time out there; I mean, they go out, but they shouldn't be going out and spending all that time. They go into states like New Hampshire, which is a small state, they have very few electoral votes, it has less people in it than--I keep coming back to

the state of Florida--than you've got in Miami's county, Dade County has got more people than all of New Hampshire.

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A guy goes and spends his time in the middle of the winter, out there in Iowa and all those people like him, and they have a vote, and pretty soon a guy from Washington will send his name out, but what happens? The guy who sends his name out is fairly well known because he's been getting some press here, but the Iowans vote for the fellow who's been out there with them. So now Jimmy Carter is Number One Candidate. The press picks it up: Number One. He's already got committed delegates for the nomination, nobody else has any. So now you go to New Hampshire; it's the same damn thing. They go and live with these guys, and they get a little money and they work around the little towns. He goes to corn-basting, and chestnut-rolling, and county fair to help judge the cows and look at the pigs and all that kind of stuff, and the first thing you know, hell everybody says, "Isn't he a nice guy." He is a nice guy, but now he's won two primaries so he's obviously way out front. And here are your qualified people back in Washington who can't get out there and do that. They don't want to do it. It gets to be a bad system. You get guys like Dukakis, who began to win the primaries earlier than anybody else, and is better, and in some respects was better known than was Jimmy Carter. But we Democrats keep ending up with candidates who really is not as strong a candidate as we should have.

That's what was happening, so I introduced a bill based on the premise that if a guy's going to run, you have a nationwide primary, not just in Iowa on one day, not just in Kansas on their special day, not in New Hampshire on their special day, you have it on the same day. The Democratic and Republican parties could have different days, but they have one day that the guys all run for the nomination of the Democratic party. That means the guy who runs has got to be well-known throughout the country. He's got to be something of a nationwide figure, have some nationwide following, if you have it on the same day. So you can eliminate the freaks. That's a rough word, and I don't mean to apply that to Jimmy Carter too much, but he was a political freak. He's a nice, nice man, I'll say that. I like Jimmy Carter. But he's a political freak. And Dukakis was somewhat of one. Television has begun to move them up so you get a little better feel of who's running, who's getting the nomination, but it ought to be a nationwide primary.

Well, I didn't get anywhere with those bills. I didn't get anywhere, even though I tried to head it off. Now, somebody has introduced a bill here lately which I see getting some endorsements from some of the big newspapers. The New York Times gave it a reasonably fair review, said this may be the way to go, because at least what it does do is give you a nationally recognized fellow who can get up there and run, that means somebody who's done something, either as an outstanding senator or as an outstanding governor of a big state. I wouldn't say that every little state should not have a governor who is eligible to be president

someday, but he's got to have done something to get recognition nationwide at one time, rather than just singleshot until he finally builds himself into a lead. Because if you leave qualified people, a guy like [Lyndon Johnson](#) actually, he could have never had a shoe in. Had he not come the route he did through vice president, he'd have never been president, because he didn't

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have time to go out and run in the primaries. He was running the Senate. He was an important man, he couldn't do that. The important guys in the federal government can't go out and do this. It's some governor who can. But anyway, it seemed like a good idea to me. I liked it, and it got some support, but I never could get it passed in the Congress. Now I see that two people have picked it up, some senator has now said that he's going to introduce a bill on it. I think that's the way to go.

Okay, that's one thing that I was proud of that never got off the ground, but is still the most sensible, practical way to go, if you're going to eliminate the smoke-filled rooms and the selection on the convention the way it used to be back in the '20s, and '30s, and '40s. The other thing that I did not do but I talked about is this fund raising thing, which has gotten so terrible, the political action committees, the PACs. We desperately need to go back to a system where the only campaign contributions which can be made--and the media won't like this, the newspapers won't like this, the television won't like this particularly--campaign contributions can be made to a candidate only from the state from which he's running. A fellow who's running for the United States Senate has got to have campaign contributions only from his state.

It distorts the theory of senators representing their states, and congressmen representing their districts, when a political action committee from outside the state can finance the senatorial candidates' campaign in a state like Alabama or Louisiana or Oklahoma or wherever it is, or New Mexico, and the money is actually raised in New York. It gives to the large influential organizations, whether they be the National Association of Manufacturers, whether it be the National Bankers Association, whether it's the National Rifle Association, whether it's the United Mine Workers or whatever it is, it gives to those people too much authority the way we do it today, because they send money into all these states and congressional districts to help a guy get elected and the fellow who finally gets elected is always knowledgeable as to where the money is coming from and to whom he has to be grateful. They get influence which is sometimes contrary to what the people in his own district are thinking, or even in his own home state are thinking. It's a distortion which we should get away from.

If a guy who is going to run for the Senate has to start out and get money only from within the state boundaries, his opposition is limited to the same thing, then the people in the state who are supposed to have a senator representing them,

that candidate has to come to them every time he's running and say, "Look, I want you all to help me." And they have a chance to, in effect, police their own senator and their own congressman. He does not have the latitude as we talked about here where Lyndon Johnson and I used to raise money here in Washington and take it to Nebraska, I know we took it to Nevada to help [Howard Cannon](#). We helped them with money that was raised by our committee here in Washington from all these political organizations. So now the money's going to Nevada and you get a distortion as to what's really happening out there, because suddenly one candidate has got a lot of money.

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But it is not from the people in his state. It's not from Nevadans, it's from some organization in Detroit, Michigan, or in New York City, or Washington, D.C.

It defeats the basic concept of what democratic government's all about. If a fellow is going to run in Oklahoma, if he's going to run in Massachusetts, if he's limited to the money that he can raise from people in his home state they have more control. He's got to come to them every time he's going to run again. He's got to make his case to his own people. It would be healthier to have it, and we need to have that. I'm sorry that when I was there I didn't get that done. I thought about it a lot, but I never got anything in. But I want to be on record on that.

Ritchie: You mentioned about the nationwide primary that it didn't get anywhere. What was the nature of the opposition to it at the time?

Smathers: Indifference. "Well, you know George. . ." And they kept saying "There ought to be a constitutional amendment." That's ridiculous. Why would you need a constitutional amendment for a party? All we've got to do is pass a law that says that there will be a primary on that day, on May 2 of the that year, and everybody votes then. So all the Democrats in all fifty states in the Union go vote that day. You have another day for the Republicans to go vote. But they are voting on candidates who are nationally known. That says to guys like Jimmy Carter--I keep using him as an example--that means he just can't go out to Iowa and spend three months cultivating those people, because he's got to run in every state in the union. He wouldn't have time to spend the whole winter in Iowa, chatting with those people, sewing sweaters and whittling, and doing whatever they do in the middle of the winter out there. A nationwide primary eliminates that. We didn't get too far, but I see some senator put a bill in the other day, and there was a big editorial written that this is a great idea. Well, it is a great idea, but it's certainly not new. Okay, I'll stop with that,

Ritchie: I was hoping to ask you some questions about the press today. You mentioned earlier the newspapers and their reaction to things. I wondered what your assessment was of the way the media covered Congress while you were a member of Congress.

Smathers: I think that overall it was good. I don't have any complaints. A lot of people complain about the press. I think you have to understand that the press guys have a job. The reporters that come to cover you have to get a story. If they don't get a good story from time to time they don't have a job. The owners of the press know that their paper will be bought if their paper continues to beat some other paper in terms of getting scoops, getting more sensational stories, political or otherwise. So it starts right from the top, the owner right on down. They're all trying to make a living. It's money that really. . . I don't like to say it just like that because there's some people who hate to think that they do things because of money, but they do it because of

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the job that they've got. I'm guessing here, but I guess that the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Miami Herald*, they pay more to their reporters than does some paper like the Valdosta, Georgia, paper or something, and everybody wants to be reporters on the big five newspaper so to speak. Everybody wants to be a reporter for the big networks, because why? They make more money. It's certainly not more fun, they've got to produce more, they've got to be more productive. The competition's greater, they make more money.

They're having to do their job, and their job is trying to get in information. Now, you learn several things about reporters when you're in office. You can never have a secret and tell them about it, because it will be printed. If they don't print it, they'll leak it to one of their buddies so they can say, "I didn't write it." But it's a story, and a story is something that they want to get out because somebody else may print it before they do. They just flat cannot keep a secret. Naturally they could about war, or an atomic bomb explosion where the nation's welfare would be at stake. They're not going to print that. But they're going to print anything that's at all printable, and it doesn't make any difference whether it hurts an individual or whether it doesn't. They're going to print it.

People will say that's healthy, and it probably is healthy, but this is why I think however that there should be a sunshine law--they have it Florida--where you can't have a meeting of five guys in the cabinet secretly because the sunshine law says that you've got to have a reporter there. To me, I think that's ridiculous. I don't like that. I think it makes them just even more secretive. They can't take an official act without it being well-publicized, and it should be well-publicized in advance, but certainly they should be permitted to meet with each other and have coffee in the morning and not to have to have five reporters sitting there listening to everything they say and taking their pictures, because then they can't really converse with each other.

They can't say to each other, "Now, look, Joe, what do you really think? What will work and what won't work?" Because if they think "what I'm going to say is going

to be printed, and all of my constituents will read it tomorrow," they'll keep making speeches to each other. They're really afraid to say anything that might hurt their reelection. So they don't learn, they don't really exchange ideas, and half of this business of legislating is giving and taking. The press make it so that it's very difficult. That's why we have a lot less legislation being passed, any meaningful legislation, because you can't get them together in a room, like old Johnson used to do, and say, "Nobody's going to leave this damn room until we've got some kind of agreement. You Joe, you have to give up what you thought was going to be your biggest point." Now, Joe doesn't want to give up his biggest point if it's going to be publicized back in his state that he had to give it up. He might not get reelection if the newspaper people see it, and he's not going to give it up.

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So what happens is you never do get much legislation through these days. It's compromise, compromise, compromise. I think it slows the process down. It's kind of like a man and a woman being married, in a way. There should not be publicized all the fights between a husband and wife. Now, if they get a divorce, that's publicized. If one kills the other, that's publicized. But all the arguments that go on between them, when it takes a little while for them to adjust and get together--this is not a particularly good illustration, but in the absence of a better one, give me a moment and I'll think of some better ones.

But anyway, I think the newspapers have gone too far in wanting to know everything. Television is terrible. What they do to [Jackie Kennedy](#) is outrageous. She can't walk down the street without these reporters. She had to go to court to finally stop one guy from taking her picture and bothering her all the time. It gets to be an absolute nuisance, and it gets to be an infringement upon her personal rights. Okay, they say, "This is political, this is business of the community, this is business of the city, this is business of the state, this is business of the United States, and we reporters should be right in there writing every word that is discussed." The reason it shouldn't be is because you can't resolve anything like that. You cannot come to a consensus, because no politician wants to look like he's giving up his position in front of the press. They just don't do it.

Johnson would get you in a room and you knew damn well there wasn't going to be nothing written about. He'd say "I want you to do this, and I want you to do this, and I want you to do this." And the guy would say, "I can't do it." "Yes you can do it. Here's what we're going to do for you." And so on. And you'd come out of there with an agreement. That's the reason that Lyndon Johnson was able to pass civil rights legislation. You've got to remember, he was the only guy to pass civil rights legislation. He was the fellow who started the Medicare program, the big one. Johnson did that. We got more good legislation during Lyndon Johnson's administration than we've ever had before, in any four or six year

period. Johnson did it, and he did it by just bringing them in there and knocking heads together.

But if a newspaper guy had been sitting there, no senator could afford to have it said that he gave up on his position in order to compromise something and get it out. He's got to look strong. He's got to look brave. He's got to look as big as Johnson. "Nobody tells me what to do. Only my constituents tell me what to do. I'm not going to let anybody boss me around like that." And he won't. But he'll go into a meeting where nobody's going to report what's going on, and Johnson says, "Fellows, we've got to pass legislation. You're on this side, and you're on this side, and you're here in the middle, and you're here in the middle, but we've got to have fifty votes to get this through, okay? We've only got forty-six now, we've got to pick up five more, and you're the fellows who I think can help us pass the legislation by giving up some one thing you want. But we're going to give you something else over here." And he would put the thing together and we'd pass it.

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What do I think of the press? I think the press is essential. I think they are generally as honorable if not more honorable than anybody else, that they are as honorable as any other group of people, just like I think the members of Congress are as honorable as anybody you can find. Sure we've got some dumb guys, and sure we've got a few crooks that show up, but where are you going to get a hundred men and put them together that you're not going to find one or two bad apples? It's supposed to be representative of the people of the United States, and that's what it is. You've got some pretty bad apples. But the press overall is good. They're doing their job. I just wish they would recognize that they don't have to be in on everything. Obviously when it's finally brought out in the light and voted on, sure, they report that.

Ritchie: From what I gather, at least in the 1950s, maybe the early '60s, there was a sense in the press that a man's private life was his private business and wasn't to be reported on.

Smathers: That's right. You know, this gossipy stuff, I think the Kennedys probably started that. During his period they began to report more about a man's private life, because the people that Kennedy was allegedly mixed up with were all very prominent movie stars, stage stars, that sort of thing. That lent itself to an interesting story, everybody likes to read about movie stars and big people and all that kind of stuff, having dates or having dinner quietly, everybody likes to read that kind of stuff. I think it pretty much started then. It used to not be that bad, but since then they've reported a lot.

Nixon was very much opposed--that's not the right word--he was very fearful of the press. He went way out of his way, he was distrustful of the press. I thought he went too far the other way in my judgment. Johnson was very distrustful of the

press, but Johnson had enough sense to know that at some point the press was going to have to know what was happening. But I thought when Nixon was dictating these notes and having all these private meetings off the record, it was a little bit silly. He had a great paranoia. It was unfortunate. I think it exacerbated his problem. The more he was secretive, the more they pursued him. I don't ever remember his calling in the reporters and relaxing and sitting behind the desk and saying "Okay, fellows, what is it you want to know?" He had press conferences, but they were pretty well staged.

[Reagan](#) was pretty good at it. Johnson was pretty good at it. Kennedy was super at it. That's why they all loved him. Kennedy was admired and loved by the press. He had better press than anybody because the press liked him. He could turn off the questions that he didn't want to answer with a joke, with something humorous. Some of these people took themselves so seriously that they could never relax and joke about it. Say, "Okay, so what? I stumbled." I thought next to Kennedy, Reagan was the best at handling the press.

Ritchie: I got the sense that Johnson as a senator tried to cultivate reporters like William S. White and others.

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Smathers: He spent half his time cultivating the press. He would have them in and he would give one a little inside information, and then he would give another one a little inside information. He played them just like he did the senators, in a way.

Ritchie: Was he as successful with the press as he was with the senators?

Smathers: Well, he was pretty successful. He never did think he got a good press. He was always bitching about the fact that he didn't think the press was treating him quite right. I thought that the press treated him rather well. There were some individuals who would write columns that would give Johnson fits, give him trouble. The problem with Johnson was he would--I'll give you a good illustration, typical Johnson. The campaign of 1960, he's running for vice president of the United States, I'm in charge of the southern eleven states. We get a train. We were going to have a train go from Washington all the way to New Orleans. Johnson would stop the train and go off. And we'd get a plane, like we'd swing through Jacksonville and Tallahassee and we'd get some private planes to fly us to Miami and Tampa, and then we'd pick the train back up. We would make a few whistle-stops. Johnson would get out on the back. It would be advertised. And every state we'd go through we'd pick up the two state senators and the local congressmen. [Harry Byrd](#) rode with us through Virginia, and then we'd get to North Carolina and [Sam Ervin](#) would ride with us, and then South Carolina and so on.

Anyway, to make my point about Johnson being paranoid about the press--Nixon was very much the same way, but a little different type--we got to New Orleans at the end, and I thought it had been a very successful trip. We had big crowds and Johnson made pretty good speeches. Each time the two senators from the state would be on the back of the train with Johnson and have their picture taken. And he'd go off maybe for one little speech, maybe fifteen, twenty miles away, and so on and would come back to the train. Then we'd pick up the next couple of senators, the next congressmen. Now we're coming into New Orleans. The train stopped outside of the train station and we were backing the train into New Orleans where there was a fairly big crowd. The reason we wanted to back in was because it had a big porch on the back of the train, and Johnson and [Lady Bird](#) were going to come out there, and all the other people, me, and Russell Long and [Allen Ellender](#), and we were all going to have our picture made on the back of the train.

Okay, so here we are backing into the station, and I'm sitting there with Lyndon and I'm trying to keep him up. He's a guy you had to build up everyday. "You're doing great," "you're wonderful," and so on, because he would get down. "They didn't have a big enough crowd," "didn't have a big enough crowd," always complaining. Well, I thought we were doing great. We were backing in, and there had to be at least a thousand signs, "Kennedy/Johnson," "Kennedy/Johnson," all over the place. I'm saying, "Look at that. Now look at that wonderful sign there Lyndon. Look at that great big banner back there.

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Isn't that great." Johnson said, "Look at that son of a bitch! Look at that sign there!" "Johnson: Traitor to the South." There was one sign! I give you my word, it wasn't a foot high. It wasn't eight feet long. There were thousands of signs, and that's the one he picked out. "Goddamn it! Why can't you can't do something right?" I thought, this is the damndest fellow I had ever seen in my life, here we had all this, and all he could see was "Johnson: Traitor to the South." He jumped like he was shot. But that was typical Johnson, he could always find something that wasn't quite right. It had to be unanimous as far as he was concerned. But anyway, he produced. Okay, now what else did you want to ask me about the press?

Ritchie: As a senator, what was more useful to you: a story on the front page of the *New York Times* or in a Miami paper or Tampa paper?

Smathers: Oh, the Miami paper or Tampa paper much more so than the *New York Times*. There's a group of people in Florida, there's a group of people in every state who read the *New York Times*, but as far as numbers who read those respective papers, why it's ninety to one. The local papers are much more valuable to you than the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. They love to think they're that powerful. They write an editorial and they love to think that

somehow it influences the state of South Carolina. Well, they're crazy, it doesn't. [Fritz Hollings](#) would ten times rather have an editorial in the Greenville paper, or the Aiken, South Carolina, paper, or any other big city in South Carolina than he would in the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*.

Ritchie: Did you find that you had better relations with the Florida reporters than with the national reporters?

Smathers: Well, no. I had pretty good relations with most of them. The guy who used to cut me up terribly when I first got here was Drew Pearson. Of course, he was succeeded by Jack Anderson. Now, Jack Anderson and I got along great. Jack Anderson became one of my very close friends, and good friends. That's not to say he didn't write some things that were uncomplimentary about me from time to time, when he felt it. But if somebody called my office and said, "I'm Bill Safire from the *New York Times*," and another person called and said, "I'm Dave Craswell from the *Miami Herald*," I'd forget Bill Safire in a second and go to see Dave Craswell, because he wrote in the *Miami Herald*, and Bill Safire wrote in the *New York Times* and some other papers that weren't big in my state. There is some intellectual snobbery among people who like to say, "I read something in the *New York Times*," or some people would say in the *Christian Science Monitor*, some people would say in the *Wall Street Journal*. Those are very important papers, to a certain element of people, but politically they don't amount to anything, in my judgment. Now, in New York, sure. [Mario] Cuomo and the senators from New York, they damn sure got to worry about the *New York Times*, because that's what everybody in New York reads--not everybody, but a lot of them. They've got to worry about the New York papers. No, you worry about the papers in your own state.

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Ritchie: If you had a particularly good story, were there certain reporters that you would let it go to first?

Smathers: Sure. Yes. The *Miami Herald* group, the Jacksonville *Times-Union*, the Tampa *Tribune*, sure. Yes, if I had a particularly good story, if I knew we were going to have an appropriation that was going to bring in \$150 million to the McNeil Field over in Tampa, I would let the guys know from Tampa, I would call them and say, "I want to tell you something, but you don't print this till it's passed, but I think the votes are there. It should pass at ten o'clock tomorrow." The guy would say, "Well, can't you hold it up so that I can make it for my morning newspaper?" Well, that always presented a little problem, as to when you were going to release that information, so that which newspaper in a community would get it first. It would depend upon which one you liked the best, which one you thought was helping you the most.

Ritchie: Was there any difference between dealing with newspaper reporters and dealing with television and radio reporters?

Smathers: I never noticed any particular difference. See, television just came along when I was in the Senate. It had not developed as much. I had only one really tough race and that was way back in 1950, so I stayed there eighteen years after that, and television had not come along that much. I didn't have a hard race. But I'll say this, when I'd go to any town and had the opportunity to be interviewed by the television, I was very anxious for them to interview me, to give me that exposure. Sure, I liked that. All politicians do.

Ritchie: Did you always have a press secretary when you were a senator?

Smathers: Yes. I had some good ones and some sorry ones. But I had a couple of real good ones.

Ritchie: You mentioned some of the things that you promoted, like the national primary and things like that, did you have a sense of frustration that the press wouldn't focus on the things that you thought were worthy enough?

Smathers: Yes, right. And every now and then your press secretary and you--he was the fellow who you talked to mostly in your office. You had your administrative assistant who sort of headed up answering all the mail. You had your legislative assistant who helped you follow the specifics of a piece of legislation, particularly legislation which you were interested in promoting, and you had your press secretary who helped you deal with the press to get a favorable press for you as much as it was possible to get. You would talk with him about, "Now when are we going to release this story? We're going to vote so-and-so on this bill. Do we want to say anything about it before the vote?" You'd discuss it with him and make a decision and he would go over to the press gallery,

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sometimes with a press release that was printed up, send it around to the various papers.

Or you could get on television. The last four or five years you'd go downstairs, and one of the big things that all the guys do today is they have a television program that goes back into their districts and to their state. I started one, I was one of the first guys that did that. I got a weekly program in my state, starting let's say about the early '60s and ran one every week. I interviewed, and frequently I'd have people up from Florida. The governor of Florida would come here and I'd get him on my television program. We'd talk about what was doing in the state legislature, what we were doing up here in Washington, and what were the things that the people of Florida were interested in, and all that. I'd have the head Catholic priest on, and I'd have a strong Jewish representative on. I had Rabbi

Lehrman, whom I love, from Miami. I used to call him "my rabbi," got him in trouble saying that at the time. But he's a wonderful speaker and a wonderful guy. Every time he'd come to Washington I'd put him on my television program. I'd get a lot of compliments from the Miami area particularly, where there is a big Jewish population. But he was so good, he was so smart, everybody loved him.

That's the kind of thing that you constantly did in order to keep your contact with the people back home. You had your weekly broadcasts, and then on top of that you'd send out all your newsletters, which were a very good thing. I see they're going to stop some of it, this junk mail. You'd also write a weekly column, which some weekly papers would print: weekly column from your senator. You'd write what happened in Congress this week, and how it affected the school program, and how it affected the health program, and all this. Being a senator was a full-time job, just one big job.

Ritchie: Is it harder for a senator, being in Washington, to get press coverage back in the home state, than say the governor and the local political figures?

Smathers: No, it depends on the story. I think the story determines whether or not you get a good press. The press is looking for the best story. The governor can say something pretty stupid sometime, and they're not going to carry that. Or the governor can say something that's very impressive, the same way the senator can. He hands out a press release and you don't see anything. What happened? Well, they didn't think that was much of a story, that's why they just didn't print it.

Ritchie: Did you ever get political advice from reporters in your state? Reporters who might advise you on what was happening there?

Smathers: Oh, yes. My experience with reporters was that I learned about as much from them as they learned from me, especially those who were back in the state. They'd come in and ask you a couple of questions, and then you'd start asking them: who's going to get elected mayor? Is the waterways

bill going to pass? Does Nelson Poynter of the *St. Petersburg Times* still got his nose out of joint? Those kinds of things. The answer is yes. I had wonderful relations with a large number of reporters. Some of them you felt were out to get you all the time, and so you didn't open up too much around them. Happily for me there were only a few guys that I felt didn't like me, and I didn't like them. That's always mutual. If you like a reporter it's because you like him because he likes you. It's a mutually advantageous thing. And if you've got a good story that sometimes you can let him have before somebody else, why you'll do it. It's a game that everybody plays. Johnson was a master of that.

Ritchie: You mentioned earlier, Drew Pearson, who gave you a pretty rough time in a lot of columns.

Smathers: A whole lot of columns. He was for [Claude Pepper](#) very strongly. He wrote column after column. I venture to say that over the course of a year and half he wrote fifty columns that were just as damaging to me--or he thought they were, and he wanted them to be as damaging to me as was possible. Anything that I had ever done that he felt was wrong, why he emphasized it. Jack Knight, who owned the *Miami Herald*, later to form Knight-Ridder newspapers, the *Detroit Free Press*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and so on, he was my good friend. He endorsed me. I used to say, "Jack, why do you carry that guy every day and he cuts me up?" He said, "George, don't worry about it. I'm going to endorse you when the time comes." "Yeah, I know that," I said, "but he's out there every day and you give me that endorsement once a year at most, and he's chewing me to death." He said, "Oh, you're too sensitive." And that's somewhat the truth.

I think the general public is really pretty good about sifting out in their own minds who is really leveling, who they want to believe and who they don't want to believe. Generally speaking, I think the public is pretty much on to who's really genuine and who isn't; who's reaching hard for a story, and who isn't. After they read the paper for a number of months or years, they come to their own conclusions about who they want to believe. And apparently, Drew Pearson wasn't hurting me as bad as I thought he was. It's tough, though, when you see your name in the paper and it's been circulated throughout the state, and a lot of people are reading it. Jack Knight used to say, "Now, George, in the first place not half the people read it that you think read it. Half of them that read it are on your side, and they don't believe it. And the other half, there's nothing you could do in your life that would make them be for you anyway. So forget it." I said, "Jack, wait till you get a little criticism." Every now and then somebody would write about him as head of the paper, and oh my God, he was so sensitive. He couldn't believe it. "By God! That's about me!"

My brother used to say that about me. I recall one time that I had been complaining about Drew Pearson, and Lyndon Johnson was at my house when this happened. I was living in Chevy Chase, this was about the time I believe that Lyndon first became majority leader. But my brother was in Miami, and he called me up and told me about a story that was in the paper that morning.

Drew Pearson's column was unfriendly to me, very unfriendly, very distorted I used to think. He would take a few little facts and twist them around so that it would come out incorrectly and very uncomplimentary to me. But it so happened that I had picked up a story in the other paper, the *Miami Daily News*. The *Miami Herald* carried Pearson, and the *Miami Daily News* carried an article on the financial page. My brother was a banker, and they had written this story that

was very uncomplimentary to bankers. It said that Frank Smathers, who is president of the Florida State Bankers has done something--I forget what it was--but it was very hurtful and he did it only for the betterment of his own stock in the bank or something like that. So he was telling me about this sad story by Drew Pearson, and I was saying, "Oh, my God." And I said, "By the way, did you see the story about you in the *Miami Daily News*?" He said no. I said, "Let me read it to you." So I got the paper and brought it back to read to him. "God almighty, can you believe that?" I said. He said, "Yeah, but that's about me!" That's just the way it is. If it's you, it's entirely different. It's always easy for a guy to be brave if it's about somebody else, even though it's about his friend.

Ritchie: Drew Pearson had a reputation of getting inside information from certain senators, [Wayne Morse](#) was one. People said that he was always providing things to him.

Smathers: Who was that?

Ritchie: Wayne Morse.

Smathers: Oh, sure, Wayne Morse and Drew Pearson were just like that.

Ritchie: Did that create a problem in the Senate, as to whom you could divulge information?

Smathers: Sure. You couldn't tell Wayne Morse anything. As I said earlier, Wayne Morse wanted to be, he would have voted to be in the minority. The worse thing that could ever have happened to Wayne Morse was for him to say that he was on the side of the majority. He didn't ever want to be there. He wanted to be an absolute iconoclast. He wanted to be different. He wanted to stand out because of his difference. [Proxmire](#) was somewhat like that, but not like Wayne. Proxmire was to my way of thinking a much more sensible, rational guy than was Wayne Morse. Wayne Morse was a big buddy of Drew Pearson's and they would just, you know, collaborate together. I think that Drew Pearson was the one that got Wayne to change from a Republican to a Democrat.

Ritchie: Another reporter who gave you a pretty rough time was Clark Mollenhoff.

Smathers: Yeah. Clark was a great big old fellow, about two inches taller than me, and I'm six foot two. He didn't like me for some reason, and I don't know exactly what it was. But he always gave me a hard time. I mean, whatever it was that he could find that was wrong, or he felt was wrong, he wanted to write it. Now, I don't remember exactly anything, but whatever it was that he could make me look bad, he made me look bad. And yet I got along with him. I'd laugh at

him, and he would laugh at me. I'd say, "Well, Clark you really cut me up today." He'd laugh and say, "Well, you wait till next week, I've really got something I'm going to cut you up with." He was also a great liberal, see. All the guys that opposed me were great liberal writers. I was a middle of the road guy and they didn't like that because I had a lot of influence with Jack Kennedy, and with Lyndon Johnson, and with the leadership, and was always up in the leadership myself. They didn't like that. If I had just been a raggedyass regular senator, why maybe I wouldn't have had any bad things written about me. It wouldn't have been worthwhile.

Ritchie: When you were a senator, was it still fairly common for senators to practice law on the outside and to carry on outside business?

Smathers: I didn't know anybody who did.

Ritchie: You didn't? It wasn't against the rules then.

Smathers: No, I don't know anybody who did. I still had my name in the office, but I didn't take any money from it, and I didn't practice law. I don't really know of any senator who did. I know a lot of them who kept their names there, even today. Claude Pepper had his name. [Danny Fascell](#) today has got his name in an office in Miami. I don't think Danny practices law at all, but he's in a big firm down there. I don't think we should do that. Today, I would say we ought to get out. There shouldn't even be that suggestion.

Ritchie: I was going to ask, is it possible if you're an officeholder like a senator, to do almost anything else on the outside without their being some question as to conflict of interest?

Smathers: I don't think that a senator or a congressman today should have any connection with any type of law firm, or be in anything that has government connections or government connotations. I think that you just have to be clean as Caesar's wife. You have to be above criticism. You have to be above reproach. I think that it's unwise for a congressman even to let his name be in a law firm, even though he doesn't do anything. I left my name in it, and looking back I wouldn't do that again. I didn't practice law, I didn't get any money, but what you keep thinking is that someday I might be defeated and I'll want to go back to that office. That's why you do it, mainly. You want to keep your name there so that if all of a sudden you're out of a job, which you could be at any election, that you've got a place to go. I think that's why they do it. I don't think it's because of the money, or the influence. As a matter of fact, I don't think there's any money in it for them. I think the other fellows make

the money, I don't think the senators do. Claude Pepper had a little outside business, he was on the board of directors of the Jefferson Savings and Loan Association. They may have given him a little something, but it didn't amount to anything. But I don't think it's a good idea. I'm opposed to people doing it. They should not do that.

I think it's very bad for a fellow to build up campaign contributions and keep them after he retires from the Senate. I think that's very dangerous. I think it should not be done because fellows who don't even have opposition, they go out and raise money--there's a story in today's paper in North Carolina when I left this morning, about a fellow who maybe secretary of agriculture or something, but he's built up a campaign fund over the years. They asked him: what are you going to do with it? He said, "I'm going to use it in my next campaign." But he's never had any opposition. He's not going to have any opposition this time, but he's out raising money. So he's got a hundred and fifty thousand dollars saved up, and then they point out that the law of North Carolina says that he can keep that. Well, that's not right, because people give it to him not to provide a sinecure for him after he's gone, they don't give him a retirement. That's not his pension program, he's got a pension program from the government when he gets out. That's wrong, he should be required to give that money back to the people.

Oh, I'm glad you brought this up. I'm the first fellow in Florida who ever sent back campaign contributions. I was the first guy ever to do that. I got more good publicity out of that than just about anything I ever did. See, I never had any tough race after 1950, so I was there eighteen years and it was easy to collect money because everybody thought I was going to win. But I'd send it all back. I'd show them what money had been spent, where it went, to establish a headquarters, that sort of thing, make a few television appearances, but it was a nothing deal. Here's where it went. Here's what you get back. I got more good publicity and more compliments on that than probably anything I ever did, which is interesting. I'm glad you brought that up.

Ritchie: I raised the question about outside interests because that always seems to raise implications.

Smathers: That's right.

Ritchie: Even if there's no evidence, there's a sense that if a person supports something they must somehow have some interest in it.

Smathers: It's the appearance. It's the appearance more than the fact. If it appears that you are a member of a big law firm, and then you see the law firm is now representing somebody who wants to build a cross-state canal or something, and you think, "Well, the congressman's name is in that firm, so obviously he's for it, and obviously they're going to get some big money because they represent it." It looks bad. Even if it doesn't happen that way it still looks bad. It's the appearance. You have to be as good in your life, and you must

appear totally honorable and above any sort of campaign bribery or payoffs or anything like that. You just cannot have anything to do with that, or look like you are.

Ritchie: Some of the press attacks on you dealt with the Dominican Republic, early in the '60s, and your support of the government there.

Smathers: Well, the reason they did was because I went down and visited Trujillo a couple of times. I know that they jumped on me for that because he was a well-known dictator. First, there was never any money involved, okay. The interesting thing about that was that compared to Haiti, compared to all the other Central American countries, believe it or not, Trujillo as dictatorial as he was, had more schools per thousand students than any other country in Central America. More paved roads per square mile of land than any other country in South America. More hospitals than any other country in Central or South America in point of numbers of people. So while he was a tough dictator, ran everything with an iron hand, still the people were better off, had better schools, better health care, better roads, than any other country. Now, they'd say to me, because he doesn't have elections you shouldn't go down there. Well, I'd go down there and talk to him about: when are you going to have elections? Just like I did with Fidel Castro. That was my bag--I don't like that word--that was the thing that I liked to do, to go to Central and South America. I was chairman of the committee for Central and South America, so I went there most every year. I got criticized because I went to see Trujillo, because a lot of the liberal press did not think I ought to go to see him. Well, I went to see him just like I did--who was the guy who came in after him?

Ritchie: Juan Bosch?

Smathers: Bosch, he's running this time again. Eighty years old. I knew Bosch.

Ritchie: And Balaguer.

Smathers: And Balaguer is today the president. Balaguer is blind. He was Trujillo's secretary. When I went to see Trujillo, Balaguer was there in the room. But look at them as compared to Haiti. Gee, what a disaster Haiti has been. Always. I went over there a couple of times to see Poppa what was his name?

Ritchie: Poppa Doc Duvalier.

Smathers: Duvalier. But I didn't go back because he was so disgusting. He didn't make any sense. He had no sense. Now, Trujillo was a smart son of a bitch. But like the old joke, he was our son of a bitch. He was on our side. He had been

in the United States Marine Corps. I mean, he had helped train the United States Marines. He was tough on his enemies, no question, but he

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did more for the country than has ever been done before or since. But I don't want to be remembered as the guy who tried to defend Trujillo.

I went to see Poppa Doc, I went on down and saw the Somoza's in Nicaragua in those days, I went on into Panama. I've got medals from Panama, helped them bring out democratic institutions. I went on into Venezuela. I visited them all.

Ritchie: But anyone who had any dealings with the Dominican Republic was always suspected of being in the pay of the Dominican Republic.

Smathers: Well, I wouldn't be surprised. He had a lot of people on his payroll, he had Rubirossa and people like that. But just because I went there, nobody ever accused me of ever being on his payroll. That's one thing that never happened. I never got accused of being dishonest. I got accused of making bad judgments, like they thought it was a bad judgment to visit Trujillo. Claude Pepper went to visit Joe Stalin. Now, you take dictator versus dictator, I don't know. He never got criticized because that was the liberal press. Who are you going to criticize? Is Trujillo in any way comparable to Joe Stalin? Gosh, Stalin killed millions. If Trujillo did, I don't know about it. He killed some, I have no doubt, I couldn't prove it, I don't know that, but I'm sure when he came into power he was a pretty tough guy.

Ritchie: About Latin America, you mentioned earlier about the senators and how hard it was to get them to pay attention. Did you find that the press paid much attention to Latin America?

Smathers: No, nobody. The press didn't pay any attention to Latin America either. Nobody did. It was a very uphill battle and a very discouraging battle. You get terribly discouraged about it. You know, you could go to Argentina and see the value of that country, a rich, marvelous country with really good people. When Peron was in, I visited him, spent a night in his palace and all this stuff, and talked to him on three or four different occasions. That was a wonderful country, but they had a very difficult time handling their own finances.

As I used to preach then, and I preach even today, we're going to find when the European Community comes into realization in 1990 and 1991, that there's going to be a wall around them where they trade with each other. They're not going to be trading with us if they can trade with each other. We're not going to be selling automobiles over there. We're not going to be selling tractors over there. We're not going to be selling the things we're selling over there today. Why? Because they'll be one big community and they're going to have one tariff wall and it will

be around those fourteen countries of Europe. Where are we going to trade? We're going to have to trade south. We should have started doing it a long time ago, building up the South American economy. They're rich countries, they're beautiful countries. They can produce certainly a lot of things

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that we can't produce. That's where we should have been looking all these years.

Ritchie: It seems like the press can only focus on Latin America if there's a crisis or a revolution. Why is that? Why is that on a regular basis it's a blank spot on the map?

Smathers: I don't know. I guess you did if you went to school at Oxford, like [Bill Fulbright](#), or Cambridge, or you went to the University of Paris, if you went into Heidelberg, to pick out some of the intellectual places, but when you went to high school, who ever took Latin American history? Nobody. You were required to take certain history, and what did everybody take? European history. Mid-European history between certain ages and so on. Everybody who comes out of school knows about France, they know about Germany, they know about Italy, they know about Russia, they know about Poland. They had all of that. But you asked these kids today, half of them, can they name four countries in South America, and they can't name them. The educational system has never been aimed at all to South America.

Our culture, most of it, has come from Europe, our families come from Europe. Your family, way back, came from Europe. My family, way back, came from Europe. We all came from Europe. Very few people in the United States--there are more and more of them--come from South America. So its natural to know a lot about your heritage, your genealogy takes you back to Germany, takes you back to Italy, takes you back to Poland, takes you back to France, takes you back to England, wherever. Damn little genealogy takes anybody back to Peru, or to Argentina, or Chile. So what do you do? When you go through school you study about what is interesting to your mother and daddy, what was interesting to their mother and daddy, it's Europe. But, economically speaking, we're going to find that our salvation is going to be with South America.

Ritchie: Was the Florida press more attuned to Latin America?

Smathers: Yes. We're closer to Cuba. It's more attuned. The answer to that is simply yes.

Ritchie: Probably more so now than when you were in office.

Smathers: More so now even then when I was there, that's right. We've got a congresswoman elected now from Claude Pepper's old district, actually my

congresswoman, who was born in Cuba. That's the first time we've had a Cuban-born person to be in the United States Congress. So more and more in the communities around Dade County there are five little separate communities and the mayor of each one of those is a Latin. So, all right, are you running out of things now to ask me?

Ritchie: Yes, I would like to come back one more time, if I could.

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Smathers: All right, but let's postpone it for maybe two weeks. That will give you time to think of something, and I may think of something else. I was glad--I wanted to get on the record today about the primary and about the campaign funds.

Ritchie: Well, at the end of the interview I'd like to wrap up by asking if there aren't any additional things that we haven't covered. So if there's anything I've left out, please let me know.

Smathers: I think that's good. I like it, and I appreciate your time.

[End of Interview #7]

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George A. Smathers
United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969

Interview #8: Outside the Senate

(Tuesday, October 17, 1989)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

Smathers: Thank you for getting that information about the Latin American peace force, and that in 1963 I made that speech on the floor of the Senate referring to the fact that some years previous I had recommended that the Latin Americans have their own inter-American peace force. Here it is, I'm quoting me on page 4375 of the *Congressional Record*, where I'm saying "On November 15, 1960, I urged Secretary Herter to call for a plenary session of the OAS to investigate the threat of Castro's communism in this hemisphere, and for the United States to assume the leadership for the formation of an inter-American police force."

Actually, I wasn't aware of that so much as I was that I had made a speech several times about the desirability of having an inter-American police force. What happens is that when you have a dictatorship such as the type that people didn't like with Trujillo, even though I think I pointed out to you that Trujillo actually did a great deal of good along with a great deal of bad, which is the way those dictatorships usually go for a while. They start off and they do some good things, but they end up doing mostly bad things, and they take away people's rights, which is the worst thing they do. But every time we the United States interfere with military power in Latin American, as we started to do with Castro in the Bay of Pigs invasion, we get criticized very badly for it. Then when [Lyndon Johnson](#) came in and we sent the Marines into the Dominican Republic, after Trujillo had died and there was some doubt whether or not a communist leader, Bosch then, who was presumed to be leading toward the communists, would get control. The United States did not want him to do that, and Johnson actually sent the Marines in at that particular time, and stabilized the country, and called for an election, and slowed things down so that Bosch was never elected. It ended up with our friend. . . .

Ritchie: Balaguer

Smathers: Balaguer getting elected president. But every time we, the United States, do something in that part of the world we get criticized for it. We look like a big bully telling them how to run their business, and they resent it. So this is why I started a long time ago in recommending that the inter-American group that we had in the Alliance for Progress and all the other things that grew out of it, that they create their own police force. It would save a dickens of a lot of money because, for example, rather than the Venezuelans having to raise a lot of money, tax a lot of people heavily to have their own military, and then the minute

they do it, right next door to them the Ecuadorians think they've got to have it, then the Peruvians think they've got

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to have it, and each one has got to get its own military force sufficiently big so they figure they won't be overrun by their neighbor. The truth of the matter is, none of them can really afford it. The truth of the matter is, that money would be infinitely better spent in schools, and hospitals, and roads, and the sort of things that would be beneficial to the public.

I had long ago recommended that there be set up an inter-American police force, and let each one of those countries contribute to it. They would have a thousand, or two thousand, of their own soldiers in this group. It would be run by the Latin American or Inter-American Council, I forget what it was called at that time. In any event, what brings it to my mind is that this past week at the United Nations in New York, the Secretary General has recommended this very same thing. He's asking all the countries of Latin America as well as throughout the world to approve of this idea, of having a Latin America peace force. I did that back in 1960, so here we are 29 years later doing the same thing. It's still a good idea, because that's really the way it ought to go. Then one country is no longer fearful of the other country invading it.

If there is an agreement among those countries that a fellow like Noriega should go, all they've got to do then is say, "Mr. Noriega, go," because we've got a force--and it's a Latin force--that can go in there and remove him. If they don't like the way things are going in Haiti, they say, "Military, we don't like the way you're running it, out you go." And let's have some elections or whatever it is those Latins want to have. But anyway, it makes a lot of sense, so I was very pleased to see that's what the United Nations was now debating and discussing. Now, you've got to ask me some questions.

Ritchie: I do have some questions. Looking at the South in the years that you served, when you came into the Senate there was a solid South, today there is a two-party South.

Smathers: Right.

Ritchie: I wondered how you accounted for the difference in the South from 1950 to 1989?

Smathers: There isn't really a great deal of basic economic nor even political change, believe it or not. What's happened is, they've changed parties. The reason that they've changed parties is that the Democratic party has let itself be pictured as the party of the minorities, the blacks, the foreigners, and the people of the South are essentially conservative. They were originally all Democrats, but the

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Dukakises of the world--and this is not any particular criticism of him--but when you read the Democratic platform today it's very offensive to most southern people. I was a Democrat. In a couple of races I didn't even have a Republican opponent. Senator [Holland](#) never had a Republican opponent. He was very conservative. I was very conservative. [Harry Byrd](#) was very conservative. [Dick Russell](#) was very conservative. [John Sparkman](#) was very conservative. [Lister Hill](#) was very conservative about some things. There

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were all elements where we were conservative, I'm talking mostly economically speaking.

When the Democrats began to be dominated, so to speak, by northern groups, and particularly New England Democrats, it began to turn southern Democrats off. The southern Democrats find themselves very comfortable with western Democrats. As time has gone on and it's not considered so important today to belong to either a Republican party or a Democratic people, but where people will have no hesitancy in crossing political lines, which we see happening everyday in the Florida legislature. This current legislature there are four members of the House who have just in the last eighteen months declared themselves Republicans and no longer Democrats, because they're much more comfortable with the Republican attitude toward finances, the Republican attitude toward schools, the Republican attitude toward deficit spending, the Republican attitude toward affirmative action programs. They find themselves much more in tune with the Republican viewpoints than with the Democratic viewpoints.

As a matter of fact, if the Democratic party--and you're not asking me for this, I'm just volunteering this--does not rework itself, and come up with a nomination for president from [Chuck Robb](#) of Virginia, or [Bob Graham](#) of Florida, or some reasonable conservative southerner or westerner, the Democratic party will never carry any election in the South. It's just gotten that bad. And the problem is that the Jesse Jacksons of the world, and the people who are constantly talking about the minorities, and constantly talking about how we have to appropriate more money because we don't have enough jails, and you know, all of these social things, and these admittedly good things but dreamy things--that's what the Democratic party has let itself be pictured as nationwide, and that's why they're not winning any nationwide elections. They haven't elected a president--the last Democratic president was Lyndon Johnson, wasn't it?

Ritchie: Carter.

Smathers: [Jimmy Carter](#), that's right. I forgot about Jimmy. But Jimmy gets up there and becomes pretty liberal right off the bat again. That doesn't sell any longer in the old southern eleven states, or in the midwest, Oklahoma, Texas, or anywhere like that. It sells probably a little better even in California, but it doesn't

sell that well in the South or in the West. So, you ask me the question, yeah we were all Democrats, but [Strom Thurmond](#) I guess led the fight--not the fight--led the flight, I should say, from the Democratic party. He was a Democrat, now he's one of the outstanding Republicans. But you see them more and more.

Bob Graham, whom I think is a young man with a great potential and a lot of ability, but he's having to constantly be careful that he's not identified too strongly with a national ticket, unless he can get [Sam Nunn](#) and a couple of midwestern Democrats to go along with him. He does not want [Teddy Kennedy](#).

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He does not want some of these so-called flaming liberals, most of whom come from the New England states or the upper midwest states. I don't think the Democrats are going to win anything unless they can come back into the more middle of the road type of economic philosophy and political philosophy, and the whole sensible--what people think are sensible programs. Anyway, that's what it is. It's gotten that way, and it's going to get worse before it gets better.

A thing that really has been bad is the writing of the Democratic platform, which has been controlled solely by minority groups. They express their strong minority views, and all it does when you take some of those platforms and take them down into Alabama and Mississippi and Arkansas and Oklahoma and you start reading what the Democratic platform stands for, it turns everybody off. So, that's my answer, and I know I'm right. That doesn't mean that everybody agrees with me. Oh, hell, no, very few people would agree with me.

Ritchie: How do you figure the civil rights legislation into the equation? The civil rights bills of '64 and '65 that Johnson got through?

Smathers: Well, see, I think that, as I've said to you before that Lyndon Johnson was the fellow who moved all of us along toward more, you might say, more progressive, more broadminded, more open-minded civil right legislation. He did that. Those major civil rights legislation were all passed under Lyndon Johnson, he was responsible for most of them.

Civil rights is no longer a big issue in the South, politically. I mean, every now and then you'll see a little outbreak of something, but it's a minor thing. You see more trouble in segregated districts in New York and in Detroit and in Milwaukee. There's more bad blood demonstrated in New York than there has been anywhere in the South in the last five years. I venture to say you're never going to see--every now and then a few crackpot kids will go out and do something totally asinine, but they're a very limited minority. Most southerners are very, very happy about the way the civil rights thing has gone. They're pleased about it. The southern people as a group don't dislike at all the black people, they grew up with them. You've heard me on this before. They knew them. It was the

black folks who worked the farms, and who developed whatever economy we had. That's why the white folks from the South are more comfortable with the blacks than the North white people are. They've got harder segregation lines now in New York City than they've got anywhere in Florida.

Ritchie: But you don't think that the Democrats' identification with civil rights legislation tended to drive some people out of the Democratic party in the South?

Smathers: Nope. I don't know of anybody. You know, there were some few rednecks, but they're very few. After '64, when Johnson passed the Civil Rights act, the South still voted pretty strongly for Democrats. There was never a Republican senator. Florida never had a Republican senator. South Carolina

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never had a Republican senator. No, no, that didn't bother anybody. It's just recently, it's these affirmative action programs that they talk about. They continue to harp on them. These leaders of the Democratic party today are actually polarizing the voters, and by doing that they're driving out the moderates into independent parties or into voting the Republican ticket. See, actually, while there were less Republicans registered in Florida, for example, as voters, yet the Republican presidential candidate has been getting elected. Which means what? Which means that Democrats are voting for the successful Republican candidate.

Ritchie: Florida has gone Republican in almost every presidential election except '64 and '76.

Smathers: That's right.

Ritchie: Those were the only two Democratic victories going all the way back to when Eisenhower carried it.

Smathers: That's right. Florida will be more Republican than Alabama or South Carolina or Georgia or Tennessee or some of those states because we have such a great number of people who have moved in from out of state. We're not a state of native sons, we're a state of transplants. But most of the people who have come down there have been reasonably well off. Some people think that just only rich people live there, but that isn't the case at all. Our standard of living, I think the average income of our people in Florida today, out of the fifty states I would guess we're somewhere in the top fifteen. But we don't have the overall wealth that a lot of other states have. Massachusetts, or Rhode Island, or Connecticut, they're way ahead of us.

Ritchie: When you were still in the Senate, in 1966 Florida elected a Republican governor, Claude Kirk. So the Florida Republican party was obviously coming along. Did that affect you in your political calculations?

Smathers: Not really. See, he had been a big Democrat. He had been a very active Democrat. He was a guy who liked publicity and got a lot of publicity. He changed from the Democratic party to the Republican party, and just the mere fact that you can make yourself stand out when you're a candidate, and there are five guys running for governor, if all of a sudden you can make yourself stand out by doing something somewhat dramatic or something that gets a lot of public attention, then all of a sudden you have moved yourself out front. Because now the people in Florida they don't know, half the voters there haven't been there but about three or four years, and they're not sure who's what. So as more Republicans moved in, and as the state really became more conservative, why everybody is moving from the Democratic party to the Republican party.

We're seeing this happen right now. You know, the abortion thing, my golly, as it's becoming more evident that pro-choice people are the larger number

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of people, guys who are running for office now in the last two weeks, I see, originally they were pro-life and now they have taken stands and votes that indicate that they can go both ways. As a matter of fact, Governor Martinez of Florida, who is basically a Catholic. I love Catholics, God knows, Jack Kennedy was a great Catholic and I loved him--that doesn't have anything to do with it--but they're basically pro-life. They have been taught to be that way all of their lives. The Pope says that pro-life is it, so to the extent that they can, why they stay that way.

Now, Martinez, Catholic, Spanish, so on, he thought, I think, that he was going to be really very highly accepted over the state when he announced, "I'm going to call the legislature into session and we're going to have a session on nothing but this abortion issue, and we're going to go pro-life." He offered some amendments which would have advanced the cause of the pro-life people. He suddenly discovered, much to his amazement and everybody else's amazement that wasn't really what the state legislature thought at all. As a matter of fact, they didn't take a pro-choice position, they just adjourned. They didn't do anything. They just said, "Look, we think you're wrong, but we're not going to say it, we're just not going to do anything." So they adjourned, and he couldn't do anything about it. But it was evident that was the way the public is going. But that's the way all this politics is. They go a little with the wind, that's what it should be. This is representative government. They guys are supposed to represent the thinking of the people.

Ritchie: As a former Democratic senator, do you think that the South is better off now being a two-party system, or do you miss the old days.

Smathers: That's an interesting question, because it depends upon how you look at it as what's better off. The answer is, if we liked the old South, if we liked

the old traditions, if we liked the old habits, if we liked the rural society, obviously we're not better off, because it has changed. Today the majestic oaks, pines, the old homes, you don't see that anymore. The days of "Gone With the Wind" are gone with the wind. You see that in a few spots in Georgia, and Florida, Alabama, and Arkansas. You'll go into Charleston, South Carolina, and see a lot of it. But you don't see much of it, that's all gone. So you ask me whether they're better off today, I think that they're much better off today than they've ever been. Their standard of living is higher for everybody. The level of education is better for everybody.

The blacks are infinitely better off. They're now the leaders. They're accepted into the schools. There are no schools today that prohibit blacks. When I was in the Senate, you couldn't get a black into some of the schools. Today, why people don't bother with that thought at all. It's accepted. The racial barriers are happily and fortunately breaking down very rapidly. So I have to say that they're infinitely better off. The standard of living is better, their health is better, knowledge is better. We've got more people. So I think that the South has moved out of its Civil War inheritance and has moved into

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the modern twentieth century very nicely, and is demonstrating considerable economic influence and power as well as a lot of political power.

They've always had political power because of the rule of seniority, when Senator [George](#), and Dick Russell, and [John McClellan](#), and Spessard Holland, and these fellows who had been in the Senate a long time, all southerners, and they had stayed there many, many years, [Carl Hayden](#) from Arizona, they stayed there throughout the years and they obtained the seniority. They were very powerful politically and that made the South very powerful politically. I don't think that today the South is as powerful politically in the Congress as it used to be. I'm sure it isn't. But that doesn't mean that the people aren't a lot better off. I think the people in these southern states are infinitely better off than they were. I think there's been great progress in that particular field.

Ritchie: We're coming to the end of your Senate term in the late 1960s. Around the mid-sixties you decided not to run again for reelection in 1968. Why did you decide to retire from the Senate at that stage?

Smathers: There were several good reasons. One, I'd been in the Senate eighteen years, I could see that. I could not, by virtue of having gotten off the Commerce Committee, at President [Kennedy](#)'s request, I'd given up my seniority and gone on the Foreign Relations Committee, where I was very, very junior. On the Finance and Taxation Committee, which was my big committee, I was behind my dear friend Russell Long, whom I loved and adored and admired, and he's two years younger than I am, or was, still two years younger than me. I had also

pretty well, by getting angry with Lyndon Johnson and telling him that I didn't want to go up in the hierarchy under him, and moving [Mansfield](#) into my place, which I did, I had pretty well blocked that off too. So there I was, not being able to go any higher in the Senate, so to speak, and having no particular great ambition to want to run as a national figure. So it looked like to me, that all I was going to be was just another senior senator, with considerable influence by virtue of my general seniority, but I would have no significant position. That was number one.

Number two of the reasons why I got out, which was a very strong reason, was that a lot of my very dear, close friends were no longer there. Despite the fact that I had debated with [Hubert Humphrey](#) all the time, I missed Hubert, he was no longer there. Lyndon Johnson was no longer there. Jack Kennedy was no longer there. The people that I really did like were really no longer there anymore. [Earle Clements](#) was gone, [Albert Gore](#) was gone, a number of people like that that I had come in with, the people that I had come into the Congress with, either in the House or the Senate, they were no longer there. And here were all these young guys, younger guys. You know, you always look down upon these new young fellows who come in, because they don't know what they're talking about. They've got to learn a lot, and so on, but they were all very cocky, all very bright, and in many ways they wanted to change things around. And it just wasn't as comfortable for me. That was reason number two.

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Number three was that the Congress is very much the same. It lost a lot of its appeal and excitement. You have the same type of legislative problems every single year, the same ones. You've got a budget problem. How do you pass the budget? The military want all this, the social workers want all this. You've got to give something to education. The old people have got to get their money, and they're entitled to their money. Then the tax problem comes in, what are you doing with respect to it? Are we running a balanced budget or not? Then the next big issue is balance of trade with the foreign countries. But those are the same issues that are there today. Exactly the same issues. No different. The only thing they've got are different numbers, that's all it is, different numbers. So you say to yourself, "By God, I've been through this now for twenty-two years. Do I want to spend the next six years of my life doing exactly the same things, except with a few different personalities and the numbers a little different. You've got a different president from time to time, but it's the same issues, exactly the same issues. What are we going to do about salaries? What are we going to do about Europe? What are we going to do about military defenses? Same things. Different, of course, as times change, but not basically different. So that's the real reason. You get bored, you want to do something different

I had never been out in the private world at all. From the time I had gotten out of school I had worked for the government. I'd been an assistant United States

district attorney, which was the best job I ever had. I was in the Marine Corps for four years. Later as a member I went to the House, I then went to the Senate. I'd been doing that all of my life. I'd never been in private practice, or never knew anything really about it. So I thought I'd like to do that. In addition to that, I know when I went to the Congress I was making \$12,500 a year. I had two children, and I had to support a family on \$12,000. Well, of course, \$12,000 went a lot further in those days than it does today. But it still was not a lot of money. Then it got to be \$20,000, then it went to \$30,000, then it went to \$40,000. By the time I went to the Senate it was \$22,500 and by the time I left the Senate I think I was making \$40,000 a year. Well, you know, it's tough to live on that kind of money when you're sending your children to good schools and you're trying to keep up two homes, one in your district or your state back home, mine was Florida, and one up here in Washington. It was very difficult.

In those days there was not the honorarium availability that there is today. I'm glad that there wasn't. I'm glad that you went to make a speech in those days because the citrus growers invited you to make a speech and you did it for political reasons and not for pecuniary reasons. There was much less of this business of a senator becoming reasonably famous and going on some kind of a lecture tour. They didn't have much of that in my day, for which I'm grateful. I think you're a better a senator.

I think currently today the Senate, the Congress, has got to think about putting a definite limitation on this business of outside honorariums and these outside speeches. Not only is the money influence, and it shouldn't be, but look

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at the time that these guys spend flying to California to make a speech, going to Hawaii because the Dental Association is having their national convention there and the doctors like to hear you talk about why you don't want government encroachment. Or they'll have a meeting down in my state at Ocean Reef. So they invite five senators, all of them from the West Coast, [Robert] [Packwood](#) from Oregon, when he was chairman, they wanted to hear him, so he goes, but he's away from his work. This is why every now and then you see them work all night. But you see many days that they can't get a quorum. If they were back in their own districts, it wouldn't be as bad, but they're not necessarily back in their home district. That ought to be eliminated. And we didn't have a lot of that.

Now, you ask me the question, why did I get out? I wandered a little bit there. I got out because number one there was hardly any place for me to go up in the Senate. Two, my friends basically were gone. Three, it lost its excitement and appeal for me. So I decided that I wouldn't run. I thought the thing to do was for me to announce long in advance so that nobody says he was run out of his job. So while everybody thought that Smathers has just got reelected and everything is

going along fine, and I was very popular and had a lot of influence in my state, I thought, now this is the time for me to make my move, and so I did.

Ritchie: There was some mention in the papers about your health at that time too. **Smathers:** They talked about that. Really I didn't have a health problem. I think I wasn't feeling very well, but compared to the way I feel today, I was feeling then a hell of a lot better. I saw that, but I didn't ever talk about that.

Ritchie: You were succeeded in the Senate by a Republican senator, [Ed Gurney](#). What was your impression of Gurney as a senator?

Smathers: You know, I didn't know Ed hardly at all. I had never met him. He had been a Congressman, I think, for a couple of terms, and I had met him to shake hands with him, but I hardly knew him. I wasn't very fond of Gurney. I didn't think he could get elected, and didn't think he would. I was surprised when he won. But that again shows you that the sentiment of the more conservative people of Florida was beginning to rise very strongly, and so he got elected. I didn't have anything to do with that campaign. I can't even remember who was the Democratic nominee.

Ritchie: Was it Cramer?

Smathers: No, Cramer was a Republican.

Ritchie: Oh, that's right.

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Smathers: I can't remember who it was. Oh, I'll tell you who it was Dick, who got elected senator later, from Miami. [Dick Stone](#).

Ritchie: Stone got elected later.

Smathers: Stone came in at sometime after.

Ritchie: Yes, later on. He came in after Gurney.

Smathers: I don't remember who was the Democrat. It wasn't Leroy Collins, was it?

Ritchie: Yes, I think that's right.

Smathers: I think that's who it was.

Ritchie: Well, your term ended the same time Lyndon Johnson's as president. Did you have many dealings with Johnson towards the end of his administration?

Smathers: Yes, while he was president I saw Johnson all the time. After he retired, and I retired, we didn't see each other very much. I got very busy and stayed here, he went back to Texas. I became a lobbyist. I organized the American Horse Council. I became attorney for the Association of American Railroads. I became attorney for the waterways. Man, I had more damn business! I was so busy I couldn't believe it. I loved it. And I made a lot of money. That's the only money I ever made.

Ritchie: Before we get into that, I just wanted to ask if you had a sense that Johnson was depressed at the end, with the way things had turned out.

Smathers: Yes. Johnson was a very sad fellow. That's the reason, I'm sure, that I didn't go to see him. He was always so lugubrious when you went to talk with him. He was a fellow who continued to want to abuse his enemies. He spent a lot of time telling you about who was a big son of a bitch and who wasn't, and all this stuff. He lived completely in the past. I saw him a couple of times, but it wasn't fun to see him.

Ritchie: Was he a man who expressed much regret about things he had done?

Smathers: No, he did not regret--of course, the Vietnam war was something that absolutely destroyed him. That became his overriding disappointment. I thought he thought too much about it. He kept trying to explain how it really was, rather than what it was pictured to be. Every time that I saw him, which was, as I said, not very many, he came to Miami one time I think, and I went out there to a birthday party for him before he passed away.

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There were a lot of people there, and I was able to talk with him sort of quietly for about fifteen, twenty minutes one afternoon. He was going back, "Do you remember when so and so and so and so?" and "You remember that Westmoreland coming in there and telling me how we could win this war?" and "You remember McNamara and them saying we're going to win the war?" I said, "Sure, I remember all that, Lyndon." And he said, "Well, you know the thing about it that burns my ass to this day is that they kept suckering me on." That was his attitude, and he just wanted to talk about those kind of things when he'd see a guy like me. I guess he talked that way to other people too.

It got so, it really wasn't much fun. You know, we were out and it was better to talk about what might be going on in the future. He didn't want to talk about that. It was pretty evident that the guy was not going to live very long. I don't think he wanted to live very long. But he dwelled too much on his failures and not enough

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on his successes. That's always been Johnson and most of his friends. That has been their problem. They still have a fight with Jack Kennedy. They're still resentful of certain people in the Congress that they were unfortunately jealous of. And there were so many powerful and positive things that Johnson had done that he ought to have spent his time just on that. Now, [Lady Bird](#) has been great about talking about the positive things. I get to see her a good deal. But Lyndon was sad.

Ritchie: When you left the Senate, you did actively become a lobbyist in Washington with a variety of activities. How different is it dealing with Senate now that you're on the outside, trying to persuade them to vote for legislation?

Smathers: Well, actually it was really--now, see I've been out almost twenty years. When I first got out it was really a lot of fun. Obviously the mere fact that I could go back to the Senate, and still could go on the floor, I still could park in the Senate garage. You could eat in the Senate dining room. You had all those privileges and prerequisites that you had when you were a senator. So I could make a big impression on a couple of clients, let's say from Ohio or from California or somewhere. I'd say, "Come on, I'm going to take you to the Senate for lunch." Then I'd see all of my friends and I'd introduce them. By God, these guys would go back and say, "That Smathers is really something. He knows everybody over there." I could send them a big bill, and hell, they'd be happy to pay it. And actually you could get a good deal done. I think I explained to you earlier about [Scott Lucas](#). I was always aware that if you've been a senator you can get in to see the senators a lot more quickly than you can if you're just a normal lobbyist. In addition, you're also a big campaign contributor. I used to give a lot of money to everybody's campaign.

Anyway, that was a lot of fun. And then to make a lot of money for the first time, to have some money, was really a lot of fun. Quite enlightening. I mean, you get a feeling: gee, I can go most anywhere I want. If I want to go to Europe this summer, have a vacation with my wife and go to the French Riviera, I can go. It's no big problem. I can ride the Concorde, and that sort of stuff. So that

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was fun. Now, what happens is that that goes along pretty well for I would say maybe ten years. Then as finally your friends retire, new guys come on. Now, these you don't know so well. They have heard about you, and you have read about them, but you don't know them. You go to see them, if they're let's say on the taxation committee, where I had spent most of my time while I was in the Senate, and most of my lobbying time, going to see [Dan Rostenkowski](#), and going to see [Sam Gibbons](#) from Tampa, whom I had kind of grown up with and had nursed along, anyway that was all easy. But when you got to see these new fellows that you didn't know, and you were having to explain to them a little bit who you

were, and they were sort of looking at you, you know, and you had to be very proper about what you said and what you did. But it still goes along pretty good.

Now, then you stay out and it's now twelve years have done by, and so now you've got turnover of almost two thirds of the Senate. That doesn't mean that your guys aren't still there, but you are less and less influential. Now, when a matter comes before you, let's say like the waterways, when a question would come up about a bridge tax. Every time they opened a bridge over the Ohio River, how much should the barge man pay, and how much should the other people pay? You were trying to represent the barge people, and so you had to go see the people on the Commerce Committee as well as the taxation committee, and you didn't know any of them. So you'd send word, and they'd see you because you had been a former senator, a former Congressman, and that gets a little more embarrassing. They're usually younger than you are, and they don't know too much about you, you don't know anything about them really, except what you've looked up in the book before you went over there to see them. So that gets to be less fun, I think. I mean, in my case it got to be less and less fun. What happens is, I think with people like myself, that you get less and less in a lobbying position.

And then you get asked for everybody's campaign. There's not a fellow who runs who doesn't get your name on his list, and you have requests for funds like you can't believe. Every senator who's running, whether he ever knew you or heard about you, the people who raise money, who are pros, the pros do it all. They get your name and they figure because you're lobbying you're specially vulnerable to have to give money, and you feel like you do. Half the money that I was making I was spending on all kinds of fellows' campaigns, Republicans and Democrats, if they were on important committees. Well, that gets to be less fun, and less fun, and less fun, and I think what happens to us as we get older, just like in my case, I began to go back to Florida and have my interest back home. I bought into a number of orange groves, and I'm now a pretty substantial orange grove operator. We have over a thousand acres of orange grove, and I love it, just love it. Then I have an automobile agency that my son runs. I'm in a couple of law offices, still have a law office in Miami that I may from time to time introduce people to--actually, I'm helping my older friends go to the law office to have their wills drawn. That's the most influential thing, or important thing I'm doing these days, as far as the law office is concerned.

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So I think that it's a natural progression. When the new generation comes in, and the new fellows come in, you don't know them as well, it gets a little more embarrassing for you to go over there. All of these fellows who have been in the Senate, we're very proud people. We don't want to ask some young guy who's thirty-five years old, and you don't think he knows too much anyway, and he's very important now because he's the United States senator, and you're trying to say, "I want to tell you this is the way the real world really goes. You've been in

politics all of your life, you've been in government, but you've really never spent a nickel on anything of your own, because the government's always paid for it. So you've got to learn what the other world's like." It's hard to tell these fellows that. Just like I'm sure it was hard for some of them to tell me that when I was there. So you get so you'd just as soon not do it. And if you've got enough money, you just finally quit doing it. That's what's happened to me. For all practical purposes, I don't represent anybody with any special interest. I have a couple of law cases that I've got a couple of lawyers here who do some good work, and that's what we're doing. But I'm mostly handling my own affairs.

Ritchie: When you were lobbying, did you specialize in anything in particular?

Smathers: The answer is mostly taxes, because I came out of the Finance and Taxation Committee, just like Russell Long today. Russell has been out now three years, and he is so happy. We see each other all the time, and he is so busy. He calls me up and he's making me put up money for all these guys on the Finance Committee. I'm having to make contributions to [David] [Boren](#) and all these guys, and I'm glad to do it, they're good men. But Russell will say, "Come on, now, we've got to do this for so and so." Now, in time, that will wear off. The traveling to New York, I was on the board of Paramount Studios, and Gulf and Western. I was on the board of the Pan-American Banks. I was on the board of the Winn-Dixie Grocery Company. I was on the board of one private high school, and one University of Florida group, and that sort of thing. I was on the board of a commercial bank, and I owned two other banks that I bought after I got out of the Senate, and made a little money, one in Ocala and one in Bradenton, and so on. That's all fun, because it's new. It's interesting, and you meet new people. It has some excitement to it. But I like to do that much better than I do the lobbying bit. So I just don't lobby.

Ritchie: Did you find that when you were lobbying that the corporate people with whom you were dealing had a good sense of how the government worked, or were they pretty innocent when they came here?

Smathers: They were pretty innocent. A lot of these big corporations, obviously, they have a man who stays here all the time, and he is the guy who tells them what to do in a way. Now, he is the fellow who will say, "Go hire George Smathers, because this is a transportation matter and he's had a lot of experience. He was the subcommittee chairman for all ground transportation, which includes trucks and railroads. So go hire him." So I'd get a lot of

trucking business, lobbying work. You'd get the legislation that they'd like to try to get. Then tax matters, yes, I was on the Finance and Taxation Committee, had a lot of that. For a while I represented the Chamber of Commerce of Mexico, that was a lot of fun. I represented the sugar industry from Venezuela, that was a lot of

fun. Who else did I represent? I had a couple of clients in Central America. But that was fun, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. As time went on, and I had enough money, it go so I didn't want to work that hard, and didn't. Then I had a big law office for a while. Then I began to lay back and these fellows began to work for me. They took those various clients that I had assigned them to work on, and most of them just stayed with that, and to this day the American Horse Council has got the same fellows that I had. We're very friendly, I see them all the time. They worked for me. Railroad Association the same way. So that was fun, that has been a lot of fun. I've had a lot of interesting experience.

Ritchie: You mentioned the Scott Lucas story about a senator with whom you had worked, that you felt an obligation almost to see. But is there a reverse on that sometimes? Do you think that some of the senators resent former colleagues coming back to lobby them on issues?

Smathers: Well, I'm sure that there are probably one or two, but I've never seen any. Now, you mention it, and I'm sure in a hundred guys you're not going to find all hundred agreed to anything. I'm sure that there's some senators who resent a fellow coming in and lobbying them about something, particularly if it has a financial consideration. I don't think if somebody went to a member of the Judiciary Committee and said I'm opposed to the president's nominee for the Supreme Court and I don't represent anybody but myself, I'm sure they wouldn't mind at all. If you went over there and said I'm against this because we think this fellow is going to rule a certain way, and I represent a big private financial institution, he wouldn't like that too much.

I'll tell you, the senators and the Congressmen are such adjustable creatures that you just can't believe it. They're not going to get mad at anybody who comes to see them except on the rarest of occasions.

Ritchie: I recall that Senator [John Culver](#) got upset about former members who were lobbying.

Smathers: Did he? Well, now he got to be one of the biggest lobbyists. He's here in this same building, down here with a big law firm. Same way with [Joe Tydings](#), he's in the same building, and so on. They're still lobbying. I think I was very fortunate in the lobbying work that I did, and that I had enough sense to take my money and invest it in real estate in Florida, in orange groves and other real estate, and it's all turned out beautifully.

Ritchie: Looking at what's happening in the United States Senate and how it's been operating in the last few years, does it look like the same institution to you that you served in, or is has it really changed?

Smathers: I think, from what I hear, and I have not been over there this year. That's not exactly correct, I've been over there for lunch maybe two times in the Senate dining room with some friends. I've only been to see Bob Graham. I've been to see Sam Gibbons, but only socially. And politically I'm helping Bob Graham. I want to keep him. I think he's a splendid public servant and deserves to be helped, and has got a bright future. If ever there is going to be a southerner elected president, in my view it won't be Albert Gore, it will be Bob Graham. He's got a lot going for him because in addition to all his natural attributes, he's got the *Washington Post*. His half sister-in-law is Kay Graham, so that's a pretty powerful institution to have going for you. But he's a very talented and hard working and devoted and dedicated guy.

I see [Bill Nelson](#), who was my son's roommate. He's the Congressman, you may remember, who was one of the astronauts who went off around the earth. He's running for governor. I hope he becomes governor, I think he'll make a good one, and I'm helping him. I go over there to talk a little politics with him. I go to see Bob Graham and talk politics with him. I'm not talking to them about helping me in any way, because frankly I don't need any help at this point. I say that thanking the dear Lord. So, that's about it.

Ritchie: What I'd like to do is come back one more time to do that one interview that we lost because of the tape recorder malfunction. That was mostly about Lyndon Johnson as majority leader. So if you wouldn't mind going back over some of those questions. . . .

Smathers: No, I'll do that. I want to help Lyndon Johnson get the recognition that he deserves. It bothers me that just among my friends, when I start talking about Lyndon Johnson they all kind of turn their nose up, "Oh, that rube," you know, "that ham bone," that sort of thing. It really does bother me. I go in these groups and they still remember Jack Kennedy as a very attractive guy--they couldn't name you any one thing that he really did except that he was just good looking, and he was beautiful, humorous, and a fine speech-maker, and everybody liked him. They remember [Nixon](#) mostly, unfortunately, because of the Watergate, they don't really remember that he was the guy who opened up China. He was the guy who did a lot of things. He was kind of like Johnson. He was never recognized for some of the big things that he did. But when the opportunity presents itself, I feel better about trying to let people know about how really important and influential Lyndon Johnson was. Because in my career he was far and away the man who accomplished the most, by far. That's covering forty years. He was far and away it, and yet he doesn't get any credit.

Ritchie: Well, I saw in the *Post* on Sunday that Robert Caro's new book is due out next spring, and he now projects it to be a five-volume biography of Johnson. He's published one, this is the second one, and he's thinking about three more volumes after that, so maybe at last Johnson will get his due.

Smathers: Yeah, well, I hope so. Because I think in all frankness and candor and honesty, the guy who performs, the fellow who accomplishes, the fellow who opens doors, he deserves to be recognized for the good things that he did, and not just to be remembered as sort of a lumbering, overbearing, sometimes crude individual who tried to dominate everybody he was with. All of that is also somewhat true, but on the other hand, he should not be denied the recognition which he deserves for the things that he really did, because he really did a lot. All right, sir.

Ritchie: Thank you, senator.

Smathers: Thank you.

[End of Interview #8]

George A. Smathers

United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969

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