

THE ROAD TO WASHINGTON

Interview #1

Thursday, December 5, 1996

RITCHIE: I know you came from Edmond, Oklahoma

JOHNSTON: Correct.

RITCHIE: I wonder if you could just tell me about your family and your roots in Oklahoma.

JOHNSTON: Well, a former Republican National Committee Chairman, the late Lee Atwater, once described his background as being from the middle of the middle class. That's pretty much mine as well. I was born in 1956, in fact, right before the election that year. My father was twenty-one. Mother had just turned nineteen when I was born. My father was doing mostly manual work in and around Edmond, Oklahoma. I moved around a great deal as a child, always in Oklahoma. We lived in a variety of small towns from Edmond to Tulsa, where my sister Jan was born. My dad worked in a warehouse for Pillsbury there and then he got into insurance, actually the credit investigation business. We lived in such huge metropolises as Guymon, Kingfisher, Stillwater, El Reno, Oklahoma City, and Washington, Oklahoma, where I finished high school.

There were twenty-eight in my high school graduating class in 1974. I first attended a big high school in Oklahoma City, named after U.S. Grant, and moved to a very small farm community. The experience was very good because I went from large classes to very small classes where the only course required all four years was agriculture. It was a wonderful experience. I graduated from the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma in Chickasha, Oklahoma, where I had received a scholarship to play baseball. I had been an all-conference short stop in the high school. The college had recruited six short stops to play that year and I was *not* the best one. I wound up actually earning a debate scholarship--and we never developed a debate team. Then I went to work for a newspaper and had journalism scholarships sponsored by my company, the Donrey Media Group.

I chose that school because I was in kind of a hurry to move on with my career. I had plans to either go into the military or journalism, which seems like an odd combination. I got into journalism. My first big story as a college student was to cover then President [Gerald] Ford's visit to Lawton, Oklahoma, during the 1976 campaign. He was on his way to see the OU-Texas football game. I covered that story, and people noticed it. When I graduated in December of 1976--I went on a year round trimester system and finished college in two and a half years--I became an Oklahoma State Capital reporter for the Donrey Group. They had twelve small newspapers in Oklahoma. I covered the 35th legislature of the Oklahoma State Legislature. I did that for a session as a very young twenty-one-year-old reporter. I did not do a very good job because I had no mentoring and no real training, but it was a trial by fire. I enjoyed it.

After doing that for a brief while, they moved me to be editor of the newspaper in Henryetta, Oklahoma. In 1977 the paper was in some financial trouble and that was attributed in part to a very weak news division. The news division in those days was two people: an editor and an assistant. I really had a tremendous amount of fun. I had a free rein as editor to write and do whatever I wished, and develop some photography skills. I was an active editorial writer. I could be very controversial, but it was a lot of fun and the paper began to thrive again just by having a high degree of energy.

1978 was a very big year for politics in Oklahoma. It had a dramatic influence on me. Senator Dewey Bartlett developed cancer, chose not to run for reelection, and then Governor David Boren was running for his seat. I'd covered Boren when I was State Capital reporter. We had a very competitive race for governor that year between George Nigh and a former OU football star [Ron Shotts]. We had a very competitive race for Attorney General. There was a lot of political activity. Being a political junkie, I just thrived as a reporter. The one thing that I found very frustrating was that I was missing the action. I wanted to be in the action. I wanted to be involved in running a campaign.

So right before the election, actually near Labor Day of 1978, I met a Republican candidate for Congress named Gary Richardson who was running against, we thought, Congressman Ted Risenhoover. Well, Risenhoover was

defeated in the primary by a young guy named Mike Synar, in Oklahoma's Second Congressional District. I knew Mike. My paper had endorsed Mike in his primary. I wrote the editorial. I didn't think Mike was going to win the primary. Well, he did but I had already committed to work for the Republican candidate so it was really an odd paradox for me. But it was a very educational experience because it taught me that you could have friends even though you're in political combat on both sides of the aisle. It's very instructive and it proved to be a very useful skill for me here in the United States Senate.

We narrowly lost that race but during the campaign we had neighboring congressmen come in and campaign for us, one of whom was John Paul Hammerschmidt from Arkansas. Congressman Hammerschmidt called me, as I was contemplating my unemployment after the election was over, and said, "I need a press secretary, would you like to come to Washington?" It took me I think about a tenth of a microsecond to say yes. I packed up my little 1975 Datsun B210 car with boxes and began my trek that December to Washington. A nice long drive on ice-covered roads through Arkansas and Tennessee up to Washington. That was my first trip ever into D.C. I remember just being *awestruck* as I was driving down Constitution Avenue on a very beautiful winter day on, I think it was the day after New Year's, just seeing the buildings--it was a cold but gorgeous day--and then parking within a block or two of the Cannon Building and walking over to see the Congressman in his office in the Rayburn Building, in a role being a staff assistant.

It was quite a transition, coming from a small Oklahoma town to Capitol Hill. Again, much like my reporting experience, I did not do very well. I didn't really have a mentor, didn't have any friends here in town. It was kind of a lonely experience for a while, but in the process I developed, in that year, a great deal of knowledge. I enjoyed writing, communication. My political skills and instincts were at work doing press calls. I made a lot of mistakes, but I learned from them. Congressman Hammerschmidt was fortunately very patient with me. I believe the reason that he hired me was that he was seriously considering running for the Senate in 1980 against Dale Bumpers. When his personal friend George Bush decided to run for President instead he changed his mind and chaired Bush's campaign in Arkansas. When he changed his plans, I believe, is

when it became in my mind apparent that there really wasn't a need for me. The Congressman was not what I would call a media-savvy member. He just was not all that interested in doing a lot with the press.

Now I felt somewhat useless and so I jumped at the chance to go to the National Restaurant Association as a communications director. It was my first foray into the association world in an advocacy role. It proved to be a very fun experience. I was given a lot of free rein there. I was spokesman for the food service industry (a role I now am going to in the private sector again, but for a different part of the industry) and found myself travelling with the association chairman around the country doing his advance work, writing his speeches, and being with him during all these visits. I met scores of people. Our chairman was Bill Regis and he still owns and operates a restaurant in Knoxville, Tennessee. He's a close friend of Howard Baker, very politically conservative and active. Of course, 1980 was a big political year so he and I struck a very close friendship. I wrote a lot of speeches where he basically was all but endorsing Ronald Reagan everywhere we went.

During the course of the campaign because of my past political experience, my friend Gary Richardson was running *again* against Mike Synar. His consultant, a man named Eddie Maye, who's still active in the business, called me and said "He wants you to come here to help." So once again I took a leave of absence for about six weeks and went out and tried to help the campaign. It was a disaster. He lost, again narrowly, but it was still a defeat. A friend of mine from Oklahoma who had been helping to run another race in Indiana called and said that this young, twenty-seven-year-old House member named John Hiler needed a press secretary and would I come back to the Hill. I said, "Absolutely."

I loved working on Capitol Hill and really wanted to be in a freshman office. I think I was the third person he'd actually hired, one of four people who began the office on Day One, back on that nice cold January morning in 1981. That was a very formative experience because it gave me a chance to come into an operation from the start with a congressman who was himself young in experience yet bright. He gave me a lot of leeway to try to be very aggressive on press and again really honed my political and communication skills during the

three years I worked for him. I helped to run his first reelection campaign, which he was declared that night's first loser. That was the '82 debacle for the Republicans. They lost twenty-six seats nationally. [CBS anchorman] Dan Rather at 7:30 p.m. that night declared Hiler the first GOP casualty. Well, later that night as the final returns came in, he got a three-thousand vote victory. Again, that was quite instructive.

I stayed with Hiler for an additional year and then had a chance to move over to the National Republican Congressional Committee to be responsible for the reelection campaigns of endangered GOP incumbents in the House. Well, '84 was not a year in which GOP incumbent House members had much to worry about. Ronald Reagan was going to win in a landslide. The question was how many seats were we going to gain. But I was given nine incumbents around the country to work with, people like Congressman Denny Smith of Oregon, Congressman Chris Smith of New Jersey, Congressman Bill Carney of New York, Congressman Arlan Stangeland of Minnesota, and Manuel Lujan from New Mexico. There were others on that list--Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania, now the Governor of the state. In each case I developed a good friendship with each of those members. These are districts all over the country. I gained remarkable experience about different political environments, built friendships and alliances that last to this day.

RITCHIE: What were you doing for each of these races?

JOHNSTON: Basically, campaign committees have special provisions under campaign finance law to contribute dollars beyond the usual cash limits. So my role was to just be an unpaid consultant, to make sure that the money being spent by the committee was being spent well, and that we were a "player" at the table in terms of when campaign decisions were made. I travelled around the districts with each one of the members, developed close friendships with Tom Ridge and Chris Smith in particular.

The most unique experience for me was going in to help one convicted member that year. The bylaws at the NRCC prohibited us from supporting people who have been convicted of felonies. At one point, then Chairman Guy

Vander Jagt thought that we'd have a chance to gain control of the House. So in early October they changed it. They basically changed the provision that would permit me to go in and help that member named George Hansen from Idaho. They gave me \$40,000 in coordinated dollars. They gave me the \$15,000 in cash out of the Committee and said, "Kelly go in there. We can't afford to lose Hansen. He may make the difference if we have control or not. Go in there and help him." It was a disaster. There was no way he was going to win. But it was a lot of fun to be given that much money, which was a lot for a rural western congressional district in a very inexpensive media market. He went from being down from like forty points to losing by less than 170 votes. That gave me a great deal of confidence in my political ability that I could do the right things politically.

I remained at the Congressional Committee during the 1986 cycle. I was given the "fast" growing areas, Sunbelt states, Arizona, New Mexico, then over to, Texas, Oklahoma, staying right outside the Deep South states that were in the perimeter to the South and the Southwest, and had the fastest growth rates in the country with the exception of California. I struck a very close friendship with a candidate by the name of Jon Kyl and after 1986 was wonderful. In a year in which the Republicans lost five seats in the House, my region gained two seats. The two members I helped most to elect in Democratic open seats were Jim Inhofe from Tulsa, who became a close friend of mind during that cycle and remains a close friend to this day, and I'm glad he's here in the Senate. And a guy named Clyde Hallaway running in a seat that was once held by one of the Longs in Louisiana. In both cases they were upsets.

Newly-elected congressman Jon Kyl wanted a Washington hand he trusted to run his office, so once again it was back to a freshman office. Again it was a wonderfully successful experience. He was unopposed for his first reelection campaign except by a Libertarian candidate. Then Senator [Don] Nickles became Chairman of the Senatorial Committee over here. I had had very little contact with Senator Nickles. I encountered him when he was a state senate candidate in 1978, when I was a reporter. I really had no contact with him since. I ran into him a few times during the 1980 campaign when I was working for Gary Richardson and he was running for Senate in the race. Nobody thought he was

going to win. A thirty-year-old candidate running against an experienced prosecutor. No way he was going to do that well, but he won.

Through a mutual friend I was approached about becoming a deputy political director to handle mostly incumbent races, the same races that were up this last cycle [1996]. People like Jesse Helms, Strom Thurmond, Larry Pressler, John Warner--people that were potentially in trouble during a mid-term election during [George] Bush's presidency. Nickles hired me, and that's when he and I struck up a close friendship. We had, from my perspective, a successful cycle. I was given mostly incumbents. Every one of them was elected that I was responsible for and again I developed an expertise and developed contacts and friendships in states that I'd never worked in before from South Carolina to Nebraska. I had Nebraska and South Dakota. I remember driving a forty thousand piece mailing in a truck from Pierre to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, one afternoon for Larry Pressler. Those kinds of experiences gained you a lot of friendships.

I'd always known that loyalty is the single most important attribute a senator or any politician looks for in having somebody in his inner circle. And the most important way to gain that loyalty or gain that relationship is to be there in a tough campaign. If I can paraphrase Bob Dole, "that's what it's all about." If you're there with them when their survival or their careers are at stake and you're there fighting with them, you built bonds that you could *never* come close to making just by working in a Senate office or a House office. I found those campaign experiences both in the House and the Senate to be incredibly powerful bonding experiences. Not just working in particular campaigns but in so many campaigns in so many parts of the country. It gave me a political perspective that I've really gained a tremendous amount of benefit from over the last several years, working with states that are as diverse as Minnesota to South Carolina and Arizona. They are three very unique states. And I've been able to maintain friendships all these years.

RITCHIE: You said you were always a political junkie from the very beginning. Did you grow up in a political family?

JOHNSTON: No, not at all. In 1966 I was a twelve turning thirteen year old boy. My parents were not politically active. They were conservative Democrats in Oklahoma, which was very typical for Oklahomans in those days. My parents had been John F. Kennedy supporters in 1960 and then Barry Goldwater supporters in 1964. I just found an automatic fascination with campaigns and politics.

I distinctly remember coming out of a grocery store one day with my parents and there was a brochure in our car window from a guy named Raymond Gary, a former Governor running for his old job again. I was struck by the language and gained a fascination. I was hooked. At one point--I don't know quite how I did this--but I wound up being pulled into distributing brochures that year for Dewey Bartlett, the Republican nominee for governor.

During college, I ran for student body president and won. I was active in 1976, very active, in fact, when our native son Fred Harris (I was a Democrat in those days still) was running for president, I was his county co-coordinator in Grady County, Oklahoma, that year. As a reporter, I gained access to many of our state's officials: Henry Bellmon, Dewey Bartlett, Governor Boren in particular, who were very open. Of course, they loved reporters, they loved to talk to them, and so I was able to build friendships and gain tremendous knowledge.

RITCHIE: I talked to a reporter for the *Tulsa World* by the name of Jim Myers. He covered Oklahoma politics before it became the state capital, and he commented about how much more open it was and how much more accessible. You could go on the floor and you could talk to members. He said that when he came to Washington he had to make an appointment to see the press secretary to a member. In Oklahoma, it must have been a great way to start in journalism in an environment where the doors were all open to the press.

JOHNSTON: Yes, it really was. He's right. I covered the legislature in 1977, as I mentioned. There was no press gallery per se, there was a press table. You had to fight for space on the floor with the bigger papers and the bigger media-outlets. But you got to go on the floor. You couldn't roam around, of course, but members came to you. That was a nice part about it. But being a

reporter gave you an automatic entre with politicians that campaign workers and other lobbyist don't. So being a reporter was a magnificent way to gain insights, an education and a relationship with a wide variety of people in public life in both parties, and that has proven to be very, very helpful in my career here in Washington.

RITCHIE: Earlier you had said to me that you had some experience in radio when you were in high school.

JOHNSTON: In college, actually. I was a communications and drama major in college. We had a small little local radio station and each of us got to intern briefly at and get a little bit of radio experience. KWCO in Chickasha, Oklahoma, a little thousand watt station that didn't go beyond the city's borders.

My father tried to get me, as a young boy--I was very shy as a boy--to be more outgoing so he got me involved in speech contests. He'd been in speech and thought I should do speech contests and had somebody come to the house with the Optimist Program and recruited me. I was involved in a lot of speech contests in high school and college and studied speech and read books about speech and worked hard to kind of eliminate a lazy speech pattern that afflicts many Oklahomans. So, I worked real hard to not eliminate my accent but take out the worst aspects of my accent and lazy speech patterns. Then when I began to win some of these contests it gave me enormous confidence to approach people. In politics you can't really be shy. People can cover it up, I suppose, but you really have to be outgoing and you have to have confidence in your ability to meet people and strike up conversations and communicate, whether you're a reporter or you're running for office.

RITCHIE: Well, you said at one point when you were writing you really began to feel like you wanted to be part of the action. Did you ever see yourself as a candidate at some point?

JOHNSTON: When I was in college, yes, because I was a student body president and I thought, yeah, maybe someday I'd like to run for office. Then when I became a reporter I realized what I was happiest doing was being behind

the scenes and being a stage manager. I was very comfortable in that role. I didn't really have that much confidence to go out and be the candidate, and felt I really didn't have the background or the resources to give what it took to be successful as a candidate.

Having been involved in so many campaigns, close to forty campaigns over twenty years, I see what these people go through, and what they have to do or what the family does. I suppose if I have grown children or more personal wealth or a more independent situation, it would be something I would find intriguing. But I don't have strong desires to run. I've seen the sacrifices, I've seen the kinds of things that people have had done to them or done by them, frankly, and in some cases, I find it repulsive. I'm much more comfortable, and much happier, being part of an inner circle and giving the advice and being part of the give-and-take and seeing somebody succeed. I'm very comfortable being in that role.

RITCHIE: I think sometimes it's better not to know what you're in store for when you're going to get into a race.

JOHNSTON: If somebody said, "If there's anything that you'd like to do in the Senate before you pass on from the earth what would it be?" I thought it would be really fun to be appointed to a vacancy for about a year. I'd probably really enjoy that. I'd be a caretaker. I could really be a part of the club, enjoy it, get active, speak on the floor, do what I would really like to do, make those points I'd love to make. But I really don't have a desire to personally be on the ballot and run as a candidate.

RITCHIE: It does take a tremendous amount of stamina and a very thick skin.

JOHNSTON: It takes a lot of ego. I don't think I've got the ego to do it. My skin probably would be a little bit too thin. [laughs]

RITCHIE: You said when you were an editor you wrote very controversial editorials. Was that to be provocative to sell newspapers or did you really feel a need to sort of challenge the establishment?

JOHNSTON: Both. I had a populist upbringing that was typical for an Oklahoman, and I loved to challenge the establishment. In college, too--in fact, I got hauled before a college board meeting because I'd written a provocative editorial about the administration's lack of response to student needs. They pinned my ears back a little bit. They proved me wrong, but didn't deter me from getting out there and being hard charging. I found myself being very passionate about my politics.

One of the big issues, in fact, one of the things I'm kind of proud of, was that we had a small community in Henryetta that had no leash law for dogs. So I led this campaign in the newspaper to have a leash law in the community. I took on a couple of city council members for their lack of interest and for being too beholden to certain interests in the community. I got into some private altercations, not fisticuffs but just some shouting matches with them when they thought that I was being unfair. I thought, "No, wait a minute I'm calling it as I see it prove me wrong." It was really a lot of fun. I've mellowed in my older years. I don't like confrontations like I used to, but nonetheless I enjoyed that because I felt it was right, and it was fun.

RITCHIE: It also sold newspapers, I bet.

JOHNSTON: It sold newspapers. It made my boss very happy so that was a factor. But it was more of the result of doing things I thought, "Well, why are we doing this?" That's how I got started.

RITCHIE: You worked for an interesting group of people. You started off with Hammerschmidt who was established--he'd been in the House since the '60s--and then you moved to a freshman member. Hammerschmidt seems to me an old school Republican conservative, who didn't make huge waves, and who had a nice, safe district. He was able to beat Bill Clinton in 1974. Hiler was just the opposite.

JOHNSTON: Yes, that's right.

RITCHIE: Heads on, fight the establishment, much more a forerunner of what the House became in the 104th Congress.

JOHNSTON: That's correct.

RITCHIE: What did that do to you--going from one type of Republican to another? Did you find yourself growing intellectually in the process?

JOHNSTON: Yes, it was highly instructive. It was not always comfortable. Working for Hammerschmidt was not the best job I had in Washington. I adored the man. He gave me my start in Washington. He's a very nice person. But for all the reasons you just stated--I was as a young passionate political newcomer, in fact, I was still kind of growing in my political passions and interests. Working for him was very stilted. It was always frustrating for me to be pushing ideas and pushing concepts and trying to advocate and write for him, and always having it pared back all the time because it was too inflammatory. "We don't talk that way." "We don't use the word 'I.'" But it gave me some insights and a chance to study that kind of a political figure because there aren't as many of those as there used to be, but at the time that was the predominant kind of Republican member of Congress. But it just gave me some insights into the mind set that I found very useful in trying to understand people like his peers who were much the same way.

I was much happier, comfortable and enjoyed working for John Hiler. But I also gained, working for John Hiler, a higher respect for people like John Paul Hammerschmidt. Because Hammerschmidt, for his being an extremely cautious establishmentarian, I saw the benefit of moderation, of caution. We were a little aggressive in that freshman class of the 96th Congress and made some of the same mistakes as the 104th Congress made later. It was really interesting to watch some of those House members in the class of the 104th make the same mistakes we made back at the 96th Congress. Hiler became much more of a keep-your-nose-to-the-grindstone-and-work-hard Congressman. He became really a much better member after those first two years.

RITCHIE: He stood out. I remember him when he first came to the House. He was so against pork barrel that he voted against pork for his own district.

JOHNSTON: Made a point of it! It was quite a press challenge for me as well, because there was the mayor of South Bend, the largest city in the district, who wanted to build an ethanol plant using federal funds. Well, John Hiler thought that was just awful. There was no market for ethanol in the country at the time. It was just sheer pork. It made absolutely no sense economically. Here was the young businessman, conservative, [Milton] Friedman School of Economics at the University of Chicago's student saying, "Why are we doing this? It makes no sense." He advocated the free flow of capital. There were companies flying out of the district, moving from South Bend to South Carolina for lower labor rates to get away from unions. He was saying, "That's okay. It's not right to try to stop that. We just have to find ways to keep them here that don't involve federal mandates. Government shouldn't get involved in that."

He paid a price for that honesty. He never did recover from some of those things from a political standpoint in that area. He always lost South Bend by huge margins and it finally all caught up with him in 1990 when he lost his reelection that year. It was fun working for him because I was able to do a lot. We had a very young staff. He was the second youngest member in the House that year, but not the most rambunctious. John LeBoutillier was the youngest *and* the most rambunctious member of the House. [laughs]

RITCHIE: As a press secretary for a very controversial person who as a freshman member got national attention, you weren't trying to attract attention to the man. But were you trying, in a sense, to define him or to help him define himself?

JOHNSTON: It was a struggle because I had enough experience then to know that some things he was saying and doing were not playing real well back home. We were trying to carefully manage it. His most famous confrontation was probably in the White House when a lot of the freshmen members that year were hauled down to the White House in February before Reagan was shot in

that year, '81. Reagan felt obligated to pass a debt limit extension. Jack Hiler and a lot of the other freshmen that year had campaigned against debt for balanced budgets and didn't want to vote for that extension, especially as one of their first votes in the new Congress, after they'd been elected in this new political climate.

I recall that the Congressman got up to tell the President in the meeting that he just wasn't going to do that. It was not true to his conservative principles. That was a private meeting. The political director for the White House at that point was Lyn Nofziger. He had leaked a totally fictitious story that Reagan lectured this young congressman that he was active in conservative politics long before he was born. That was on national news that night. It never happened! I learned the power of a White House aide to be able to manipulate the press that effectively on something that *never* happened that way. It was quite educational.

RITCHIE: And there was almost no way he could fight back.

JOHNSTON: There was no way to fight back. There are just some things you just have to manage to do the best you can. You just flat out deny it and say that it really didn't happen that way and you try to give the truth but it didn't matter. [laughs] They had their story.

RITCHIE: So, how would you compare Kyl to Hammerschmidt and to Hiler?

JOHNSTON: Kyl was an interesting blend. Kyl came from establishment Arizona. He'd been President of the Chamber of Commerce for Phoenix and Maricopa County Arizona. He led campaigns to build roads. He followed the establishment path and was perceived to have been the moderate establishment politician, when, in fact, he was very conservative, and also intellectual. Neither Hiler nor Hammerschmidt, although both were very bright men in their own ways--Hiler was very strong economically--Kyl was a real intellectual. I mean he is a bright, brilliant man with very strongly held conservative views. His father had been a House member for years from Iowa and I found Kyl to be more ideological and a lot more focused on "doing the right thing." I thought he'd be more of the Hammerschmidt mold, would just take care of his district do things

for his state. I had learned after my Hiler experience to appreciate just taking care of the district and that wasn't the approach he was going to take.

End of the First Interview