

## FROM THE HOUSE TO THE SENATE

### Interview #2

Wednesday, December 11, 1996

**RITCHIE:** When we stopped the other day you had just started to work for Jon Kyl and that was in 1987 when he was in the House.

**JOHNSTON:** He'd just been elected to the House. His first race for public office, basically.

**RITCHIE:** And you were his administrative assistant.

**JOHNSTON:** That's correct.

**RITCHIE:** So you came back in a different capacity. Before you'd been press secretary to two congressmen. What did it entail to become an administrative assistant?

**JOHNSTON:** It was interesting because when I first came to Washington and first got on Congressman Hammerschmidt's staff, I was twenty-three, twenty-four years old and my immediate goal was to become a chief of staff for a House member. That's what I thought I was going to aspire to on Capitol Hill and that would be just the greatest job in the world. It would pay decently and I would have a chance to really be in charge of something and support a member. Well, by the time I turned thirty I'd reached it. What happened was, having worked at the Campaign Committee as a field manager, I had built a relationship with a lot of candidates. And Jon Kyl and I just hit it off wonderfully, early in the process when few people thought he was going to win.

His election was something of a surprise. He was in a race to succeed a retiring member, Eldon Rudd. A former congressman, Rudd's predecessor, John Conlan was running and all the surveys suggested that Conlan still had high name recognition. He had vacated the seat in 1976 when he lost a Senate primary to succeed Senator Paul Fannin. Of course, Senator [Dennis] DeConcini won that

race, largely based on a contentious GOP primary. So, Conlan while he still had some name ID familiarity, he also carried some baggage. And Jon Kyl was able to build some pretty strong financial support. He raised over a million dollars and just clobbered poor John Conlan. After he won, Jon Kyl called me during Thanksgiving at my parents house in North Carolina, saying that he really wanted somebody that he trusted who knew Washington and would I help get him up and running. I said that would be great. Ironically, I'd already planned to take a vacation in his district without even knowing I'd be working for him, so it turned into a transition period and I got off to an early start with him.

Being a political animal, the thing that I wanted to do with Jon Kyl was to maximize the advantage of incumbency--I was not shy about it--to make sure that Jon Kyl got off to a good start. My objectives were: he would face no serious opposition for reelection; we'd maximize the levers of incumbency; and we would be the best freshman office on Capitol Hill. We hired, recruited, and organized our staff from day one, walked in with a full staff, ready to go to work. Probably the most poignant moment and probably one of the most interesting experiences was the way the House members select their offices. They do it by lottery by class, and so the freshman class of course is the last group to do the lottery. There were, I think, fifty-four members of that class. It was a pretty good size class as I remember. Jon Kyl was very fixated on getting decent office space so I felt under *enormous* pressure. He sent me to do the lottery, when usually the member does it. And how I breathed a sigh of relief when we drew number three! The third best number in that freshman class.

**RITCHIE:** Do you reach into a bag or something?

**JOHNSTON:** You reach into a box and you pull out a button with a number on it. I pulled out number three and there just happened to be three nice offices in the Cannon [House Office Building] below the top floor, which is considered prime real estate for a freshman member. We got good office space. We were all together. A lot of freshman House members are spread all over the Capitol. In John Hiler's case, we drew the next to last number so we had space on the third floor of Longworth but also an annex on the fifth floor, with slow

elevators and two flights of stairs. It was just a pain. So it's nice to be all together, and in Jon Kyl's case it was great.

I thought Jon Kyl would be more of a traditional kind of House member, take care of his district and focus on local issues. He surprised me. He proved he really wanted to go-- even though he had a background as a lawyer specializing in federal issues, water reclamation, public lands issues--into defense and national security. So, he proved to be quite a challenge for me and really brought me back to focus more on policy and less on politics. Although *he* was able to free up on policy because I was largely taking care of the politics for him. He wound up with no Democratic opposition, no primary opposition, so it was quite successful. It was quite a tenure for me. We worked very hard. It was wonderful to aspire to something and then to get there and have it turn out well. It was a good experience.

**RITCHIE:** Did you also handle press relations for him?

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, I did some. The one frustrating aspect was that he, having been editor of a law review in college, was a very picky editor. He was hard to satisfy. Somehow I managed to write in a way he liked. We went through, during the two and a half years I was with him, three press secretaries. He was never quite satisfied with the press secretaries' work, so I wound up having to do a lot of the media relations work, especially with the editorial writers and the Capitol press corps. So, yes, I did handle more press relations than I thought I was going to for him.

**RITCHIE:** On the House side, what's a typical day like for an administrative assistant? When would you get to work?

**JOHNSTON:** I arrived very early, because Jon Kyl was an early riser. So I made a point of being the first person in the office each morning. I did not want Jon Kyl arriving first, so I was usually there between 7:15 and 7:30 every morning. Basically, the thing I remember most was just the incredible amount of paper that came through a House office. I'm sure Senate offices are no different but they just have more people to process it. I spent a good chunk of my day just

going through the inbox. Usually the day was getting there ahead of schedule and trying to anticipate in about fifteen minutes what Jon Kyl would want or need when he walked in the door.

The key part was just being there because his mind was always working, like a lot of very bright members' minds do. He always barreled into the office having just thought of fifteen things that had to get done that day or even that minute. So he'd walk in and he'd rattle off the four or five things he needed to see done or he wanted to have done or was concerned about, and that pretty much dominated what happened that day or that week for me. He usually was in there Monday through Thursday. He did not work the usual Tuesday-Thursday routine that most House members seem to work. He would fly to Arizona Thursday evening and would fly back on Sunday. Thus it was a very short weekend in Arizona and he would be in the office on Monday all the way through Thursday. Friday was kind of catch-up day and usually it was just a case of just keeping on top of the work.

Jon Kyl really focused a lot on the correspondence, the mail system. House offices sometimes get driven by mail and that was a big frustration. We'd get on average in a House office in those days five hundred pieces a week. You have a staff in D.C. of seven or eight people to handle all this so a big chunk of my day was also handling all of the correspondence that didn't fall with anybody else and to be on top constantly of the mail load. We had some staffers that could turn mail over in three days, some that took three weeks, and some that took longer, unfortunately. So a large part of our day was making sure that he was satisfied. But he was also very hard to satisfy on letter drafts. He constantly was editing. He'd say: "This letter's grammar is bad. This word is wrong. It's not my style. It didn't answer the question." He would also read the correspondence. He signed every letter that went out of the office that was in response to a personal letter. We also responded to anything that was mass generated--he didn't read those just because we had a machine respond to them. But he not only read the response, he'd read the letter, and if he felt the letter wasn't being answered, he made us redo it over again. That was constant. It got to be very frustrating just trying to satisfy him on the quality of mail. He really

cared about that kind of correspondence. Most members don't, but he did, and that was a *huge* part of that two-year period.

**RITCHIE:** Did you keep in touch with other administrative assistants?

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, one thing we did back in my John Hiler days is that we had a network within the freshman class of AA's and press secretaries, who kind of shared ideas and shared observations. The funny thing about freshmen members, especially on the House side, is that often times there's a natural competition as to who's got the best operation, who answers the mail most quickly. And they lie to each other! [laughs] One member would say to Jon Kyl, "Well, I answer my mail in three days." So Jon Kyl would say to me, "Why is so-and-so able to answer his mail in three days and we take three weeks?" So I went to the AA who I knew and said, "What's the real story here?" And he said, "Oh, we're four weeks behind." They just would lie to each other. So a lot of my process, having been through a freshman office before, was just letting Jon Kyl know that we were doing just fine that we were ahead of the curve. We were doing above average. Yes, we're going to have frustrations but don't believe all you hear. So we all would network because they all lied to each other to some degree just to show who had the better office.

I know in the most recent freshman class for the 104th Congress their AA's met on a weekly basis. It happens on the House side, too. It's just a way of networking and staying on top of stuff. Also on the House side, unlike the Senate, there's no power in being a single House member. You gained your strength by numbers. So House members look for ways to join groups and be part of coalitions where their influence can be spread across maybe half a dozen or more members. So, yes we would do networking.

**RITCHIE:** I wondered, considering that everybody faces the same problems, if they don't share ways and techniques of doing things, especially about new equipment, or if you had an office that was a model office that you might have kept an eye on? I have a feeling there is probably more of that kind of networking on the House side than on the Senate side.

**JOHNSTON:** Yes there is because what really drives the House much more than the Senate is the schedule. A House member sees a two-year cycle where a senator sees a six-year term. That's why House members tend to be more frantic, more focused on getting things

done more quickly, because they just don't have the time to do what they really want to do, and because political pressures are much more severe over there than they are here in the Senate.

**RITCHIE:** Talking about political pressures, that was a particularly political time in the House because the Speaker from Texas. . .

**JOHNSTON:** Jim Wright.

**RITCHIE:** Got in trouble and everything had gotten highly charged at that point.

**JOHNSTON:** It was tough for us. There were two things going on. It was a very intense time. You had the problems not only of Speaker Wright but also Tony Coelho going on. In fact, I was on my one vacation during that two and a half year period, in Europe of all places, when Speaker Wright resigned and Coelho announced he was going to step down. It all happened, I think, in the spring of 1988. In addition, back in Arizona we had a Governor named Evan Mecham who was in the process of being impeached. So we not only had the political pressure back home of seeing the whole Republican coalition fracturing over this very divisive, very conservative, and eventually impeached Governor, but you also had the upheavals in the House led by Newt Gingrich. Jon Kyl was very much a disciple of Newt Gingrich.

In fact, Congressman Gingrich's primary vehicle for spreading his gospel was something called the Conservative Opportunity Society, or COS for short. Jon Kyl was an active and loyal participant in those sessions. In fact, I would go with him to those every Wednesday morning eight o'clock sessions. Jon Kyl was so active and so impressed both Newt Gingrich and Bob Walker, the Chair, that in his second year in the House he was made chairman of COS, in 1988. That also consumed an enormous amount of time because we controlled the agenda. We had twenty to thirty active members, the most conservative junior members

of the House. Newt still played the role of a professor who came in usually late in the meeting and would listen, not say a word, for fifteen to twenty minutes and suddenly say: "All right, here's what we need to do." It was really stunning to watch Gingrich perform in that format because it showed his brilliance, his ability to strategize, his ability to communicate. So his ascension up the ranks was no surprise to me at all.

**RITCHIE:** That seemed like a polarizing period.

**JOHNSTON:** Very much so.

**RITCHIE:** On one hand you have Wright who was trying to put his stamp on the House and was a somewhat authoritarian Speaker.

**JOHNSTON:** Very authoritarian.

**RITCHIE:** And then you have Gingrich who was also trying to put his stamp not only on the House but on his own party, trying to change the direction of the party and reenergize it. That period seems to be a prelude to everything that has happened since, more so I think than when Tip O'Neill was the Speaker. I'm not sure if you'd agree with that, but. . .

**JOHNSTON:** Oh, I think that's true. It was quite a time of upheaval. You had a lot of things going on in the capital. You had [Ronald] Reagan's last two years in office, you had Iran-Contra going on, and the stock market dropped five hundred points that one day in October of '87. You had economic fissures. And you had people running for president all over the place that year. That was really quite a tumultuous Congress. And we had Bob Dole, a new Minority Leader, having been Majority Leader, who was running for president. You had a Vice President running for president in George Bush. It was quite a time.

**RITCHIE:** How do national politics affect an individual member's office?

**JOHNSTON:** Mostly in '88, with so many people running in an open Republican primary, George Bush, Bob Dole, and I can't recall who all else also ran--those were the two titans that were running at the time. Arizona, of course, had a primary and so you look for influential members to try to be supportive. Jon Kyl purposely

chose to be neutral, and I chose as a result of his neutrality to have a foot in every camp, so we would be in a position to be helpful to whoever emerged the eventual frontrunner.

Jon Kyl's campaign chairman when he first ran was the Bush Chairman for Arizona, former Mayor Margaret Hance, so when Bush emerged as the eventual nominee, we had a wonderful relationship. I played quite a role since Jon Kyl--and more me than him--became the liaison between people who wanted to work in the administration after Bush won and the Bush administration personnel team. That's a job I'll never do again because I got hundreds of phone calls a day from job seekers from Arizona. It was very disruptive for me in early '89, very frustrating. I left in May not having really completed the job because the Bush people took their time getting staffed up. It was just people calling every day asking had I heard anything. Well, of course, I wasn't hearing anything, I was one of fifty people. It was neat playing that role for a while but then it got very old. I'll never do it again.

**RITCHIE:** I guess for everyone that you make happy, you must make a lot of other people very unhappy.

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, because people always think you know something. Then when they realize you don't, then they get mad at you: "Why aren't you a bigger player?" It's a fault I still have to this day where I just raised the stakes a little too high and it turned out to be a very thankless task.

**RITCHIE:** Your experiences up to that point had been alternating between elections and administration, being in the office of a member and being out on the campaign trail. Which did you enjoy the more?

**JOHNSTON:** I can't rate one over the other. Both were important and essential. It was good to be able to go back and forth because being on the Hill and doing policy and doing management helped make me a better political operative and vice versa. They both were very complementary. I didn't really

plan it to be that way, it just kind of worked out that way. I'd been successful enough in the campaign arena that I had people who wanted me to work in campaigns. Conversely, I was successful enough as a Capitol Hill manager/advisor that I was always being pulled back to the Hill. I never really applied for anything that I got. It all just kind of came my way. Jon Kyl came to me and said, "I want you to come work for me." Conversely, in 1989, in April of '89, I was approached by Senator [Don] Nickles' people about going to the [Republican] Senatorial [Campaign] Committee on this side.

I never had any desire to work in the Senate. I loved the House and saw the Senate as a foreign world. I never really had a relationship with Don Nickles but knew the people he was bringing on to manage the Campaign Committee. What attracted me was that I knew the people I'd be working for; there was an Oklahoma connection that was very comfortable for me, and it paid pretty well. Jon Kyl had one major fault: he didn't pay well. I mean, he just did not want to pay well, and frankly I kind of supported that because we were trying to save money and hire more people. So the dollars looked pretty good at the Senatorial Committee. I know Jon Kyl was not happy when I made the decision to go. He was comfortable with me in that role and now he had to go off and find somebody else to be his top staff aide. But again, that was a case where they came to me and they recruited me to go to the Senatorial Committee.

**RITCHIE:** At that point you were married and were starting a family.

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, it was very stressful. In fact, my wife became pregnant shortly after about the same time I made the decision to go work for the Senatorial Committee. So it was all very stressful, changing jobs, becoming a father for the first time, all happening at once.

**RITCHIE:** I was wondering also about the problems of keeping a personal life when you've got a job that requires you to be there early in the morning and work pretty late at night.

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, the closest I ever came to burning out was working for Jon Kyl. He was wonderful to work for. It was a great experience. I would do

it again but he's a very demanding individual. I was a very demanding individual on myself as he is on himself. You get caught in a frenzy and I'm glad I left when I did because I think I would have suffered had I stayed. It was causing a lot of stress in my family because I was working a steady sixty to eighty hour week. I was going to Arizona once a month and I was putting in a pretty long day trying to just stay ahead of the curve and be successful.

In the Senatorial Committee, Senator Nickles in his own way was a very demanding member but had a very different style of operating than Jon Kyl. That's by no means to criticize Kyl, but Nickles was much more family-friendly in his environment than Jon Kyl was. Well, Jon Kyl's kids were grown. They were gone. Don Nickles still had young kids at home and still does today. I think that had some influence on Nickles' style, which is a little different. The atmosphere and the culture was a little different. Even though it was a Campaign Committee, it was more conducive, it was a little bit of a break. We were going at eighty miles per hour versus one hundred miles an hour as I was for Jon Kyl. So, it all worked out very nicely for me.

**RITCHIE:** Whenever I go over to the House side, I'm always struck by how young everybody is. I have a feeling it's not the kind of career that you can persist in for very long or else you don't really have a private life.

**JOHNSTON:** Well, the Congressional Management Foundation has done studies that show that the average House tenure for personal staff is actually declining. It's gone from about two and a half years to eighteen months. People just don't stay in the House a long time. There are exceptions and it depends on the member, and the relationship, and the safety of the seat, the pressures. I have friends on the House side who have been there for nearly twenty years and wouldn't consider being anywhere else. But they also work for members who are in safer seats. There's a pattern, there's a comfort level, and they manage to work it out where they can have some flexibility and a personal life. It's important to do that. It's hard sometimes. Some members just drive their staff to work really hard and they have turnover. There are a lot of members on the House side who have large alumni associations. But a lot of people will tell you that they'd do it again, too, because it was a great experience, and they learned a great deal, and

it made them a better employee. That's the case with Jon Kyl, or Jack Hiler, or John Paul Hammerschmidt. I would do all three all over again.

**RITCHIE:** Well, you came to the Senate side originally through the Republican Campaign Committee. What were your responsibilities with the Campaign Committee?

**JOHNSTON:** Senator Nickles set up his political operation with three deputy political directors, which was my title. It was by geographic regions. They gave me the southern region, and what they liked about me for that position was the southern races in that cycle were predominately incumbent campaigns. It was Jesse Helms; it was Strom Thurmond; it was John Warner. It was a mostly incumbent area, and having helped incumbents when I worked for the House Campaign Committee--that's what my primary job was, to help House incumbents--I had a history of working with incumbents even though they weren't Senate races. So my job primarily was to build relationships with all those members. It took a while.

I discovered it's a little more difficult to build relationships not just with senators but a senator's own infrastructure than it was on the House side. The House side is more open. People are always looking to build friendships and alliances. On this side they're a little more protective. It's kind of like the Chinese, you just have to take some time and build that relationship in the Senate where the House side they come and they go. [snaps fingers] It took a while, and it was a little frustrating but eventually I did and because the Senate Campaign Committee provides an enormous amount of resources for a Senate campaign, millions of dollars in some cases depending on the size of the state. There was a reason for them to want to work with me, and in most cases I did very well.

I had one interesting case where Senator [Thad] Cochran was up for re-election. I walked in to see his chief of staff who's a very good friend of mine to this day and he said, "We don't want you going to our state. We had a bad experience with the Committee six years ago in our last re-election race and we don't want you going in. If we need you, we'll call you." I said, "Yes, sir." [laughs] Fortunately, he had no opposition. Senator Cochran was totally

unopposed that year so there wasn't any need for me to go into the state. But that sometimes is the response that you get based on what your predecessors had done in prior races.

I got to meet a lot of people. I travelled quite a bit so I got to go into states I'd never worked in before, like South Carolina and North Carolina. The senator I probably worked most closely with was John Warner, even though he didn't have a serious re-election campaign. But he took it seriously and was very accessible to me and I gained a lot of respect for him personally. Eventually they also gave me a couple of other states. They gave me South Dakota and Nebraska, so I got to work with Senator [Larry] Pressler pretty closely. His 1990 race was very close. Then they gave me a challenger race. Senator [James] Exon was being challenged by Hal Daub, a former congressman, and I was involved in that race, although it was not successful. Primarily, all the incumbents I worked with were re-elected, and that was my primary responsibility.

**RITCHIE:** What kinds of things would you do for them? Would you assess their situation?

**JOHNSTON:** Basically, my job as a field person was to do three primary responsibilities. One, was to gather intelligence about the political environment in the state for the chairman and for the management of the Senatorial Committee. Number two was to coordinate the way the Committee's money was spent to support those campaigns. And thirdly it was to work with other political parties, state parties, national party, to coordinate other efforts of the Republican party to support that candidate's re-election or that candidate's election. That was primarily what I did. It required travel to most of the states, travelling where possible with the senator or with the staff, going in, meeting with state party officials, and then drawing up plans. I was best known, unlike most political operatives, as a consummate planner. I was constantly trying to negotiate coordinated plans between the national party, state parties, and my committee on how various get-out-the-vote and other advocacy programs were designed and carried out. Again, it was primarily a management function but one I really, really enjoyed.

**RITCHIE:** Were you involved in advertising for campaigns?

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, mostly in direct mail not television advertising. Television advertising, I discovered, in Senate races is very personal. Members get personally involved in their television advertising because they realize that's how most voters get their information. Seventy percent of voters get their information from television. Radio is climbing but it's still second place to television. So they really got personally involved in how they were portrayed, what ads they ran, and such. Most of my involvement, where I really could influence advertising, was in a direct mail area where most of our money went. Actually, we encouraged it because if people used our money for direct mail, they got a lower postage rate in most cases because we were paying for the mailing at nonprofit rates. Not seeing it or not sharing the perception that I had of direct mail as a powerful tool, they let me go ahead and play a role there so I did in that case. Other than that, that was pretty much it.

**RITCHIE:** The Republican party got into direct mailing much earlier than did the Democratic party.

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, they did.

**RITCHIE:** It's just amazing to me how the operation works. The only campaign that I ever volunteered for was John Lindsay's campaign for Mayor of New York in 1965. Then I went away to graduate school and for years afterwards I can't tell you how much mail came to my parents' address in New York from various Republican committees because my name got on their mailing lists. I was both impressed and overwhelmed by how much would accumulate. I'd come home on holidays and my parents would have saved what had arrived in between. I never got the sense that the Democrats used direct mailing to the degree that the Republicans did. Republicans almost made a science out of it.

**JOHNSTON:** Actually it depends on where you're at. If you go to the more expensive media markets, California, was kind of the birth place for political direct mail. It's still the most dominant form of communication in California because it's so expensive to run advertising on television. And it's true of New York and Philadelphia as well. That's why you see states like New Jersey which has one TV station, but you're sandwiched between New York and Philadelphia, the most and fourth-

most media markets in the country. That's where you see direct mail because direct mail is the most efficient means of communicating. It's not the most powerful, TV is the most powerful, but direct mail is especially effective for down ballot races, Congress and for state races, is the predominant form of communication in those kinds of areas. Less so in a state like Idaho or Oklahoma where TV is relatively inexpensive.

**RITCHIE:** Especially because TV reaches everybody, but not everybody's going to vote. The big question in every election is who is going to show up? Whose supporters will come out? Only about forty-eight percent of the voters came out in 1996 and only thirty-seven percent showed up in 1994, so you really have to get the faithful out and focus their attention on the election.

**JOHNSTON:** That's why a lot of direct mail is delivered late in an election because it's designed not just to persuade last-minute undecided voters but it's also designed to generate some turnout. In the case of Senator Pressler's race, for example, the Senatorial Committee used bulk mail--federal law permits a national party committee to help a state party do candidate-specific mailings or candidate-specific activities, just so long as volunteers are involved and it not be considered a contribution to the campaign. It's kind of a legal convolution but one of the responsibilities I had was to use that mechanism of the law to go beyond what we could normally do directly for a campaign if a state party's involved.

For example, I took \$125,000 into South Dakota late in 1990 to help Senator Pressler in a very tight race. It was money above and beyond what our legal limits were but because we used volunteers it was permissible as a "party building" activity. We would basically replace--we'd give the state party money for it to operate and then it would use its dollars from its federal account to underwrite these programs. Now, as long as volunteers were involved in a significant way, it was all considered nonallicable. It was not a contribution, so we were able to generate several hundred thousand pieces of mail the last month of that race, and he won with fifty-two percent.

**RITCHIE:** Did you use phone banks and things like that as well?

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, phone banks were big too. In fact, that was always the most difficult part of the process because the state party, the national party, the Campaign Committee, and the candidate have to come up with a coordinated plan on how dollars will be used for party activities. Everybody was always worried about being rolled or screwed by somebody else and that nobody had to carry an unequal burden of expense. That's why I thought I could negotiate Middle East peace plans. It was that difficult sometimes to come to agreement on how money would be used. One of the most expensive but one of the most important elements was how we would do the phoning, which races would you call to identify voters.

A typical phone bank would do two things. One, it would call voters that you believed were undecided and asked them who they were for. You had to allocate the cost of that phone call based on who you were calling for, whether it was a governors race or Senate race. The party would underwrite a small part of it as law would permit. Then you would do get-out-the-vote calls. It costs on average about fifty to sixty cents per completed call, to reach that undecided voter, to survey them, or to turn them out. When you're calling tens of thousands of voters it can be very expensive, but it is very effective. Studies have shown that the combination of a last-minute mail piece and a phone call on a Saturday can generate thousands of additional voters who otherwise would not vote.

**RITCHIE:** Who are sort of at sea because they've seen so many ads and there are so many candidates. You need something to catch their attention.

**JOHNSTON:** That's correct. Studies show, too, that most voters even today don't make up their minds, truly make a decision in a race, until the last two or three weeks of a campaign. They may tell a pollster in September: yeah, I'm for John Warner or I'm for Mark Warner. But that's usually based on the last thing they've seen or heard. Those numbers do change and people tend not to make a final decision until those last two or three weeks. That's why you see the most dollars spent on campaign activity are spent during that time in most cases.

**RITCHIE:** Would you also advise the senator's own campaign staff if they were getting off track?

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, I played an advisory role. I'd go in and often times they'd ask me, "Well, how are we doing compared to somebody else?" For example, Senator Helms' campaign would say, "Well, what are you doing in South Carolina? What are you doing in Nebraska? What is somebody else doing that we're not doing that maybe we should." What you carried was the efforts of other campaigns. So they would get intelligence from me of what others were doing.

For example, Hal Daub was mailing a video which is an expensive but a very novel way of campaigning in a state like Nebraska, where people are spread out. But they all have VCR's, ironically, in Nebraska. We'd talk about how that would do in North Carolina and where it might work, who it might go to and what the cost might be. Often times they would also seek information from me about various vendors. Who was the best person to hire to do our phone banking? Who was the best mail vendor to use? What were their costs like? How's their creativity? I often got involved in the polling because it also is very expensive and we sometimes would underwrite the cost so we also would get the information how the candidate was doing. It's a huge expense in most campaign committees and most candidates are happy to have us do that. All it costs them is sharing very sensitive data with us, which helped us know what was really going on. So we did a tremendous amount of polling for candidates and those are some of the areas where we can be helpful.

**RITCHIE:** Now, you were working mostly for incumbents. House incumbents get re-elected in a much larger percentage than Senate incumbents. I've heard from Senate staff that a lot changes in a state in the six years between elections.

**JOHNSTON:** It sure does.

**RITCHIE:** And it's sometimes easy for incumbent senators to lose track of who's who and what's going on. Did you have to get incumbents up to speed to face a new election?

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, it struck me that House members never really truly leave being in "campaign mode." They're always politically attuned to what's going on. They go back more frequently. They hustle more. A senator, I noticed, and mostly his staff, would just get totally isolated from the political culture and have to really get in the campaign mode. Every member is different. Some members are more politically attuned than others. Don Nickles, for example, is very politically savvy. Trent Lott is very politically savvy. They always keep an eye on what's going on back home. Some members--I'm not going to name any names--just have to get back into it again. I noticed that with a lot of the ones I worked for. They just had to gear up, because one thing you have to do is you have to go home in a campaign. People expect to see you if you want to get re-elected and if a member is used to going back once a month, it's hard to get them to shift their machinery to go back two or three or four times a month.

Also a Senate office, unlike a House office, doesn't respond as quickly to things that develop as a House office does. A House office, if they saw a bad news story that morning, they'd have a response out by noon. A Senate office might take a while, one, to discover a bad story but, number two, to respond to it, or decide whether even to respond to it. You tend to get politically desensitized to things. So, a part of my process was creating a sense of urgency in offices and with staff. Senate staff also are much less politically attuned to things back in the state than House members' staffs are. A lot of my time was spent trying to motivate and again give that sense of urgency to a Senate staffer. "You better pay attention to what's going on. This is something you've got to respond to, this is something you got to watch out for." In addition we also did a lot of research on a Senate incumbent as if we were the opposition so they would know what to anticipate was going to happen to them. Again, House members do that almost automatically. It's the way their mind set is. Senators you kind of have to walk them through it. It's like they've left a world and then

have to go back to it again. It's a hard transition to have to kind of shift back for a Senate office. Six years is a long time.

**RITCHIE:** Especially some of the older members find that their key supporters are retired by the time their election comes around again.

**JOHNSTON:** Now that is a problem for both House and Senate incumbents. I noticed that working for Jack Hiler of Indiana. He had a huge staff infrastructure in 1980 when he first won. There is always more excitement for a new candidate than there is for an incumbent and it's hard to get people motivated to keep somebody in office versus trying to change something. Senators really suffer because they don't do political mailings, don't do political fundraisers for many years. There's sometimes a four-year gap between doing political events or even attending political events in their state. A lot happens in a six-year period. A lot happens in a two-year period, too, for House guys, but in the senators' case, they sometimes have to start from scratch all over again. It's not easy.

**RITCHIE:** Well, you have a good track record. That was 1990 and almost everybody you worked for, all the incumbents, were re-elected.

**JOHNSTON:** That's correct.

**RITCHIE:** What does somebody working for a campaign committee do when the campaign is over?

**JOHNSTON:** They have to find another job, especially if there's a new chairman. Senator Phil Gramm of Texas was elected to replace Senator Nickles. Senator Nickles and I had built a pretty good relationship. We had done some travelling together. He was a very hands on chairman. He would go in to recruit with me. For example, in Tennessee, Al Gore was up in 1990. We wanted to have someone to run against Al Gore. I brought Senator Nickles in with me to Tennessee to try to recruit people to run for office. We were not successful by the way.

**RITCHIE:** How would you recruit somebody in a state like Tennessee?

**JOHNSTON:** It's hard. Tennessee was hard because our objective was to help George Bush. We thought Al Gore would be (and this is more my view than anybody else's) a factor and maybe even be the nominee against George Bush in 1992. We thought, based on our survey and research that it was possible. And if you don't challenge Al Gore then he'd be out campaigning for other candidates. So our objective was not so much to defeat him as it was to keep him home. It's hard to convince someone to run as a "sacrificial lamb" when your objective is not necessarily to win. But we thought there was enough potential that if we found the right person who maybe aspired to running, say, four or six years later, to get that first race out of the way, to build that political infrastructure, to run and get a race under the belt and then be ready to run again in say two, four, six years down the road either for the House or for the Senate again. So, we approached the race that way. Don Nickles, of course, approached it that anybody could win, using his own example of somebody who was never suppose to be even taken seriously who won a race.

I would go in and say: "We have these resources. We think you'd be a good candidate. If you run and if you do as well as we think you will do, then we'll be here with the money." And that was always the sticking point. They often times would say, "I want the money guaranteed up front before I decide to run." Well, we wouldn't do that. So we'd often say, "Look, we'll put in some money but we're going to reserve the right to give you full funding based on how well you do." That's sometimes is the breaking point. If they were going to run, they had to be serious. If they didn't want to take that risk, they probably wouldn't be a good candidate. So in a way that was a nice filter, as it were, it was a nice hurdle for them to have to overcome.

If we really wanted somebody to run but we didn't necessarily want to commit the resources early on, then I'd bring in Don Nickles, and sometimes that could be very persuasive when a U.S. senator, a member of the leadership says, "Hey, we think you should be a candidate. I want you to be a colleague of mine in Washington." That sometimes helped. Recruiting was never a bigger problem in the Senate as it was for the House. The House is a big problem recruitingwise.

Senate races, because they are more visible, tend to attract people much more than a House race. That's why you have a lower retention rate in the Senate because you get better quality people running for the Senate than you do sometimes for the House. That's changed a lot.

**RITCHIE:** How would you identify somebody to recruit?

**JOHNSTON:** Well, you tended to look for somebody that you thought would want to be a senator. I looked for people that I thought either had an ability to attract a lot of support or, in all candor, we would look for somebody who had a lot of personal money on their own, who was involved politically. We would look for somebody who had some stature; somebody who had political ability; somebody we thought would be a strongly motivated candidate for office.

A good example of somebody we looked at and identified in Tennessee was Ted Welch. Ted Welch is a very successful businessman, former chairman of the state party, a Republican National Committeeman, personally quite wealthy. Don Nickles went to Ted and said, "I think you should run for office." We'd also tried to communicate with Lamar Alexander at the time. He was head of the University of Tennessee and he said, "No way." He made it very clear that it was not in his plan to a U.S. senator or to challenge Al Gore at that time. That may change in year 2000 but that was the plan back then.

Part of the agenda, too, was we wanted to be able to brag about a candidate. If we could get a Big Name into the race that was just great. Former governors or House members were very attractive to Don Nickles. Or an independently wealthy, respected businessperson who had some personal resources was also very attractive. Those were the primary paradigms of the person we would look for in a state. Otherwise, to get somebody who wasn't known, didn't have the resources, didn't have the stature, was always a hard sell. We wanted to be able to recruit a candidate we could go back here and pitch the PAC community or others, "Hey this person could win this race." It's hard to do with a No Name person. So for a Senate race you tended to try to find somebody, really, who had some ability.

**RITCHIE:** And I suppose it's kind of heady to have the Campaign Committee come down, sit down, and stare across the table at you, especially if you've got a senator along with you.

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, it is! [laughs]

**RITCHIE:** Now, there are different shades of Republicans. Did it make much difference, if you were going into a state, where the person would stand on the issues?

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, it depended on the issue. I was more policy focused than your average political operative because I knew that candidates define themselves and are defined by how they handle issues; not so much the positions they take but how they handle them. A good story is in 1992, I might be getting a little bit ahead of you here, but when I was at the Policy Committee I would often times avail myself to the Senatorial Committee or Senator Gramm to go in and help brief a candidate on issues. Often times my role was not to tell them what to say but to give them enough background but also to tell them based on their position how to communicate it. I would occasionally, though I am personally very strongly pro-life, communicate to somebody how to express a pro-choice position to be politically effective, because I was putting on my Republican hat and not my policy hat at the time.

It was not unusual to go in and tell somebody, even somebody whom I disagreed with on the issue, how to communicate it to win. I would look for somebody who had a nice issue that they would like bring to a race. If somebody for example had a tragedy in their life, I'd wonder how that would play. Would that be a plus or a negative? You had to handle this very carefully. You didn't want to try to capitalize on somebody's personal tragedy, but if somebody had been a "victim of crime," well, guess what that does for you in a campaign? It gives you the crime issue. What greater authority is there than somebody who's suffered at the hands of a criminal? So, if somebody had had that kind of personal experience, that to me was a positive.

I would look for those kinds of hooks, as we call them, to an issue, that would make an even more effective candidate and allow them to build a campaign around this key issue that would attract voters. Issues were a lot more important to me than they were the average political operative because I knew ultimately voters in deciding who to be for would look for a similarity on issues. They look for things like passion, they look for intensity, they look for some commonality without ever having to agree necessarily. That was more important. That's why Bill Clinton's so successful.

**RITCHIE:** But in some states, if you're on the wrong side of an issue, the campaign's going to be swimming up stream the whole time.

**JOHNSTON:** I did look carefully, especially when recruiting somebody who's in the legislature, at their voting record. If they had a history of voting for a lot of tax increases, I tended to shy away because that is a death sentence in a primary. Really, I found that issues never were really an obstacle even if somebody was pro-choice, pro-life. That never got to be a big problem.

**RITCHIE:** Many politicians change their minds, but it takes a good politician to explain why he changed his mind.

**JOHNSTON:** That's correct. I looked more for the ability to communicate than I did where they stood on a certain issue. I didn't want to mess with candidates on issues. I had great respect, again more than most political operatives, for where somebody is coming from, because I understood having worked on the Hill that, hey, this is a personal decision and you were a representative of the voters. I'm not going to tell you how to think on an issue. You can think for yourself, but I am going to help you communicate it. I took that role as a political operative. I never really tried to change anybody's position, although I did have a lot of candidates, especially for the House, who asked me, who were maybe undecided, what I would do. How does so and so think? How does Newt Gingrich think on this issue? How does Bob Dole think on this issue? Where are they on this matter? How do they explain it? I would tend to influence their positions in that way if they were undecided or still looking for a particular position. Issues in terms of recruiting a candidate, they

were more factors to be dealt with or to be capitalized on than they were used to determine whether somebody actually would run on.

**RITCHIE:** Did you notice any change in the Campaign Committee between when Nickles was chairman and when Gramm was chairman? Did they have different strategies?

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, they operated differently. The worst kept secret in town was that Phil Gramm was running for president. He narrowly won the chairmanship both times because people knew that he had national ambitions. Phil Gramm certainly was very aggressive and much more so than Don Nickles was in reaching out to organizations that clearly could be helpful in a national campaign. He spent a lot of time in New Hampshire, a lot of time in Iowa. I'm sure there was a reason for that. [laughs] He denied it and would deny it now that he used the Campaign Committee to advance his national campaign. I sense that Gramm was much more aggressive in building those kinds of alliances that were more of a national scope than they were a candidate specific scope.

Nickles tended to focus more on things that would help candidates. Gramm was looking for, it appeared to me, a bigger picture. He would work with an organization and do things that would help a variety of candidates versus just one or two. Nickles was a little more retail than Phil Gramm was in that respect. Other than that both of them were aggressive. Gramm was an aggressive fundraiser as was Nickles. Gramm inherited a debt from Nickles in the 1990 race so he had to focus more on fundraising. The 1992 cycle was a much more expensive election cycle. We had the luxury in '90 of having not a single big state Senate race. No California, no Texas, no Florida or New York. Where for Phil Gramm, in '92, all those states I just mentioned had a Senate race. Well, that's five million dollars right there that you had to raise that you didn't have to raise in the previous cycle. So Phil Gramm was probably a much more aggressive fundraiser as a result than Don Nickles. Actually they were pretty similar in style both young, aggressive, conservative members that really were pretty competitive people.

**RITCHIE:** I was thinking when you said it that it's probably better to leave a deficit in the treasury than a deficit in the elections.

**JOHNSTON:** That's right.

**RITCHIE:** I remember in 1986 the Republicans actually wound up with a surplus but lost the Senate. The question was, "Why did you raise the money if you weren't going to spend it?"

**JOHNSTON:** In all candor, they were in the majority and people knew they were in danger of losing and they couldn't spend money fast enough. Money was pouring into their coffers in 1986. We had to struggle in the minority to raise money. Phil Gramm struggled, Don Nickles struggled, Rudy Boschwitz struggled. It was hard to raise money when you're in the minority. That's why I know that Senator [Alfonse] D'Amato was very successful in raising money [in 1996]. Being in the majority makes a big difference in how well a campaign committee can run. When you're going to fundraisers featuring chairmen of committees, it's a little different than going featuring ranking minority members.

**RITCHIE:** You mentioned Senator Gramm's national ambitions. Barry Goldwater also started out as the Republican Campaign Committee Chairman. The job puts you in all those different states, and gives you visibility, and also gets you a lot of IOUs if your candidates win those races, helping you to build a national campaign structure. The other path that it's gone to is to the internal leadership in the Senate. A lot of majority leaders and minority leaders at one time served their turn as head of a Campaign Committee. George Mitchell built his reputation doing that in 1986 on the Democratic side. Did Senator Nickles at that stage have leadership ambitions? Did you see him heading in that direction?

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, he did. Don Nickles definitely wanted to go up the leadership ranks and obviously time has proven it to be the case. When Bill Armstrong announced he was going to retire, he had been Policy Chairman and my first exposure to it was when I heard that Nickles was running for Policy Committee. Well, what's the Policy Committee? I understand that Phil Gramm was critical of Don Nickles for using his Campaign Committee to support a lot

of incumbent colleagues who didn't really have serious races, that he was building good will for a Policy Committee Chairman race. I don't think that was really the case. If somebody was up for re-election, Don Nickles supported him. That's what the Campaign Committee does. Well, Phil Gramm was running for president, too. So you can find something to criticize either way. I'm not sure how much really had a bearing on the other, but that's one way how a senator can take advantage of a leadership position to advance a future candidacy.

**RITCHIE:** You could probably also sink your future candidacy if your candidates don't win or if you're perceived to have been a weak leader in the Campaign Committee.

**JOHNSTON:** You have to perform. That's correct.

**RITCHIE:** When did you make the move then from the Campaign Committee to the Policy Committee?

**JOHNSTON:** People I'd worked for indicated that Nickles, who supported Gramm for the leadership position, I believe, had extracted a promise that he would keep certain people on board. Nickles, who was up himself in 1992, wanted me involved in his re-election campaign. He thought he would have a serious race. He actually did, although he won handsomely. So it was a bit of a surprise when we got notified in January that we were not being kept on board. I was unemployed. That was the height of the recession in 1991, as well, so I had to find something to do. And because I had, in my John Paul Hammerschmidt days, developed connections with George Bush, I was able to turn to the administration and was able to find something fairly quickly.

I was very lucky and went to the Department of Transportation as the deputy assistant secretary for public affairs in the Bush administration, which was a great experience. It was my one foray in the executive branch. I'm not sure I'll go back, but it was a great experience, where I was the chief operating officer for a public affairs office under Secretary of Transportation Sam Skinner. That was a tumultuous time because Skinner himself had ambitions. He wanted to be a big player in the Bush cabinet, and was. Eventually, while I was there, he moved on

to be Chief of Staff at the White House. I helped Andy Card his successor with that and even though I was "hatched" under the Hatch Act, played an indirect role to kind of provide political advice to people I worked with. I was the most politically experienced person in the Skinner and Card administrations there at Transportation but I couldn't do politics. So I often times would advise people about who were the political points of contact with the Bush campaign and how we could maximize issues.

I was there for a year and during that whole time Don Nickles would call saying, "I want to get you back to the Hill some day." I said, "Great, call me when you've got something." And one day he did call. He called and said, "My staff director at the Policy Committee is leaving, I want you to come over and do this." I'd just gotten a big raise and was taking a pay cut to come back to the Hill. Because Nickles was so persistent, because I felt I owed it to him and because he'd been good to me, I liked him personally, this seemed to be a good opportunity. But I didn't know much about the Policy Committee. I said, "I'm on my way." How glad I was because Bush at the time was ahead in the polls but wound up losing his re-election campaign. And with Nickles, of course, I got involved in his re-election campaign. I took a break during October of that year and helped him get re-elected and had a place to go after the election. [laughs]

**RITCHIE:** That's great. One question about the Department of Transportation: did Capitol Hill look different from the inside of an executive agency?

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, the major thing that made it different was, especially in public affairs, I really was divorced from Capitol Hill. It was like moving from Oklahoma to Virginia. It was like changing locations. Yes, you're part of the same country, but you're just in a whole different community. I had very little contact with Capitol Hill during that year. Most of my contacts in the past were somewhat political. Well, I was "hatched," I couldn't be involved in politics. Skinner was an aggressive enough Secretary of Transportation. I was plenty occupied and really missed the politics, but was busy enough that I didn't worry too much about it. Looking back now that year is a blur. I can't tell you what I really did or accomplished or what really happened.

One thing that did happen was where I did have some contact with the Hill was we had the reauthorization of all the nation's highway programs up that year, a bill that's become known as ISTEA, or the Inter-modal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act. I was detailed as the official public affairs person on behalf of that effort. Of course, you don't lobby in the executive branch. You have to make that very clear distinction. But my job was to make sure that the administration's position on that bill was well publicized. So I did a lot of op-ed pieces. I was still being political but in a very different sense. I was taking a very strong advocacy role on behalf of the administration's position on transportation. As we were getting into a political year, I helped stage events around the country for George Bush to go into to bless certain transportation projects that were creating jobs in Los Angeles, and Texas, and a few other key states. So, there was a political element, of course, to all of this, but it wasn't directly involved in a campaign sense. Those are the things I remember most about that time frame. Other than that, I took a true sabbatical from Capitol Hill during that year.

**RITCHIE:** When you said you did op-ed pieces, did you write them yourself or did you write them for the Secretary?

**JOHNSTON:** I wrote them for the Secretary. I drafted them. I also ran the speech writing department. I wrote a lot of speeches for both Secretaries, as well, and travelled with them whenever they gave them. In fact, I remember in 1992 or late '91 going to a Governor's Association meeting in Seattle, Washington, where I accompanied Skinner, as often I did, whenever he travelled someplace and gave a speech. I wrote the speech and I would provide support. I remember being in an elevator with then Governor Bill Clinton. It was my first contact with him since my first days with Hammerschmidt.

**RITCHIE:** Skinner went over to the White House right in the middle of the campaign to be staff director. A lot of people thought he was going to bring magic and order because that was such a disorganized year. But he got some of the blame for Bush's defeat. What kind of person was he? How would you rate his abilities?

**JOHNSTON:** I would say he was a boy scout. He was a good guy. He was a hard charging, very outgoing, very ambitious individual. I never thought that organizational skills were his forte. He was more of a cheerleader, more of a campaign kind of guy, very political. He always looked at things and did things--from my perspective--that would give the Department and the administration a lot of visibility, and a lot of credit. Very approachable, a lot of fun. He made a practice of dropping in on employees that hadn't seen a Secretary for years. I learned a valuable lesson from that. I used that experience when I became Secretary of the Senate. I was always impressed by people who were in positions like that who would reach down into the bowels of the building to meet people and talk to people who most folks never have contact with. He was a pilot, so whenever he flew someplace, I'd be sitting behind the pilot's seat. I'd be sitting behind him. He really taught me the value of inspiring the troops and bringing a lot of energy and devotion to a position.

**RITCHIE:** Well, he got much better press when he was Secretary of Transportation than when he was chief of staff of the White House.

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, he did. When you're dealing with things like road building and airplanes and things, it's much easier to get good press than it is when you're chief of staff of the White House. It's a very different role and I'm not sure Skinner ever adjusted to that, because he was used to being a deliverer of good news, being the good guy as Secretary of Transportation. When you're chief of staff, you're the chief spear catcher for the President, and I'm not sure Skinner ever really adjusted to that role. That is a role that was foreign to his nature. He's a very positive, optimistic, forward-looking guy, who could do battle with anybody, but always was a cheerful optimist. Well, sometimes you've got to be the bad guy being chief of staff. I don't think it ever worked out that way.

**RITCHIE:** They want the President to be the cheerful optimist and somebody else to deliver the bad news.

**JOHNSTON:** Yes. He liked to make people happy and that's not the job of chief of staff.

**RITCHIE:** Well, you came back in 1992 to work with Senator Nickles for the Policy Committee. We've talked about this before, but in general what did you envision in that job?

Here you were coming back to Capitol Hill after being gone for a year. You're on the Senate side as opposed to the House side, working for a committee that you really had not much connection to.

**JOHNSTON:** Didn't know much about it.

**RITCHIE:** How did you envision the job?

**JOHNSTON:** I didn't know how to envision the job because Don Nickles had not given me a lot direction. And I detected from my predecessor, Rick Lawson, that he never felt that he really developed in the job as he thought he might. I mean it was still a growing, learning process for him, but also between him and what he thought Nickles wanted. I don't think Nickles at that time really knew what the Policy Committee should be doing, where it was truly headed. I think I sensed that when I walked into it. It was a committee that didn't quite know where it was suppose to go, and Nickles was looking for some leadership from me, giving it some direction and giving him some advice as to where it should go.

The thing about Don Nickles is that he delegates extremely well. He provides some leadership but also looks for leadership from his own staff, and follows advice that he thinks is good. I really enjoyed that relationship with him. Nickles made it clear: "Look", he said, "we work with Bob Dole. We don't ever get cross purposes with Bob Dole. And I want to be an aggressive force for political leadership in the GOP leadership. Go forth and do." So it was up to me to walk in there and figure out what the place was, what resources it had, and then to give it some leadership and direction. What I saw was a very bright group of people. It was the largest committee inside the leadership. There were about eighteen to nineteen staffers, over a million dollar budget. They were a lot of very bright policy people with very little political orientation that I thought had enormous potential to be a force.

Early on it was a case of changing the orientation. They liked to do the meaty, in-depth, detailed policy papers that nobody read. It wasn't seen as being a particularly useful part of the leadership. My role was to change focus to an operation that was more of a guerrilla strike force, where we looked for opportunities for Republicans to make a mark and to advance their agenda. It wasn't so much to help them develop the agenda, except that we provided basic research. But I wanted to make the Policy Committee staff more usable by the leadership to achieve political objectives both on the floor, in the public, and in the press. That's when I began to see the communication dimension that had never been utilized by the committee. I wanted to change the way we did things, from long, detailed, always interesting, and brilliantly written tomes, to shorter, what I call "hit" pieces where we would seize an issue real quick, do a quick hit, and get it out. And so we wound up producing a lot more papers, probably the same amount of paper but more shorter things that were just more user friendly, in trying to help our Senate position itself for the '92 elections.

Meanwhile, I was also working behind the scenes to help Don Nickles with his re-election campaign. I finally took a leave of absence and went out to Oklahoma and spent October helping Don Nickles' re-election campaign that year. Just trying to provide information. I saw the role that policy played in campaigns. We tried to provide information to senators primarily but information that was also picked up by the Senate Committee to give to candidates to use in their campaigns, because if they had messages and an agenda to talk about, it would help their campaigns. '92 was not a great year for the Republicans. There was, I think, actually no net change after Paul Coverdell's runoff election that year. But it established the Policy Committee as an institution that was politically cutting edge. It provided information that really helped candidates with things.

One thing that my staff volunteered to do was to help draft, on their own time, an issues manual for candidates. One of the things that we did during my early tenure was that, working with the Senatorial Campaign Committee, we did an issues seminar for all the candidates that came to D.C. They set it, they ran it, but my staff came over on a federal holiday and volunteered their own time to kind of walk with candidates through issues. That really established the Policy

Committee as a place to go for some good politically astute, politically sensitive, politically cutting edge issues. It helped to educate the political community that, hey, issues are important to campaigns and can be helpful. It put the Policy Committee on the map, I think. I'm not trying to brag, but I always felt that that's what the Policy Committee really should do and it was simply doing something I thought was long overdue.

**RITCHIE:** It obviously raised its visibility with whoever got elected that year, if they had made use of its services.

**JOHNSTON:** It did. That's right. So, I took my political background with my journalism background and made it useful to the leadership in a way that they had never seen it available before.

**RITCHIE:** In a sense, you and Senator Nickles were bringing what you learned on the job in the Campaign Committee into the Policy Committee and giving almost a campaign mode to the Policy Committee.

**JOHNSTON:** That's right. I put the Policy Committee in campaign mode, that's a good way of describing it. I brought a political dimension to what we did at the Policy Committee. Never took away from the policy focus, but just gave it a little more of a more useful dimension because, frankly, the Senate was becoming very politicized at that point. No question about it.

**RITCHIE:** Did you find that the staff, who had been there doing business under the old way, adjusted well to the new regime?

**JOHNSTON:** Most did. Most did very well because they were all loyal, partisan Republicans, who had strong feelings on issues and were deeply frustrated that their ideas were not being utilized, and that some senators were not making wise decisions on policy matters. We were not portraying issues properly, were not communicating issues properly. So what I did, in effect, was take that frustration and married it with a different way of operating. And they were thrilled. There were a couple of exceptions. There were some that resisted

it. But even some of those people, looking back on it, who are still there, say, "Hey, you did it right. This is what we should have done."

It was a new way of operating but they loved it. I think they felt they were being utilized more. They saw senators more often than they ever saw before. They saw candidates. When candidates that we'd helped got elected--Paul Coverdell, for example--called and asked for some advice and some information. He hadn't hired a staff yet. We had something happen in the Middle East. He called our staff over and said, "Help me out." So they saw a chance to build relationships with new senators that they never had a chance before. They felt their influence was expanded. To some degree the Policy Committee still plays that role today. I'm not sure to what degree, but we crossed a bridge to new territory that, I think, they still work in.

**RITCHIE:** The Policy Committee today is made up of the Republican chairmen of the committees or ranking members.

**JOHNSTON:** Technically, yes. Ironically, the Policy Committee is a committee of the conference and it consists, as you mentioned, of either the ranking members or the chairmen of the committees plus the leadership. The Policy Committee never truly meets. It's really a tool of the chairman and some degree of the staff based on what members want and need. Sometimes what we discover is you have to create that need. You have to show them, hey, you need us for this reason. That's kind of what we did. I felt like a salesman of sorts: Hey, this Policy Committee is a great resource, here's how you can use us. They'd say, "Oh yeah, we do need that." Then they'd utilize us.

**RITCHIE:** Because since 1947 the government has been paying for staff for the two Policy Committees, they were a place to hire people. And in 1993 that was an important asset for Republicans since they had lost the administration and were in the minority in both houses of Congress.

**JOHNSTON:** I recall coming back from Oklahoma one day after the election was over. I counted 143 messages from administration employees who had to find work! It was quite a challenge. We built a network of ex-Bush

administration staff. If a Republican senator really needed some policy guidance or help, they didn't call the Policy Committee, they called their friends at EPA, they called their friends at DOT or wherever else in the administration. Suddenly when Bush lost, that resource was gone. They had to turn to us. We were prepared to deal with some of it, but we couldn't do the work of the former staff of the EPA or DOT or wherever else. So we kept track of key people in those agencies and in some cases those that were unemployed we brought them on volunteer staff. We would have to do it in a way that would enhance their education because there are ethical considerations in doing that which we followed. But we created a visiting fellows program at the Policy Committee that utilized some of that expertise. Plus, Senator Dole created the "shadow cabinet" of former administration policy people that we kept contact with, who were sounding boards and gave us some direction on where we went. Very helpful.

**RITCHIE:** But the real thrust was this whole communications change that was almost unprecedented.

**JOHNSTON:** What drove that was a real perception in the Senate that George Bush was right on the issues but communicated everything horribly during the campaign. We thought, "Well, in that case we have to do a better job of communicating ourselves." We also realized that without a White House that we were emboldened to kind of lead the way in the Senate. So communicating an agenda became a big priority inside the GOP leadership. We saw a role not just for the Conference, which has that traditional role, but for us as well. The Conference operation in the Republican ranks primarily focused on TV. We saw a real need to make sure that editorial writers and the print media were better educated. Since our materials were more geared for the print media we began to do a lot more outreach to editorial writers. We shared our documents with them. We actually reached out to reporters and tried to build relationships. I took a staff person and made him a communications director to try to get our agenda and our positions and our papers and our information out there and used in a public medium. It proved to be pretty successful.

**RITCHIE:** That 103rd Congress when you came back, you started out with the Democrats controlling the White House. . .

**JOHNSTON:** Everything.

**RITCHIE:** And holding relatively comfortable majorities in both the House and the Senate, and initially getting through a lot of legislation. Basically, they passed legislation that had been passed before but vetoed by Bush or by Reagan. In the first six months, President Clinton actually signed quite a bit of legislation. Democrats had a great sense of running the show until they hit the wall with health care reform. . .

**JOHNSTON:** Actually I'd say it was before that. The first domino to fall on the Democratic Congress was the stimulus package that Bill Clinton had introduced with strong Hill support among Democrats. I'm going back four years but what I remember is that the new president had, with Henry Cisneros' help, solicited the mayors. "Send me your projects, things that you would like to do that would be good for your community that will help create jobs and improve the economy where you are." Meanwhile the stimulus package, a nineteen billion dollar bill as I remember, was a huge pork bill. It was the Policy Committee in fact that led the opposition. The mayor's wish list was actually published by the mayors' conference in a two volume set, listing projects by state, with a bill coming through Congress saying: we're going to spend money on these projects. We were able to tie statements on the bill to the wish list that came out of the mayors and create an enormous issue: "wasting money." Nineteen million dollars to build alpine ski slides in Puerto Rico and those kinds of things.

Phil Gramm was especially useful but we were the ones who spent all night one night going through that list and bringing all the more horrendous pork projects, tying it to the bill and saying, "You're going to pass this bill to pay for this junk?" That was a real first step and that was our first real victory in that Congress. We defeated that bill and that was the first real GOP success in that 103rd Congress.

That emboldened us. Then health care came down the pike. Again, the Policy Committee played a key role. My deputy staff director was our health care guy, Doug Badger, one of the Senate's top experts in health care issues. We went to battle right away knowing the administration approach was to nationalize

health care to some degree. We knew our members would strongly oppose that approach, although initially it was popular. There were discussions with the president to try to agree to a "universal coverage" and there were a lot of fissures inside the ranks. You had Sheila Burke, Dole's chief of staff, a former nurse, who also had strong views and was taking Dole a little closer to Bill Clinton's positions than perhaps a lot of members liked. Don Nickles decided he wanted to get active and so he worked with the Heritage Foundation and developed his own alternative approach.

We had John Chafee leading his own parade at Dole's request. In the health care case we came closest to actually doing what Don Nickles told me not to do and that was diverge from Bob Dole's leadership. Dole had appointed Chafee to lead a health care task force to develop a Republican position. Senator Chafee frankly had positions that were not in sync with the majority of the conference. Nickles saw an opening there to represent the more conservative members, which was the Policy Committee's orientation anyway. He used the Policy Committee, Doug Badger in particular, working with an outside organization, the Heritage Foundation, to develop a more market-oriented plan.

Meanwhile, Phil Gramm was doing his own plan. We worked with him as well and were just trying to keep the troops together without breaking away from Dole. We really became active not just advocating an alternative but also attacking the administration plan. We took a strong leadership role when the administration's plan came out in bill form known as Mitchell 1, then there was a revised Mitchell 2. We would find errors in the bill and did a rash of papers saying why this was bad policy and what this would mean. It would mean higher health care costs. It would mean you would lose your doctor. It means you would have to go shop through the government for your health plan. We took a leading role to get senators that information during that health care debate that put the president on the defense and led to the ultimate defeat of the health care bill.

So from September of '93 to August of '94 it was all health care. It was presenting alternatives and developing our own bill and then it was also going on the attack with the administration's approach. And we had a lot of fun. It

wasn't just us but we were the lead in the Senate on that issue. Even though we were becoming awfully close to breaking our mandate from Don Nickles, we didn't. I don't think we ever did but it was pretty dicey for a while. We had some tough moments.

**RITCHIE:** I just read an article that said that Clinton essentially conferred only with the Democratic leadership at that stage and that the Democratic chairmen on the House side and most of the Democratic chairmen on the Senate side said they could pass a bill. They would work it out, no problem. The only one who dissented was Senator Moynihan, who said, "Things don't pass in the Senate 51 to 49 any more. If they're going to pass, they pass 70 to 30."

**JOHNSTON:** That's right.

**RITCHIE:** That means you've got to have a bipartisan approach. The administration may have talked bipartisanship but it didn't really think in terms of a bipartisan bill.

**JOHNSTON:** Early on they did. I recall there being sessions where the president and the vice president in particular invited the Republican leadership up to talk about health care issues. I can't recall when this was, but Clinton early in the process--and this was reported in the media as I remember--thought he had agreement that any bill we pass should have universal coverage. That's when Dole sort of stopped and Nickles said, "Well, what do you mean by universal coverage?" That's when it began to turn into more of a partisan deal and I think that Republicans realized that what Clinton meant by that was something they could not accept philosophically, and that's when the paths diverged.

From that point on, especially with the what is now called the Hillary Task Force, that was the final nail in the coffin in terms of any bipartisanship, because they did not involve a single Republican on that 400-plus member task force to draft a plan, even though they had somebody who wanted to work with them in Sheila Burke. She offered and was expecting to be invited to be a part of that task force and when even she got excluded from the process, and she was probably the friendliest person to them in this process, that's when the partisan

lines were drawn. So, in a sense, the administration did blow it. If they'd simply involved a few key Republicans, John Chafee or even Sheila Burke at a key point, they may have gotten a lot farther and faster, and may have wound up salvaging some kind of a health care plan.

**RITCHIE:** And by the time they did try to reach out it was too late.

**JOHNSTON:** It was too late.

**RITCHIE:** Even the Democrats had fragmented and put forward a half dozen alternative plans.

**JOHNSTON:** They saw it as a loser. They saw that they were trying to nationalize health care. They were trying to restrict choice. They were trying to take away doctors with a plan that would require changing doctors and that the message of choice was overcoming the Democrat message of "security." Security had too high of a price tag. That's when the Republicans began to win the message. Democrats backed off and that's when the whole thing died in August of '94.

**RITCHIE:** Now part of it, I guess, was also convincing Republicans that they could stand up against a health care measure and then still run and win in '94. Because the conventional wisdom up to that point was that the public wanted health care reform, therefore if you weren't in favor of it, this would work against you.

**JOHNSTON:** That's correct.

**RITCHIE:** But, in fact, it played just the opposite in the campaign.

**JOHNSTON:** It backfired badly. I recall that we were very successful in converting good policy research into good political one-liners: "One size fits all health care." "Anti-choice health care plans." Those were some of the contributions the Policy Committee made in those days. We didn't just provide the information, we actually provided the rhetoric to go behind the research or

to go with the research. They gave senators something to really talk about that was useful. That's when the Policy Committee really came out from its long slumber, in my view, and played a key role. And again, the credit is not mine, it belongs to Don Nickles first and number two to Doug Badger who's now his staff director in the Whip's office. Doug was absolutely courageous in the way that he brought forth those matters to Don Nickles and other senators. We were quite a force on health care issues.

**RITCHIE:** What's the relationship between the Policy Committee and the Republican leadership on the floor, the cloakrooms and the Republican secretary? Is there any connection at all between them?

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, it's kind of a loose confederation of sorts and it depends on what's going on at the time. The Policy Committee has always had a small floor presence. Under Senator [William] Armstrong and then staff director, Bob Potts, the Policy Committee was able to obtain through the Senate cable television system its own channel. The purpose of that channel was to let us have information on a TV screen with the audio of the Senate floor as a backdrop. It was a way to try to enhance the TV coverage of the Senate which began in '84, I think.

**RITCHIE:** 1986.

**JOHNSTON:** 1986, excuse me, and that provided a little bit more of a floor connection because information had to come from the cloakroom. We became a communication conduit that we built on during my years at the Policy Committee. We decided: well, we got a cable TV channel; we've got the equipment; why don't we now work with the conference? It was their idea to create a Monday morning staff meeting on the TV and so we actually created a real program. It was kind of laughed at for a while. I was called Regis Philbin a few times when we first went on the air but we had a couple of anchors, myself being one, and we did about a thirty to forty-five minute Monday morning show. It was broadcast and anybody in the Senate could pick it up, Democrat or Republican.

It was designed to give our troops information on what the schedule was going to be, but we actually got senators to come on and gave them a chance to talk if they were looking for cosponsorships or to get support for an amendment. It gave them a chance to come on and talk about the issue. It also proved helpful to press secretaries, who found that the rhetoric used and some information that was used by senators and staff was really useful. It also gave people a chance to see names with faces. We featured a lot of the leadership staff in those sessions. Dave Hoppe who was with Trent Lott--still is--Sheila Burke and other members of the leadership staff were able to come on and outline issues and we tried to make it like a real news program that had a clearly Republican Senate staff tilt. We got tremendous feedback on that. This was one more way of keeping people informed, and communicated to, and plugged into what was going on. The Democrats sort of ignored us for a while. They didn't see much use in it. Now they're going to do their own program. They saw it really helped us.

**RITCHIE:** Senator Nickles didn't mind you taking the front and center on this?

**JOHNSTON:** He *encouraged* it. He thought it was a terrific idea. He liked it a whole bunch and was happy to see that. Of course, we had him on quite a bit, too. We had Trent Lott on a few times. We had Thad Cochran on quite a bit. I mean, we had some senators who really knew how to use it. Thad Cochran was probably on more than any other senator. Nickles was on a few times, but he saw it as a way to feature his colleagues and to help his colleagues with their policy efforts. So he thought it was terrific and as long as I played the anchor role and didn't try to go out there advocating policy on TV. He gives people that he has confidence in a long leash, which I have really appreciated openly.

**RITCHIE:** What about Senator Dole in all this? How did he fit into it? Did he turn to use the Policy Committee as leader?

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, in fact, it came in handy when the Democrats were throwing the "gridlock" argument at the Republicans. We did a lot of research that Dole then used in his own rhetoric to respond to a lot of the attacks. He didn't personally call over but his staff gained a lot more confidence in the Policy

Committee. I detected a strain between the Policy Committee and the leader's office when I first came on board. I'd heard stories that there had been some friction because some things they'd put out that were contrary to where Dole was going. I even heard a story from one former staffer who claims Dole put his hand around his neck in anger over something he had done or put out during the John Tower days. So I was very aware of Nickles' admonition, "Do not cross Bob Dole. We're on his team."

I made a point of really trying to earn their confidence. We began to look for ways to give him information he found useful in his own media or political venues to respond to attacks from George Mitchell that we were engaging in gridlock, to talk about some of those kinds of issues. We were able to build that bridge and we found a way to be useful to them. That proved to be our way of getting Bob Dole to utilize us.

**RITCHIE:** Did the Policy Committee have anybody working out of the cloakroom? Were there any connections there?

**JOHNSTON:** No, but we began to have people on the floor more frequently. Senator Nickles in particular became much more active on the floor, giving speeches. He was terrific about using Policy Committee materials on the floor. It was true during Whitewater, when Whitewater first began to emerge and the Democrat leadership in the Senate was really trying to thwart our efforts. Nickles got very aggressive and used the information that we had developed to articulate that. So anytime major bills came on the floor, the policy analyst in charge of that area would always be on the floor as a resource for senators, primarily for the newer members. It depended on the issue. I found that they were spending more and more time on the floor because we found our stuff being more and more used on the floor during our tenure.

**RITCHIE:** The two parties really have very different structures in the Senate. Until recently, the Democratic majority leader or minority leader had always been chairman of the Policy Committee, chairman of the Conference, chairman of everything they have on their side. So the Democratic Policy Committee staff has usually been an extension of the floor leader. Republicans

have always had a separate Conference chairman, separate Policy Committee chairman, a separate floor leader--and then you've got the party secretary as well. It seems to me you've got a whole series of independent operations. The question is: how do they work together? Or do they work together? Do they work separately or is there some coordination?

**JOHNSTON:** There's some coordination. The staff directors for the leadership, when I was there, met on a weekly basis. When Alan Simpson was the Whip, they met for breakfast on Wednesday mornings, with no agenda but just to keep in contact. In addition, all the staff directors of the leadership committees sat together during Policy lunches on Tuesday afternoons, and we worked pretty closely together. We all knew that we were on the team together even though our bosses were individually elected. Sometimes our policy agendas diverged, but for the most part we kept in good contact, worked together, shared ideas, followed up ideas together. We made a point of trying to work as closely as together as we could. For example, if Dole wanted something on a policy area, wanted to see something done, we'd do the research. The Conference would help communicate it. Each of us had our own areas of responsibility. The only one that seemed to be a misfit was the Conference Secretary. There's no real need for a Conference Secretary anymore. They also have very few resources so they would have to develop their own sense of where they fit in. But they usually found a way to be helpful based on their own personal strengths.

**RITCHIE:** One of the things that astonished me when I was looking at the history of it, was there was a time for them in the 1960s and the 1970s when the staff director of the Republican Policy Committee was also the staff director of Conference. They all worked in the same room in the Russell Building and essentially did the same things, except that some worked for the Conference chairman and the other worked for the Policy chairman. When the Hart Building opened in 1983, the Conference moved out and established themselves there. The Policy Committee stayed in the Russell Building. I wondered whether this created some competition between the two? They're now entirely separate entities.

**JOHNSTON:** A little. There's probably a little bit of natural competition, and I probably fostered that a little bit because I wanted us to be the real force of the leadership for the agenda. But I have to say that looking back on it, there was very little competition, probably almost none consciously. We were occasionally a little critical of the Conference for what they did and how they did it. I'm sure they were critical of us on occasion for some things that we did. But looking back on it, we had a great relationship with each other. The Conference, the Policy and the leader's staffs are about the same size, about nineteen to twenty people. The budgets are about the same. We were all very sensitive about stepping on each other. But I would say that ironically what made us work together so well was we wanted the business, we wanted the work.

I got the impression from the Conference and the Leader they were happy to see us do it. They wanted to be a part of it. They wanted to give direction. Will Feltus, the Conference staff director, is an idea person. He was not seen as an implementer. I was not seen as a big idea person, but I was seen as a real implementer. We were a very natural alliance in that sense. We worked very well together. A good example was the TV show. That was his idea. His staff did an equal amount of the actual production work for getting us on the cameras. It was a marvelous marriage. In that sense, there was no competition whatsoever.

**RITCHIE:** There's one other Republican organization that sort of emerged in the late 1970s and that's the Republican Steering Committee.

**JOHNSTON:** The Steering Committee, right.

**RITCHIE:** How did that fit into the equation?

**JOHNSTON:** I had very little contact personally with the Steering Committee. I discovered them just by watching our staff work that the Steering Committee staff--there are usually one or two people that are shared staffers. Jade West, who then staffed the Steering Committee and now is the Policy staff director, was constantly over and worked very closely with the analyst. Because the Policy Committee was seen as a conservative shop, the Steering Committee was an organization of conservative senators, it was a very easy fit. Nickles was

a member of the Steering Committee, I believe, and attended Steering Committee lunches more often than not. A lot of the Steering Committee senators were our strongest users ("customers" is what I used to refer to them as) with Policy Committee materials so there was a lot of communication, a lot of working well together between the two.

**RITCHIE:** Is it an official agency?

**JOHNSTON:** No. It is unofficial. In fact, they don't even share their membership list. I only attended one Steering Committee meeting. They tend not to have staff there but they invited Nickles in his capacity as Policy Committee chairman to talk about an idea. I got to go to that one session. It's a little more closed. It's not really official to our leadership at all.

**RITCHIE:** The original steering committee was what eventually became the Policy Committee back in the 1940s.

**JOHNSTON:** That's right.

**RITCHIE:** So the title has floated around. I was wondering what the purpose became then, but I guess it's more of a discussion group.

**JOHNSTON:** It's more of a discussion group among the more conservative senators who wanted their own forum outside the leadership. I never really dealt much with them personally. I can't tell you a lot about them.

**RITCHIE:** Well, the sum total of all of your work from '93 to '94 was that Republicans did very well in the election of 1994. Everybody focuses on winning the House, which they hadn't done in forty years. But they also won the Senate at the same time, on many of the same issues, and that put you into a different capacity altogether. But that also leads us into such an enormous change that this might be the point for us to break the interview and pick it up then when you became Secretary.

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, because again the Policy Committee role changed somewhat after we became the Majority in December of '94, starting in January.

**RITCHIE:** That's true, you were six months really. . .

**JOHNSTON:** Five to six months in the role of Policy staff director in the Majority.

**RITCHIE:** Let me just ask you quickly about that. When the Policy Committee seems to be most active, is a period in which they are in the minority and the other party controls the White House. There's nobody else calling the shots in terms of what the agenda is. Did you find any changes when you went from the minority to the majority in the Policy Committee?

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, in a sense the Policy Committee role diminished a little because suddenly ranking members with small staffs were chairmen with big staffs, and a lot of the older members who weren't relying on us all that much turned to us even less. Because we had a good relationship with the committee staff directors, we still had a role to play. We were even more sensitive to the fact that we had to work with the chairmen on our papers because now they were setting the agenda in the committees versus having to respond to an agenda where they could use our help. Now we were having to be very sensitive so we worked very carefully in that area. What had helped us was in the '94 election we had built relationships with a lot of the candidates who had been running that year, so we had plenty to do with all eleven freshmen members that were coming in, all of whom were Republicans. We helped them get their staffs set up.

One thing that we did was a staff orientation session. The Senate is not given to orienting freshmen very well. Most classes are small, so there's no need for orientation programs to usher these people in the Senate. Well, we decided it was important to do that at the staff level so they would know to utilize us right away. I was still being quite motivated by the fact that the Policy Committee was simply not fully utilized and not that well known. It was a real mission for me throughout my tenure as staff director to make sure that

everybody knew who we were and what we could provide for them and to rely on us for help.

A lot of that work in the early majority days was to help Don Nickles. Dole delegated a great deal to Nickles early on in terms of helping draft and develop an agenda. Senator Dole asked senators Cochran and Nickles to chair a process to develop recommendations for Dole during that transition period from the election day of '94 to the time we became the majority in January. We provided a tremendous amount of support to both senators Nickles and Cochran in terms of the agenda in all these meetings. Every senator was encouraged to participate.

One of my favorite stories is that during one of those meetings--I think it may have been the first one--Senator Cochran was chairing the meeting and asked all the freshmen to talk about what issues they would like to see the new majority address as part of the agenda. Every one of them to varying degrees raised the issue of term limits. Well, I think at some point, Senator [Strom] Thurmond raised his hand and said, "I'm for term limits too and when my twelve years are up, I'll walk out with you." The whole place just roared and that's when it got to be really fun. He was deadly serious, too. That was one poignant moment, a story I've actually told the press about.

But it was a little bit of an adjustment and because we were now higher profile, things we were now putting out were not setting the agenda. Our relationship with chairmen was good but changed because again they were setting the agenda. And we worked a little bit with Bob Dole, who was also thinking about running for president. And Nickles also was trying to develop his role. He had now a major advisory role in helping to set that new agenda so we got active right away. One thing that I had helped to do the previous Congress, I actually had worked with the House Republican staffs in developing what became their "Contract with America." We originally explored the idea of doing that as both a House and Senate document or plan. Some senators liked the idea, some did not. Eventually we detected severe opposition to it, but Senator Gramm really wanted, much like the House guys had, an agenda for candidates to run on so we developed a "Seven More in '94." We needed seven seats to win a

majority so we developed an agenda that was similar to, but not a "contract." Nobody had to sign a blood oath or pledge to do it. We conducted a big press event outside the Russell Building, in fact near the Taft Memorial, to highlight our agenda and have all of our candidates in town to express their support for it. The NRSC was the host for the event.

After we became the majority, we realized, hey, we've got to turn this into action. So we began to work a lot with the House majority staff to begin the delicate negotiations of marrying these two agendas. A lot of our senators made a point of saying in Policy meetings that this was not their agenda. They did not feel honor bound to do this. The older members in particular didn't think much of it because, one, they weren't involved directly, didn't like the idea of having a contract, were critical of the House having a contract, and so a lot of our work was designed to help develop some of those agendas working with the chairmen and with the leadership. We spent a lot of time trying to develop a good relationship with the House side during that process too. That's how the first four, five, six months were. We were just kind of emerging into this new role and growing into this new capacity.

**RITCHIE:** Had you had much contact with the House Policy Committee let's say during the previous congress.

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, I made a point, having been a former House staffer and being somewhat chagrined to discover that there was actually no relationship between the House and Senate leadership structure at the staff level. Senator Dole on his own met with then leader Bob Michel and began doing more joint leadership meetings. Hey, we were in the minority, truly, during the 103rd Congress, and we needed to stick together and so we tried to build that on a staff level. In fact, we began to invite the House leader's staff person to come to Policy lunch. To this day, a representative of the Speaker comes in to join with the Senate Policy lunch and vice versa. We now attend their conferences as a way of educating each other about each other and to try to coordinate the agendas more closely. So, that's one really nice thing that's emerged and evolved over the last four or five years, a better relationship between the House staff leadership and the Senate staff leadership. Of course, now it's very strong because Trent Lott's

a former House Republican Whip and nearly everybody that serves in this Senate leadership staff structure comes from the House. Four or five years ago that wasn't the case.

**RITCHIE:** Now there does seem to be a different trend of people moving from one body to the other.

**JOHNSTON:** Yes, especially now, I mean it's true of both senators but also staff. There are a lot of people now in the Senate that are former House staff. That wasn't the case when I came over. In fact, I noted that I was one of the few people in the Senate staff leadership structure back in 1992 that had House experience. Sheila Burke didn't have it, one or two of their staffers did, but it was minimal. Alan Simpson didn't have it, but now all of them do to some degree even Kyl McSarrow who's now Paul Coverdell's staff director in leadership was a House candidate. But, that House orientation, that sense of urgency, that political awareness and sensitivity has really kind of infected the Senate now more than it did four or five years ago. That's one of the things I've noticed that's changed about the leadership. They brought that House mind set with them to the Senate although it's interesting how it's melded with the Senate style. It's interesting to watch how all that evolves.

**RITCHIE:** Maybe we can talk more about that, the comparison between the House and the Senate style, in the future.

**[End of the second interview]**