

Elizabeth Letchworth

**Page, Floor Assistant, Republican Party Secretary
1975-2001**

Oral History Interviews

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Preface

By Katherine A. Scott

In the summer of 1975 a heated debate played out on the Senate floor. After two forced recounts, the 1974 New Hampshire Senate election contest between John Durkin and Louis Wyman remained unresolved. One candidate petitioned the Senate to review the case and it became one of the most hotly debated issues that year. On July 30, 1975, the Senate voted to declare the seat vacant, forcing New Hampshire to hold a special election. One Senate page, Elizabeth Letchworth (née Baldwin), followed these debates with rapt attention. When her summer page position expired, Republican Leader Hugh Scott offered her a position as a legislative correspondent. Her careful attention to detail and organizational skills quickly made her an indispensable member of the Republican floor staff. She rose through the ranks, serving as a page, manager of the mark calendar, cloakroom assistant, director of the newly created Republican legislative scheduling office, floor manager and assistant to the party secretary, and Republican Party secretary.

During her 26 years in the Senate, Letchworth observed major changes in the institution. She describes the rising prominence of women in positions of power, the introduction of television and its impact on the quality of Senate debate, and technological advances that helped leaders organize and communicate more effectively with members and their staff.

Beginning as a page in Hugh Scott's office, Letchworth worked with Republican leaders Howard Baker, Bob Dole, and Trent Lott, and she describes the ways in which their individual qualities helped shape legislative outcomes during their tenure. The role of party secretary, Letchworth says, is to be the leaders' "eyes and ears on the floor." This often meant addressing the concerns of individual members—either related to scheduling conflicts, or objections to legislation—before they became major issues. The demands of the job are many, including earning the trust of members, exercising discretion, and above all, learning the rhythms of an unpredictable institution. Senator Lott once told a staffer, "I have never met anybody who can read the Senate as well as [Elizabeth] can."

The Senate's unpredictability puts extraordinary pressure on Senate floor staff. Eager to set her own schedule, Letchworth retired in 2001 when she and her husband purchased a golf course and relocated to South Carolina to manage it. But she never severed her ties to Congress. Curious golfers often asked why clubhouse TV always featured C-SPAN's coverage of the Senate. Her love of Congress and her knowledge of the legislative process led her to consulting work. While she worked as senior advisor to a Washington-based firm she started GradeGov.com, an online tool that enables the public to evaluate the work of their elected officials. In 2012 Letchworth co-founded

Congressional Global Strategy with Lula Davis. She continues to host a twice-weekly radio show about congressional politics.

About the interviewer: Katherine (Kate) Scott is a historian in the Senate Historical Office. A graduate of the University of Washington, she received a M.A. in history from the University of New Mexico and a Ph.D. in history from Temple University. Scott is the author of *Reining in the State: Civil Society and Congress in the Vietnam and Watergate Eras* (University Press of Kansas, 2013). She lives in Rockville, Maryland, with her husband and two children.

Illustrations:

Following page 23:

Elizabeth Letchworth presents Senator George Voinovich with the Golden Gavel award.

Following page 84:

[image 1] Majority Leader Trent Lott gives opening remarks during the Senate impeachment trial of President William J. Clinton.

[image 2] Elizabeth Letchworth confers with Senator Lott and Chief Justice William Rehnquist.

[image 3] Elizabeth Letchworth explains the day's schedule during the impeachment trial in the President's Room of the Capitol Building.