

George A. Smathers

United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969

Interview #6: Senate Democratic Leadership

(Tuesday, September 19, 1989)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ritchie: Yes, sir.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ritchie: Why was that?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smathers: That's right.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: And it seems out of character for him.

Smathers: Well, see, Spessard was. . . I think most of the southern senators, this is an interesting thought that I have had all of my life really, they were all much more liberal than they voted. They voted the way they did in order to get reelected. There wasn't any doubt that before 1964 if Spessard Holland or I or somebody had voted for civil rights--even Claude Pepper who later became the greatest of all liberals, when he was a senator, he didn't vote for civil rights. You couldn't do it and survive. It wasn't that the Ku Klux Klan was smarter than anybody else, it was just because the natural progression of breaking down the barriers between the races had never gotten that far by that period of time. You could see it happening, but it didn't happen very rapidly.

But it was inevitable, and it's inevitable today as it will be someday in South Africa. It's inevitable that blacks are going to have every right that the whites' have, and they should.

So Spessard Hollered was really quite a liberal guy in the sense that he was not antagonistic to the advancement of the blacks. As a matter of fact, when he was governor I think he did as much for the black colleges in Florida as any governor that we ever had. The legislature appropriated sums of money for Bethune-Cookman, and Florida A&M, and other prominent black colleges that we had in the state. I think Holland was just coming along. I sort of helped him move along more liberal, and he helped me. We protected each other on that sort of thing. Between us there was never any division.

I went to Holland and said, "Senator, I think"--some people called him "Spessard," but I always called him "Senator"--"we ought to try to help this Civil Rights bill." And he said, "George, yeah, I think we should too." There was never any disagreement. "Well, here's the way it's going to come up," I would tell him. "Johnson tells me that this is the way he's going to bring it up." Spessard would say, "Okay, that sounds reasonable to me. I just want to have an opportunity to make a statement about why I'm going to do this." I said, "We'll guarantee you that. Johnson's going to limit the debate to five hours or something like that, and he hopes that that's what will be accepted by the Senate. There will be a limitation of debate." We used to have filibusters on those types of things. But it moved along, and so now we have full civil rights, political civil rights. But Holland was for it.

Ritchie: To go back, we talked about Russell Long as whip before, I wanted to ask you about when Long was defeated for reelection as whip. What really was the cause of that? Was there dissatisfaction with the way he had been whip?

Smathers: Who was it that defeated him?

Ritchie: [Ted Kennedy](#) defeated him.

Smathers: Teddy?

Ritchie: Yes.

Smathers: What year was that?

Ritchie: It was just after you left the Senate in 1969.

Smathers: I don't know. I just don't know.

Ritchie: And then Kennedy himself was defeated by Senator [Byrd](#) in 1971.

Smathers: Yes, that's right.

Ritchie: And you cleared the way for Byrd when you stepped down as secretary of the Democratic conference in 1966.

Smathers: That's right. Bob came to me asked was I really going to resign. I said, yeah. He said, "Well don't tell anybody for six weeks, so that I'll have time to work up this group." I helped Bob Byrd do that. We did it over the Christmas holidays. I remember I came up here and Bob had a list of senators. We called them all. Bob worked like a trojan. I don't remember how close he was to Lyndon, but Bob really wanted to be like Lyndon. He didn't quite have the make-up to do that, but I know Bob admired Lyndon Johnson very much.

Ritchie: What was it about him that made you work with him to get him that job?

Smathers: What was it about Bob Byrd? I liked Bob Byrd because he was a fellow whose career was about as admirable as anyone I ever knew. He was an adopted child, adopted by a coal miner family, never had anything given to him in his life that was worth very much. He had to work his way through high school, he was never able to go to college for a while. He went to night school. When he went to Congress he finally got a degree from college here in Washington going to night school. If ever there was a fellow who had pulled himself up by his own bootstraps, by just hard work and personal sacrifice, it was Bob Byrd.

I recall one time he came to me and said, "George, I want to tell you something. You have invited me to come to Florida and visit you on at least five or six different occasions and I have never gone. I don't know whether it has occurred to you that was sort of unusual, because everybody likes to go to Florida. I want to tell you why I turned you down." I said, "Yeah, Bob, I hadn't even thought that much about it, but tell me why." He said, "Well, you invited me one time with Jack Kennedy and said 'Come on down to Florida, we're going to go fishing and we're going to play some golf.' I didn't go. You asked to go with you one time when Magnuson was going down, and you said Magnuson was going to stay at the Key Biscayne Hotel and he likes to play gin rummy and we'll play a lot of gin rummy. Another time you invited me to go down you said, 'We're going to take a trip over to Cat Key and go swimming at that beautiful beach.'"

He said, "George, every time you have invited me down to visit you have always said that you were going to do this or that or the other thing. I have never in my life played a game of cards. I have never in my life had a golf club in my hand. I have never in life hit a tennis ball. I have--believe it or not--never thrown a line over to catch a fish. I don't do any of those things. I have only had to work all my life. And every time you told me about swimming, I don't know how to swim." I thought to myself, here's a guy who's never played

tennis, never golfed, never gone swimming, never fished, never played cards. I hadn't thought about it! Now there's a fellow who had done nothing but work all of his life. Worked his way up from a coal miner's adopted boy. Put himself through every bit of school. Learned how to be a butcher, went to butcher school, and did butchering at night so he could make enough money to stay in school. Have you got to be for a guy like that? I do. But that's what he told me, and it was a fact.

Ritchie: I can believe it.

Smathers: It was a fact! He never did any of those things! That's hard to believe. But I saw him a lot afterwards, never did get him to come to Florida with me on vacation. He went down one time with me and made some speeches. But it was unbelievable.

Ritchie: Do you think that helps to account for how he was able to defeat Ted Kennedy?

Smathers: I think that had a lot to do with it. See Ted was off playing. While Ted was away at Christmas, down in the islands, floating around having a good time with some of his friends, male and female, here was Bob up here calling on the phone. "I want to do this, and would you help me?" He had it all committed so that when Teddy got back to town, Teddy didn't know what hit him, but it was already all over. That was Lyndon Johnson's style. Bob Byrd learned that from watching Lyndon Johnson.

I'm glad I thought about that thing about Bob Byrd, because I've told that a lot. I've told it when I've introduced Bob Byrd for a speech. He doesn't mind me telling that. He gets up and says, "You know, that's funny, here it is now, twenty years later and I still haven't done any of those things."

Ritchie: That says a lot about the man.

Smathers: It does, it tells you a lot about him. All right sir, doctor, it's four o'clock. What do you think?

Ritchie: I think we can wrap it up for today.

[End of interview #6]