Bicentennials and Books
Interview #3
Wednesday, July 21, 2010

Scott: Welcome. Senator Robert Byrd passed away on June 28. At that time he was the Senate's longest serving member. I'd like to start with your reflections about Senator Byrd's contribution to the Senate as an institution and, more specifically, to the Historical Office.

Baker: I always counted it as my enormous good fortune that my time here coincided with his best years here. As historians of the Senate we all think, "What era would we have liked to live in?" You get that question a lot. And sure, you want to live in the Golden Age of the Senate in the mid-19th century. What it would have been like to know Thomas Hart Benton or Daniel Webster? Without being trite about it, there were a lot of these people and others in the persona of Senator Byrd. It has risen to the status of a cliché to say that Senator Byrd would have been comfortable in any Senate of the United States in any era, 18th century right on up through the 21st century. That is a way, I think, of getting at his formality as a human being. It's hard to think of him with his coat off, walking around in a sport shirt. But also, he was custodian of the Senate's constitutional role and the traditions and the interior culture of the Senate.

It came home to me once when a senator told me privately that she liked to use her BlackBerry in the Senate Chamber, but she knew that Senator Byrd didn't approve of using electronic devices in the Senate Chamber. There was a bit of an uproar about that when laptops were first developed and some wanted to use laptops. So whenever Senator Byrd entered the chamber, they put their BlackBerries away. He was in many ways the guardian of the Senate's traditions and culture.

The development of the Senate Historical Office was greatly aided by the coincidence of a series of major historical anniversaries, including the 200th anniversary of the Senate. And then to have supporting us in the planning Senator Robert Byrd and his long-time associate and assistant, Joe Stewart, as Secretary of the Senate, you talk about the planets being aligned! It was very fortunate. So on that personal level, it was a wonderful experience to work with him. Senator Byrd's interest in the institutional history of the Senate kind of radiated out through the operations of the Senate more broadly. No one had really thought about putting into writing an institutional history of the Senate. Why would you want to have that? Well, you can answer that very quickly if you only think about

the brand new members who come in who may have had the worst possible preparation for being U.S. senators, namely, a stint in the House of Representatives. You really need to retool and regroup and rethink. A written history certainly was one tool toward that. Orientation programs with the leaders actively involved was another way to transmit that culture, but throughout all of that, Senator Byrd was the spark plug.

I can't think of another contemporary senator who is anywhere close to being in his circle of the firmament. So the obvious question that we hear all the time is: Who's going to be the new Senator Byrd? And my answer to that usually is, we'll have to wait and see. It takes a while. We use the term "father of the Senate," and sometimes the press refers to such people as the "dean." The father of the Senate was a 19th-century term. (In Great Britain, the longest-serving member of the House of Commons has the formal title of "Father of the House." He advises on matters related to the body's history.) There have been, over the years, a number of senior senators who people just looked to for their wisdom, for their counsel, for their calming sense of deep knowledge. Certainly, he was it. He would have said that Richard Russell was his idea of a father of the Senate. I think very deliberately he took Richard Russell as a guide as he learned about the institution.

Scott: He had been here for decades before he reached the stature of the "dean of the Senate."

Baker: Indeed. It's easy to read history backwards and to identify when all of a sudden the early Robert Byrd gave way to the modern Robert Byrd. Some would say 1967 when he had been here for eight years. Prior to that time I suspect he was interested in holding some sort of Senate party office as a low rung on the ladder to something better. This is a man who literally climbed the ladder out of poverty, a ladder out of a poor education into a much better education. When he became Democratic Conference Secretary in 1967, that was the first rung, and then he eventually became assistant leader, the whip, in 1971, and then finally the leader in 1977. By the time 1977 rolled around I think he was a very different man in terms of his political beliefs and he shed a lot of his earlier home-based kind of attitudes and had by necessity learned to be a moderating force. Nobody is going to have any leadership role in the Senate if they are not viewed as a person of the middle. He did that very well.

Scott: Someone who is capable of making compromises, striking deals?

Baker: And of just bringing together, if not all the members of your party, or all the members of the Senate, at least a large majority of them. Bringing them into the same tent and looking for ways to keep them in the conversation. There have always been some who are just outliers who will be unreachable. The leaders are not going to spend a lot of time with them as long as he or she has the votes they need to get the programs going. There are stories that are told of Senator Byrd literally lobbying for legislation that meant very much to him or to his state and the care with which he just worked it in an old fashioned way. He wasn't interested in wholesale vote-getting. He was interested in retail selling, one at a time, case by case. It generally worked for him. I think other senators, first of all, respected the energy and more than the energy, the persistence. That's the big word for Senator Byrd: persistence. Most senators as you well know are just too busy, their attention spans are fragmented, shattered beyond belief. He had this laser like . . . again it's kind of a cliché and I apologize for using it, but he really would zoom in on an objective and it was like a dog with a bone. He wouldn't let go of it until he achieved it.

We found, in working with him on the four-volume history of the Senate project, that we had certain ideas as historians that we thought we'd like to see in each of these volumes. And we generally had good meetings of the minds on that, but I remember one time sitting down with him to propose a volume three that would be a sort of fact book about the Senate. And his response was, "Well Dr. Baker, that could be your book, but that's not my book." [Laughs] So I can just translate that experience into a much larger field of negotiation for major legislation. He didn't back off easily but he also wasn't a Johnny one-note who was just going to fight, bleed, and die to get everything that he thought he could get. You know, compromise, of course, is the big word.

Scott: In terms of mentoring other senators, and maybe the way that he grew into this title of "dean of the Senate," it seems to have something to do with leading these orientation meetings for new members. Did he initiate those orientation meetings or did they predate his leadership?

Baker: It's probably both. As far as I can determine, the first formal orientation program for new senators was 1976. But that may be because the historical office was created in 1975. [Laughs] So there is that possibility. But many people were interested because there was a fairly good size class of senators elected in 1976. As people looked around for precedents, there really were none. Nobody could remember having done that. Before, the new senator would sit down with the incumbent senator from his or her state, or if they were political

rivals, then they would look around for somebody from a nearby state who might be helpful. Or, they might go to the secretary of the Senate if it happened to be a long-serving secretary of the Senate. You couldn't avoid in 1976 doing something formal because the new members demanded it. Here's Senator Byrd in 1976, about to become the majority leader, and he expected that he would be the majority leader. He realized that he had to continue the kind of hands-on approach that he took as the assistant majority leader, the whip. All of a sudden, Mike Mansfield, this somewhat detached god-like oracle, is off the scene and in comes Senator Byrd with a whole new style of management. Senator Byrd couldn't change his persona, that's who he was. I think that's what the times demanded.

Also, 1976 was a time of a lot of institutional self-evaluation, as we've discussed already. And Senator Byrd was right in the middle of all that. Just as a few years later he was involved in the recodification of the Senate rules, for the first time since 1884. Nobody else would have thought of doing something like that, but it's sort of tidying the place up. But the rules are important, or some of them are, while some of them are dead letters. As far as I can tell, he was not the engine pulling the orientation programs. But he was certainly the person who blessed the enterprise. He came and did what the secretaries of the Senate and sergeants at arms, and party secretaries, asked him to do.

Scott: And you were part of these orientation meetings, starting in 1976. What kind of role did you play?

Baker: It was a really big deal for us because all of a sudden the leadership of the Senate and the people we all worked for realized that a good teaching model to use for these new students, incoming senators, is a historical model. Follow the history, take it one step at a time. How did we get from there to here? So, naturally you need somebody to come in and do that in one hundred words or less, or maybe a little bit longer. And throughout the various orientation programs, there was always a historical component. Generally, it was at the beginning. In those earlier days, it may have been a little farther into the schedule. But now, into the 21st century, the programs begin with a talk in the Old Senate Chamber by the Senate Historian, for maybe half an hour, and this is around 5 o'clock on a Sunday afternoon, and then a big dinner for all the senators-elect hosted by the president pro tempore and the majority leader and the minority leader, so that's their official welcome. But they get warmed up a little bit for it, by being in the Old Senate Chamber and hearing about the history of the Senate from the perspective of the old chamber. It's easier to talk to them about the

Golden Age of the Senate. It doesn't get as complicated as it does when you get down to more recent times.

Scott: How did you approach these history lessons? What did you focus on?

Baker: Well, I gave it a lot of thought over the years. You are never satisfied with each presentation, there is always something that you can do better. But I realized pretty quickly that this room is a magnificent prop. All you have to do is point and every part of the room has symbolic value. You point to the galleries, and the fact that they built galleries only some years after they first moved in there. Why all of a sudden do they need galleries? Eighteen twenty-eight, well, what was going on? And you can go from there. Then there is a press gallery and that leads to stories about the relationship between the media and the Senate and individual senators. Sometimes I would try to do a fact-and-figure brief routine because every senator wants to know where he or she fits into the big picture, what number they are; where do they place on the long chain of senators going back to 1789. I'd mention some firsts and whatnot, but just a bit of that.

In the 1982 orientation program, the whole program was done in the current Senate Chamber. I was given 45 minutes and I knew going into it that that was much too much time. But the people who scheduled us, there was sort of a window and they needed to fill it, so I was the victim. [Laughs] Sure enough, about 25 minutes into it, I remember Secretary of the Senate Bill Hildenbrand sort of tugging on my sleeve and saying that's enough. Twenty-five minutes. And that's right, that's about enough. Once in the year 2000 I had a chance to speak to the entire membership of the United Nations Security Council meeting in the Old Senate Chamber. I deliberately kept it to about 25 minutes, maybe even 20 minutes. Later, I thought, I seem to have an attentive audience. Probably I could have stretched it and gone on a little more but, you know, we all give history lectures and we like to believe that our audience is just hanging on our every word. Around here you just know that there are tiers of the audience. The top tier is with you every step of the way and the bottom tier is checking their BlackBerries to figure out where their next meeting is. So you try to hit that balance and that's what we'd try to do in the orientation program.

I would add that the substance of the program was determined by the number of new senators. There are a couple of years when there were only three or four new senators and so we didn't really have a formal program those years. It was all done in the old fashioned way of having the leaders sit down two-on-two,

or four-on-two, with the new members. But any more than say, six, in a class, then you are in business. There was also the challenge of Senate races that were decided after the general election date, or senators resigning to move into cabinet positions, or to become president. Sort of an echo effect as the second group of senators arrives. You find yourself sitting down, as I did with Don Ritchie one day in the Old Senate Chamber, for Al Franken and his wife. We had a delightful time. About 45 minutes. It was quite an experience.

Certainly there were stars--the celebrities who came into the Senate. Like Hillary Clinton in 2000. I enjoyed speaking with her one-on-one after the formal session in the Old Senate Chamber. That applies to many other senators-elect, including Barack Obama in 2004. He and Mrs. Obama were the first ones to approach me at the lectern after the presentation to ask specific questions. They were very intense kind of questions. I remember suggesting to him that he might want to do a second book—one about his experiences as a freshman senator. [Laughs] And he looked at me and smiled and said, “The contract’s already signed.” [Laughs]

Scott: I noticed in what I think is a post orientation memo that you had hand-written in the margins, “This was a tough audience.” I wonder how receptive were the new members to, let’s say, your history lessons or to any part of the orientation meeting? I’m not sure that you were there throughout the orientation meeting or if it was just for your presentation. They must feel overwhelmed—there is a lot of information coming at them—and I wonder how attentive are they?

Baker: You put your finger on the 25-minute rule. I suspect the “tough audience” note came as a result of something more than 25 minutes. I just think that’s too much to expect because of everything that’s going through their minds. They are thinking about hiring staff and getting decent office space. Basic survival issues and all of a sudden some historian is up there, going on about something in the 18th and 19th centuries. So it’s really important to judge your audience. I don’t know what year that was, but there was a lot of pain involved in writing “This was a tough audience.” [Laughs]

Scott: In the case of the one-on-one sessions, would you sit down one-on-one with them and give them the same presentation that you would have offered to the larger audience?

Baker: Yes, in a more relaxed informal way, but not always. In some cases we'd be told to stand by or come down and meet senator so-and-so in the Old Senate Chamber or the secretary's office. And then we'd get word at the last minute that the senator-elect or new senator had somebody coming in from the home state or had to meet with someone in the Disbursing Office. That was pretty much the end of that.

I remember there were certain senators who had a natural interest in trying to learn about the institution through its history. And I remember Senator Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico, I think in late 1982, we did a program in the Senate Chamber. He was sitting up there in the front row. I had been writing a book on a New Mexico senator and he grabbed on to that and we became good friends. His interests were pretty active about the role of previous New Mexico senators and about the history of Senate committees with jurisdiction over energy and environmental matters. He was also responsible for boosting the sales of the resulting book.

Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio is a deeply committed student of Senate history. He gave his brother a birthday present—the present was lunch in the Senators' Dining Room with me! [Laughs] His brother, whose name is Charlie Brown, is a history lover and has an encyclopedic memory for U.S. political history. I have found that there is always a little bit of testing going on in these exchanges to see who knows more. Senator Byrd would ask very innocent and straightforward questions but as some of his staff observed recently, he didn't ask a question if he didn't know the answer to the question. And if you didn't know the answer to the question, then you better go find out the answer. So, there's always testing going on. These senatorial "students" are not always the docile students that you think they might be. They wouldn't be here, in most cases, if they didn't have a whole lot to offer.

Scott: What kind of person was Senator Byrd?

Baker: I want to say that he was a somewhat insecure person. But I don't know if I'm qualified to make that kind of judgment. But he seemed to have the demeanor of an insecure person. In dealing with his insecurities, his lack of formal education, he didn't know his mother, who died within a year of his birth His parents handed him off to relatives to raise. I don't know about him, but most people who grow up in that kind of a situation can have a tough time. I think of the term autodidact. He was a self-taught man, in every sense of the word. I've never met a person who better exemplifies the fiery passion to learn as much as he

could, ranging over a vast canvas of interests. At his funeral, one of the ministers referred to Senator Byrd as living life as if every day was going to be his last, but learning as if he were going to live forever. I have the image of his driver loading up Senator Byrd's Senate automobile with books to take home so that he could read over the weekend for whatever project he happened to be working on.

He was such a complex man. People paint him in simple colors sometimes but they are really mistaken to do that. I had the pleasure of his company for 30 years and I'm still stumbling trying to answer your very appropriate straightforward question. I can't evaluate him. I can't judge him in terms of his role as a legislative leader or as a colleague among senators. I can only evaluate him as somebody who helped me to learn a lot of history. In 2006, my wife and I went to his wife's funeral. He said to my wife, referring to me, "Here's my mentor." And I said, "Au contraire." This is the man who has taught me a great deal about the Senate. I think of my doctoral dissertation advisor. He was an important person in my life, as I'm sure yours was, but Senator Byrd was my permanent dissertation advisor. He was the person with whom you always wanted to make sure that you knew what you were talking about. You always wanted to be out a little bit ahead. When you come into this job and you know very little about the Senate as an institution, you figure it's going to take three lifetimes to become competent. So you try to read and learn as fast as you can and as much as you can. And certainly working with Senator Byrd on his history of the Senate project was an ideal opportunity. Not only did you learn it and then write it down once, but then you had to read it probably 28 times in terms of galley proofs and page proofs so it really sunk in. It was a wonderful learning experience. I, and certainly others in the Historical Office, saw him as a remarkable unique human being. How will he be viewed 30 years down the road? We historians all try to avoid those kinds of questions. [Laughs]

Scott: We ended our last session discussing how the Historical Office survived this watershed election in 1980 and the change in party leadership. Before we move into phase two I thought we should talk about your partner in crime through this transition, Donald Ritchie. How did you come to hire him as associate historian? When did he come on? How did you divide up the work in the office?

Baker: Probably in the second paragraph of my first interview with you I should have brought Don into the conversation. That's how important he is to the development of this office. Somehow we managed to get along without him from September of 1975 until March of 1976. We did stumble along. [Laughs] But that

just made the difference that much more noticeable once he came on board on March 8, 1976. That's a date, like my wedding anniversary, that I remember.

The community of Washington-based historians was much larger in the mid-'70s than it is now. There were lots of social events, semi-annual luncheons at the Faculty Club at George Washington University, where you'd have 100 or more academic and government historians coming together. It didn't take me too long to hear the two words "Donald" and "Ritchie" put together.

I went to the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in December of 1975 in Atlanta. By that time, word of the office's creation had spread. This was thanks to the *New York Times* and articles in historical organization publications. The profession in general received the news in a very serious and upbeat way. I'm not sure today, in the 21st century . . . political history is still respected but it's not as respected in the academic world as it was in the mid-'70s. It was also a tight job market in the mid-'70s. I walked into the hotel in Atlanta and all of a sudden I felt like a rock star. All of these people are approaching me who figured out that's what I was up to. One woman, Connie Schultz, no relation to the identically named wife of Senator Sherrod Brown, but a professor at the University of South Carolina now, had been a history graduate student at the University of Maryland. I remember running into her in the exhibition hall. She gives me this big pitch. And I thought she was pitching for the job for herself. Turns out that she's saying, "You really have got to meet Don Ritchie." She had known Don as a fellow graduate student. Don had been the editor of the history journal there and had been there a long time because he had done both a masters degree and a PhD there.

Scott: And spent some time in the service.

Baker: That's right. He had time off for good behavior, coming back after being toughened up in the Marines. So he was part of the fiber of the University of Maryland history department. Once he got his degree he held, like a lot of other people did, several part-time teaching jobs simultaneously, and he also worked for the American Historical Association. So his name was very well known. It didn't take me long to hear about him from many sources, but I'll always remember Connie Schultz with great clarity and passion saying, "You've got to talk to Don." And Don didn't set her up to it. Of that I'm sure.

I met Don at the Atlanta convention and encouraged him to apply. The letters of recommendation began to come in and I remember getting one from

Professor Wayne Cole at the University of Maryland. Professor Cole was not Don's dissertation advisor but he was and is a distinguished historian of American foreign relations. He wrote the best letter of recommendation I have ever seen written about anybody, including letters that he also wrote to me about some of his own doctoral students. But the one about Don was just off the charts. It expressed so much genuine feeling in a page and a half of text. And of course, I had put Don pretty much near the top of the pile for the interviews. I remember our interview very well and there were a couple of other impressive candidates. In hindsight, I realized at the time I didn't know the names of most of the people who I interviewed. But after the fact, it turns out that a lot of them stayed around Washington and they did get jobs in the history field. I had forgotten that I'd interviewed them and I have never been sure whether there is a certain distance in our relationship because they didn't get the Senate job. There were one or two other very strong contenders, but I had no doubts whatsoever that Don was the right guy.

For the next 34 years I didn't for one second ever doubt that conclusion. We had a wonderful relationship. We never had any difficult words. I've used the word "mentor" with regard to Senator Byrd. My other mentor at the time was Don. I had the title of Senate Historian; he had the PhD. I realized I had better get my own PhD in a big hurry. Don has about him a style of being able to teach you what you really need to know but in an unthreatening, very helpful way. As a result, Don has a very wide network of people throughout this country and abroad, historians and others, who see him as a very important person in the development of their own professional careers. That's my view about Don in my own career.

I don't want to understate my affection and enthusiasm for Don. But I couldn't overstate it.

Scott: When Don came on board, there was a lot of work to be done. How did you set about assigning tasks?

Baker: It came at us very quickly and we realized that there were three major areas that demanded our attention. First came the archival issues: members' papers, which we've discussed earlier in these interviews, and committee records. I went off to conferences of archival associations to learn what I didn't know and I always came back from those kind of chagrined about how much there was to know.

Another was developing a catalog of where former senators' papers are located and what has been written about those senators. There was no comprehensive bibliography of works by and about senators or of books about the institution. It's in that second category that Don grabbed on very quickly and put together a 1,000-title bibliography of the Senate. It had a heavily illustrated paperback format that we could use as an office" business card" in the historical and the Capitol Hill communities. Also Don identified some of the most significant former senators of all times and we had a section in there of biographies about them. So it was a mixture of both institutional histories and personal biographies. It was very well received and you open it up and you say, "Something is going on in that office." I've always felt a little guilty. My name is on the title page as the author, but Don was the guiding genius who put it together.

The third area was oral history. I realized that oral history was a big component and that I'd better learn something about it. The national Oral History Association had its upcoming conference in Asheville, North Carolina. So I went down to the Grove Park Inn and spent three delightful days. It wasn't like going to the American Historical Association where there are thousands of historians. These were several hundred friendly people who were, by nature and profession, good at asking questions. I really took an instant liking to those people and thought that we needed to get up to speed pretty quickly on interviewing former senators. There was one major oral history project underway at the time sponsored by the Association of Former Members of Congress. And they had a National Endowment for the Humanities grant—a pretty sizable grant—to go around interviewing former members. I have read some of those interviews. I've talked to some of the members who were interviewed and, of course, it was better than not having interviews, but not by much. There was a certain cookie-cutter nature to the questioning. One former senator told me that he was interviewed and then did not hear again from the person who interviewed him for about two years. Didn't see a transcript in a timely manner and then eventually did see a transcript by which time he had forgotten what he had in mind when he was making some of these responses. I think by any measure it was not a successful project. We thought, "Well, do we really want to be in the business of interviewing a lot of former senators?" Maybe not. Maybe that is important, but it's not as important as interviewing people who are really close to the machinery of the Senate, who know how to oil the gears when something breaks down to get it fixed. So that's when we decided we would talk to people like the assistant secretary of the Senate, Darrell St. Claire, one of the first people interviewed; Floyd Riddick, the long-time parliamentarian of the Senate; various secretaries of the Senate and

official reporters of debates because that helped us in our education. We really wanted to know how the Senate worked, doing the homework for those interviews. But the best possible option was to have people who had devoted 30, 40 or more years to their lives to that kind of work. So it was the beginning of creating a very strong resource. I was going to go to the next annual meeting of the Oral History Association and my father became ill. So at the last minute I had to cancel. I gave Don my airline tickets and he likes to tell the story about how he was able to use my airline tickets with my name on them, to fly out to San Diego for a conference there. From that point, Don owned the Senate Oral History Project. He has developed one of the best programs that I've seen.

Scott: How did you decide who would be on the list of people to approach for an interview? Did you have any trouble getting interviews in that early stage before the Oral History Project developed such a great reputation?

Baker: We decided who would be on the list basically by people we became interested in, whether through personal contact or by reputation. We'd get a lot of suggestions from various Senate old-timers. "You ought to go out and find so-and-so." Mark Trice, former secretary of the Senate, 1953-1955. We haven't spoken about Mark Trice in these interviews? I think he began his Senate career as a page in 1917. And, with a few breaks, he then spent most of that time as a very knowledgeable Senate insider. Don and I tried every trick in the book to get Mark Trice to participate in an oral history interview and he simply wouldn't do it. And he'd look at me and growl, "Baker! I know what you're up to! I'm not telling you anything! This is a sacred trust," and so forth. But then he would say, "But I have these photographs that you might like to see." I remember going over to his home in Bethesda and spending an afternoon going through these pictures. Of course, as you're looking at each picture he is telling these wonderful stories about what was going on in the picture. So I tried to write down as much as I could but that's not the same as a formal interview. He just wouldn't do it.

Years later, for the secretary of the Senate's newsletter, *UNUM*, there were a series of profiles on former secretaries of the Senate and I wrote one on Mark Trice. Then it went up on the Internet as part of the Senate Website, and his grandson, who was teaching history in a school in Missouri and had gone on to get a PhD in history at the University of Virginia, saw this article about his grandfather. So he called me up. Eventually he transferred to us the papers of Mark Trice which he had, as the history student in the family, fallen heir to. We then transferred those down to the National Archives. They formed a reasonably rich collection, but not a substitute for sitting down and asking him a series of

questions. They would have complimented each other very nicely to have both of these resources. There were others as well, who by dint of their personalities or their sense of duty, just didn't talk to us.

Then at the other end of that spectrum are the people who work here for a couple of years, like aides to Senate leaders or whatever and then go out and write a book about it. I remember a former aide to Majority Leader Howard Baker writing such a book. That produced a good deal of heartburn within Baker's camp. "Wait a minute, who is this guy? He doesn't know what he doesn't know." There's a whole culture, that's very much frowned upon around here, of people who use their experience to profit personally, either in terms of an ego boost, as some people might say the oral history route would be and therefore they weren't going to do it because they are going to keep these confidences, or a financial boost, and trying to do a book. It's that kind of thinking that causes people to say, I'm not going to participate. Just as the obverse of that is, people say, it was a great honor in my life--and this is certainly how I feel-- to be able to come to work at the Senate for an extended period of time and I'd like to offer whatever insights I can muster and people can take from it what they will. I came to the conclusion that if people didn't want to do oral history interviews, we probably didn't want them as subjects. Perhaps that made me feel better about not getting them, but we wanted people who were wholeheartedly interested in trying to add a small piece to this huge puzzle.

Scott: Did the focus of the oral history project change over time? We've already talked about how you chose not to focus on former members. What the interviews show really well is the behind the scenes institutional development of the Senate. Was that something that you envisioned from the beginning? Or did it sort of develop on its own?

Baker: It developed on its own. We were just going after the individual pieces of a mosaic. And all of a sudden you stand back and you see this brilliant picture emerging and it's out there for researchers and the general public and eventually this is going to be a very large program. Thanks to the Internet it's now widely available. I'm very proud of it. I'm very proud of Don Ritchie's leadership in getting that off the ground, for sure.

Scott: It's a tremendous project. People talk to me about it all the time even if they have no other connection with the Historical Office.

Moving a little bit into phase two, we also talked about the realization that you and Don had when those 12 senators left rather unexpectedly after the election of 1980, the realization that there was this huge archival component that you probably didn't have the staff or the knowledge to really spend as much time with it as you would like to. I'd like to talk about the decision to hire an archivist and how that came about.

Baker: Well, archival work is all about preservation. The decision to hire an archivist was purely self preservation [Laughs]. There I am up there speaking to many credulous audiences, you know, you are the historian, you are supposed to know about all this. But I was one lesson ahead of the class in terms of the kind of reading that I could do. Surely, as the early years went by we gained a lot of experience just by talking to people in the offices who had archival responsibilities. But then our involvement with the Public Documents Commission and our involvement with the National Archives made us realize that we have a tiger by the tail and this is goal that has been affirmed repeatedly by the highest authorities. You must do everything within your powers to ensure that the historical record of the Senate survives intact. In Arthur Schlesinger's 1974 letter, one of the things he pointed out was the Senate, if it expects the State Department and other executive branch agencies to open their documentary resources to the public in a timely way, also ought to be open. Just our mere existence as an office stimulated a lot of interest in us as a vehicle for getting access to records. We had calls from a few very prominent individuals who had some personal interest in getting into a particular body of papers that were Senate-related. It's hard to say no to those people if you don't have a good reason to say no. Or if you don't know what you are doing.

So we figured we better learn pretty quickly what we were doing. In 1982—this is the blow back from the 1980 election—as we were coming up on the next cycle of elections we turned to the National Archives for help. The Archives was having some financial problems at that point. In order to save money they were not promoting people. So we heard that there were a couple of very capable people who were in that situation. One of them was Karen Paul, who had been an archivist at the University of Virginia, who had really good credentials. I remember meeting her in the cafeteria of the National Gallery of Art for a luncheon-get-to-know-you kind of interview. We weren't talking about hiring her, we were talking about getting the National Archives to loan her to us. So it wasn't as if I had to make a long-term commitment, but I wanted somebody who could get started quickly. I was very impressed with Karen right from the very first day. I can't remember what happened in terms of her salary situation,

but I think the Senate did transfer funds to the National Archives to help them out so that we could have her services for one year. At the end of that year we renewed it for a second year. At the end of the second year, we decided to bring Karen onto the staff. We had a very sympathetic person in the office of the secretary of the Senate named Marilyn Courtot. Marilyn was by training a librarian and was very active in the field of micrographics. She really identified with this particular problem. Marilyn then went on to become assistant secretary of the Senate. She was very helpful in getting us that additional slot for an archivist.

Everybody from 1984 on has felt very good about the fact that, a) we have an archivist, and b) that the archivist is Karen Paul. Karen went on to do all kinds of pioneering studies. We kept hearing from offices, “We need an archival manual,” or, “We need to know what we’re supposed to do,” and “What kind of forms do we fill out?” One of Karen’s first responsibilities was to develop a manual. That manual has now gone through several editions. Not only has she done a manual for members’ papers, but also for committee records. Those are the bibles of the trade. The nice thing about them is that they are updated every few years to reflect the impact of on-the-ground experience and, also, electronic records. We realized very quickly that the archival side of the office was “the bread and butter” of our existence. It didn’t take two seconds for a senator to understand what it was that you were up to if you began with a reference to an archival program. So I was very supportive of that right from the beginning.

Scott: Did the members make use of her services right away? Or did it take a little bit of work?

Baker: The members that I was referring to are the people who have oversight of our office in terms of budget, funding, continued existence—members of the Committee on Rules and Administration and the Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee. They thought it was great. Other senators, you know, 100 people and you get some who are passionately in favor of doing the “right thing” exactly the way we tell them to do it, and then you get the other end of the scale: “Don’t bother me, I’m too busy.”

Scott: Throughout phase one and into phase two, you are not only the historian of the United States Senate, but you are also a PhD student at the University of Maryland.

Baker: You used a great title, "Historian of the United States Senate." Others might say, "Wow, that sounds great. That is a wonderful job, I'd love to have it." When the office began, there was a question as to what we were going to call the office—"the Senate History Office," "the Historical Office," "the Office of the Senate Historian,"—and what would be the title of the people who work here. "Historian in the office of the Secretary of the Senate." I could be "the historian in the office of the secretary of the Senate." Well, first of all, that assumes some understanding of what the heck the secretary of the Senate is all about. I just brazenly barged ahead with "historian of the U.S. Senate." There is a librarian of the U.S. Senate and a curator of the U.S. Senate. So it wasn't a huge departure, but it was important, I think, to make it clear that we are historians not just for the secretary of the Senate's office where we work, but for the whole Senate. Right now that may not seem like a big point, but earlier I thought it was a big point.

Scott: It took some discussion.

Baker: Well nobody really questioned me on it, but I was the one who was submitting the order to have the office stationery printed.

Scott: The other titles that follow in the office, the decision to use academic titles, associate historian and assistant historian, how did that come about?

Baker: I think we did use an academic model. Today, the Office of the Historian in the House of Representatives uses the title "deputy historian" instead of "associate historian." I don't think it ever occurred to us to use "deputy," it sounded too bureaucratic, it sounded like some government agency—heaven forbid! And we were trying to reach out to an academic community and academics could understand them. That's pretty much it.

Scott: Back to your decision to get a PhD after you start in the office. You have two master's degrees but not the PhD. Was it something you jumped into, or did you think about it a bit? Working full-time and getting the PhD on top of that is not easy to get into.

Baker: And having two children around the ages of six and eight. There were a lot of opportunities to do other things. I think it was my nature as a person to want to get the highest degree I could within the field I was in. I saw my father held back by the lack of a post-high-school education. Earlier in my career, I was

in the PhD program at the University of Connecticut. I kind of shifted around and thought, well, it makes sense. When I went off to begin the PhD program at the University of Maryland, one professor there said, "You don't need a PhD in history. Take some courses, but you've got the job! Don't worry about it! You've got the job and you've got the title and that's fine." And then Walter Rundell, who was chairman of the department at the time, urged me right at the very beginning to get it. He said, "People are going to expect you to have it." And so I applied for the program. They had a very good program in governmental history. So, I didn't really give it too much thought. I just thought this is something I needed to do.

Scott: I think this speaks a little bit to the changes that were taking place among the staff in the 1970s as well. There would have been a period in the past when someone who had a title or worked as the Senate historian may not have needed to have that degree. But it seems that in the 1960s and 1970s there is a real professionalization of staff occurring in the Senate. Did you have a sense for that at the time? Or did it just seem natural that you would get the PhD as the historian?

Baker: Personally, it seemed natural that I would do it. I didn't want to spend a whole career explaining why I didn't have one. I will never forget speaking at the new senators' orientation program in 1980. The organizers prepared a paper name card for my place at the table. The card identified me, prematurely, as "Dr. Richard Baker." Before the session began, Marilyn Courtot walked up and matter-of-factly tore off the "Dr." I spent the next few years working to make sure that would not happen again.

Your question is a good one in that it suggests that there were a lot of patronage jobs around the pre-1980s Senate. Until then, no Senate librarian had bothered to attend library school. Roger Haley, whose father had been chief clerk for the Joint Committee on Printing, was the first librarian to have a library degree. He got that on the job, an MLS. So, I thought in terms of job security. History on Capitol Hill in 1975, if you mentioned history and said, "I'm working in a historical office," people would say, "Oh, you work for Fred Schwengel at the Capitol Historical Society." "No, no we don't. That's a private organization, we're part of the Senate." But the Capitol Historical Society in that day and age was the sum and substance of Fred Schwengel who was an incumbent congressman from Iowa. He lost one term but then he came back. So he was the face of history on the Hill. He was a tall and imposing fellow who always had a good story to tell you about Harry Truman or Sam Rayburn. He would pull out of

his interior coat pocket a huge sheaf of papers all enclosed in plastic to protect it against the rain in case he was doing this outside. He would read off these facts and figures and that conveyed an impression about institutional history that didn't really suggest that you needed to have advanced graduate degrees to be a purveyor of that kind of history.

I had run into this when I was the acting curator earlier in terms of discussions about establishing a sound and light show for the exterior of the Capitol. I wasn't involved in that because they didn't have the money for it in the late '60s, but that was an ongoing project as far as Fred Schwengel was concerned. The Capitol Historical Society and the Office of the Architect of the Capitol were more than ready to handle the whole project, "thank you very much." And they would bring in some PhD consultants and I think they may have done that. There wasn't any high premium put on having a graduate degree. By the mid-'70s, however, with the Commission on the Operation of the Senate, there was a sense of, "Wait a minute now, we've just ended a 16-year period where one group has been in control. Now we're going into a new era and it's time to put a premium on educational preparation." I don't know if I've answered your question fully.

Scott: I'd like to talk a bit more about the U.S. Capitol Historical Society as an alternate model to the House and Senate historical offices. I read that former Secretary of the Senate Kelly Johnston called the CHS a "failed effort at privatization." You've mentioned in a previous interview that it was an alternate model to Senate or House historical offices. Why has the relationship between the U.S. Capitol Historical Society and the offices in the House and Senate been a historically troubled one?

Baker: I think the answer to that is Fred Schwengel. Fred didn't need any help from the House and the Senate other than the help he asked for—and the purchase from his Society by Congress each year of tens of thousands of calendars for distribution by members to constituents. That appropriation formed the Society's financial backbone for years. He was not a person who was a good listener. And he didn't want to hear contrary opinion. He was long in years at that point. He had been a member of Congress, he didn't want staff telling him how he was making mistakes or what he really should be doing. He was the guiding genius behind the creation of that organization, he had sold it to House Speaker Sam Rayburn in 1962. On the Senate side, they said, "Well that's fine, go ahead and set it up. Do whatever it is you need to do."

Back to the sound and light show. Fred had been to Versailles and Mount Vernon also had a *son et lumière* program, which was very popular on summer evenings. He wanted to do that for the Capitol Building where you'd be out on the east front plaza and hear the voices of Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln coming down from the Statue of Freedom. It was hokey in the extreme. But Fred, because he was Fred, had a lot of supporters who, just to keep Fred happy without ever going into the substance of the matter, would say, "Sure Fred, sign me up. I'm happy to do it." And that was dangerous. When I was the acting curator, and then when Jim Ketchum came in as the Senate curator, one of the big issues was how to fight the Capitol Historical Society on sound and light. Eventually Jim, working through Mike Mansfield with a lot of help from Secretary of the Senate Frank Valeo, was able to kill it. But that project created a lot of ill will against the Society within the secretary's office and throughout the Senate, and perhaps on the House side too, about the kinds of things that could be done.

Then the Capitol Historical Society developed a program of lectures associated with the American Revolution bicentennial. Thirteen lectures, arranged chronologically, bringing in the best scholars in the country, paying them very generous honoraria, paying a historian named Ron Hoffman, from the University of Maryland, who was recommended to the Historical Society by his mentor Walter Rundell. Walter Rundell was on the board of the Capitol Historical Society, and so Ron Hoffman had the responsibility for 13 years to organize these annual conferences held on Capitol Hill about a particular phase of the American Revolution, including women in the revolution. It was broadly and thoughtfully conceived, but had nothing whatsoever to do with the history of Congress. And they were paying a fortune to all concerned to do this. They had a contract with the University of Virginia Press to do annual conference volumes. But the volumes were notoriously tardy, sometimes five, six years after the conference. And generally scholars would come and some of them would put in creative new work, but then they would publish it somewhere else and so six years down the road it was not exactly cutting edge.

I began to lobby pretty early to get them to think about conferences related to the institution of Congress. And Fred wouldn't hear of it. But the string ran out on that American Revolution series. The Society eventually developed a series of two annual programs on Congress, one focusing on the institutional history and one focusing on the art and architecture of the Capitol. Now if they had done that earlier, and if they had chosen to work with us, I think that the relations would have melded together nicely. Instead, the Historical Society became a happy hunting ground for staff. They had hired staff, some of them were particularly

good and we'd find out about them. We hired Beth Bolling Hahn to be our historical editor, for example. Carol Beebe now works for the Capitol Visitor Center and Matt Wasniewski is now chief historian in the House Office of History and Preservation. So we owe them a lot in terms of staff. But the nature of the relationship in terms of working together, it was always that they would let us know when they needed our help. And they would make a major issue of the fact that they were donating lots of art and artistic objects to the Capitol, to the curatorial collections. And when they were called on that, to prove it, they had great difficulties doing that. Particularly on the Senate side, it was always this sense of these bicameral organizations, you always think that they are in bed with the people on the other side. So it probably works both ways, but the attitude in the Senate was that it was a House organization—run by current or former House members. And I think that in the beginning, or maybe throughout, that's what it was.

Scott: Given Schwengel's leadership, that makes sense.

Baker: They did stock the board of directors with former senators and former Senate staff. But in terms of a creative genius, that was Fred. I might add that the Society has been much more open to cooperation in recent years. I should also add, in the interest of full disclosure, that I was honored to accept their annual Freedom Award on the occasion of my retirement last year and that I too have become one of those former staffers who sit on the Society's board.

I have a 12 o'clock luncheon.

Scott: Let's stop there.

Baker: Ok.