

Life after the Senate

December 8, 2010

Interview #4

[This interview was conducted via Skype. Both the narrator and interviewer used webcams for video and audio delivery. Scott used a digital voice recorder to record audio from the computer speakers. Letchworth was in her home office in Florida and Scott was in her home office in Maryland.]

Scott: That's right. [Laughs] How are you doing?

Letchworth: I'm good how are you?

Scott: I'm great, how's your husband?

Letchworth: He's doing okay. The report we got last week wasn't as great as it could have been because the chemo[therapy] they had him on isn't working so they now need to switch. So we are in the middle of learning what the switch will be. But anyway—basically, day to day he is doing pretty good. Thank you for asking.

Scott: Good. How are his spirits?

Letchworth: They are pretty good, considering. I have been pleasantly surprised at his courage. You never know what people will do in these situations.

Scott: Sure.

Letchworth: You assume, you know, all sorts of stuff, but until you actually get in it I think a lot of people are wowed. I have been absolutely wowed. I think I have more roller coasters with it than he does.

Scott: Well, that's very nice. Are you going to get to see the kids for the holidays?

Letchworth: We hope so. It will depend on when they want to start this new treatment. The new treatment is really supposed to knock him for a loop. It's the "mack daddy" of chemos. It depends on when they want to start. We are trying to figure that out, waiting for doctors. So I may have to grab a call. If I do, I'll—

Scott: Oh, sure.

Letchworth: Okay. The only call I have to take would be the one from the doctor. You know if they call you got to take it.

Scott: Of course, absolutely no problem at all. I'll be here so if you need to go we can always reconnect whenever it's convenient for you.

Letchworth: Okay. And again, I'm going to have to jump off at 3:30.

Scott: Sure. No problem.

Letchworth: Good, perfect.

Scott: Good. I wanted to follow up with a question about your retirement decision. You had been married to Howard Greene when he was the assistant secretary for the minority and majority. Basically I feel like you two grew up together and you had a life in the Senate as well as a personal life together and I wondered if your second marriage made you think at all differently about your job or made you approach your job in the Senate differently?

Letchworth: That's a good question. Did my marriage to Ron make me approach the job differently? I would have to say it did a little bit because it was more normal, real life. It wasn't 365 days a year, 24 hours a day Senate. There was Little League. There was ballet. There was a chance to be a little more in the real life than married to somebody who was a career Senate employee. All of our friends, Howard and our friends, were career Senate employees. That's a little bit of a bubble. We can debate whether it's a good bubble or a bad bubble. But it's definitely a bubble. Meeting Ron, meeting his friends, family, all of that, [who] weren't so Senate oriented, it did make me look at it from a little different perspective. I won't say that's either good or bad. It was definitely different though, you are right. A different perspective.

Scott: When did you get married to Ron?

Letchworth: In 199—Oh gosh, I'm going to have to correct this. It's either '97 or '98. I can't remember.

Scott: I won't tell him that you couldn't remember. [Laughs]

Letchworth: [Laughs] Please don't.

Scott: That's really interesting. It's something I wanted to follow up with you about because so much of your life had been in the Senate and I wondered about that change.

Now maybe we can switch gears and talk about all of the things that you've been doing since you left the Senate. You have been incredibly busy. It seems to me that you are still deeply involved in politics and I wanted to talk to you about your decision to found GradeGov.com. When did that happen and what made you decide to do it?

Letchworth: I don't think there was a real "ah-ha" moment where it just clicked in my head. I can tell you for probably the last 10 years, easily, the last 10 years of my Senate service I could see Congress, I could feel Congress, I could see the Senate, I could see the senators, changing. It was a function, in my view, a lot to do with the fact that times were changing. Technology was changing. The world as we know it on a day-to-day basis was changing. Just like you and I talked about before. How did we live before BlackBerries? How did we live before cell phones? That really made legislating change. What I think it did to legislating in a nutshell was take out the personal aspect of it. Members of Congress have so little time to actually do the personal aspect of it. It's a combination of having no time. I think we talked about how TV in the Senate and Congress in general took the personal out of it a little bit. You know, members of Congress don't want to typically go on the floor and talk about a little town item because they are afraid they will be buttonholed into, "Oh he can't possibly be a global guy, or a main media guy because all he talks about is this little town." That started a disconnect, in my view, and then the lack of time [with] the 24-hour news cycle and having to debate and having to fund-raise all the time. We the people sort of got left behind. I think also when you had 9/11, I think so many in Congress, rightfully so, there was such an obvious number one intention to protect the American people. But it's almost like the little stuff got left behind to a certain extent.

The disconnect started happening more and more and more. Disconnect to the point where it used to be members of Congress talked about going home, you know, right before recess. "What are you going to do during recess?" That kind of conversation. You quit having that excitement about going home. That connection from the legislator to the American people was slowly going away. It just dawned on me. That's dysfunctional. That's dangerous. That's not good for the American people. It's not good for our system. The more I got out into the real world, being married to Ron, living in Manassas, going to soccer games, the more it was obvious to me that the American people—and literally in the last 10 or 15 years I'm talking about, in the '90s—really felt like, "They don't care about me anymore." That feeling to me got louder and louder and louder and louder.

So it became obvious that there needs to be a good way for the American people to connect to members of Congress. It can't be bothersome for them. It can't take up a lot of their time because time is precious. But it has to be real in my view and both parties have to believe that it's real. The member of Congress has to believe these are real people speaking their mind. And the people doing the talking have to believe that the member of Congress will pay attention, will hear them. So it dawned on me. Why not do something that allows that connection and if Congress takes it seriously it really will solve this dysfunction that I believe is so, is badly needed. I remember, of course I'm sure you know this, all members of Congress have a day or morning or afternoon where they meet with their press team and they learn about, "Okay, how am I doing in the local paper? What does the big paper think of me?" They get the down low on the press and all of that. My goal for GradeGov was for the member of Congress to say, "Okay, how am I doing on GradeGov this week?" And if the staffer said, "You have a 'C'" [the member would say] "What do you mean I have a 'C'? I had a 'B' last week! What's going on?" The staffer or the member of Congress can say, "I've been on the site and I see letters from my constituents that say I'm doing this wrong or that wrong. Let's fix it."

It was interesting. After GradeGov was launched the one thing that members of Congress said to me over and over again was that when the letters were written they wanted to see their constituent mail first. So I had to revamp the system because if you remember, if you go on the website and you find a member of Congress's page, right under his or her face are all the letters. When the site was originally launched anybody's letter went there. In other words, you don't have to write your own member of Congress. You could write whoever you want. But why does a senator from, I don't know, Tennessee want to read somebody's—He may want to read somebody's comments from California, but he wants to read his constituent comments first. So I reversed that. But that I thought was an easy thing for me to do. It wasn't necessarily cheap, but it was an easy thing for me to do. People think websites just change miraculously. [Scott laughs] Imagine how people think that. I get letters all the time: "Why don't you add this? Why don't you add that?" Sometimes the suggestions are wonderful but I really have to bite my tongue to say, "It costs money to do all of that!" But anyway, the suggestion was a good one, I thought. I thought it would help them watch the site more, pay attention to the site more. So I did it.

I also heard, really interestingly enough, not a lot of people use GradeGov for constituent services, but some people do. I was surprised. I did not design it for constituent services. "Can you help my child get in the Naval Academy?" Or, "Can you help with my social security check?" It wasn't for that. But anyway, people use it for that and I have heard that people have had results. Members of GradeGov that have heard

from a member of Congress, their staff, and they had tried all the other traditional ways, whether it's a social security check issue, or an immigration—they tried everything imaginable and got nowhere. But they got an answer on GradeGov.

I feel like it's still young. It still needs to grow. A lot of the new members are familiar with it. I think some of the old members haven't been as thrilled with it. But it'll grow. It will grow with every new member of Congress and as more members of Congress use it. I also would like to have the member of Congress—and I tried the Senate Rules Committee and I tried the House Administration and I'm still sort of struggling with them, I may eventually get it—to have the ability for the member of Congress to comment on his page. Just one time a day, just like each constituent can. He can spend it talking about specific letters. He can do an “atta-boy” to himself. He can [do] whatever he wants to do. That will help keep him involved. Of course, we know a lot of them in most cases, the staff will do it. But I'm trying to get that kicked off. As you know, that takes a lot of hoops jumping through the Rules Committee. It would greatly disadvantage me from doing any kind of advertising, which I'm okay with. Because you see, you wouldn't want to get into all that advertising bit. I'm still working on that. That would, I believe, keep members of Congress more interested and more of them would watch it. More of them would read the letters. That's all it's about. All it's about is a communications effort.

Go ahead.

Scott: I was just going to ask: It's another way to enable constituents to talk to their representative, which is really interesting because there are a number of other ways to do it. Why do you think GradeGov is particularly effective in this respect?

Letchworth: Because [with] the other ways to do it, you're never clear whether it's going to a member of Congress. If you use the member of Congress's website and write them a letter, so much of that is sent to a reporting system, as you know. The member of Congress will get a report that says you got seven letters on health care today. But is your health care letter ever really written, I mean, read?

The other ways are, of course, town hall meetings. But you know, in a lot of respects, and I'm not being disrespectful, but members of Congress have taken those over. They used to be ours. They used to be the American people's. You and I would go to them, Kate. We wouldn't invite the members of Congress. You and I would go and we would talk about the member of Congress. We'd talk about our problems. And then over time, and I'm not blaming this on any one party, it's just an evolution of things, over time members of Congress started going to them because it became obvious that's where a lot

of their constituents would be. Like one-stop shopping. Now they are run by the member of Congress. The agenda is written by the member of Congress and a lot of times you have to win a lottery or win some kind of draw system to even get in the room. That's a little backward from what it started out. Even those kinds of ways to communicate aren't the same anymore and people are feeling the frustration.

I also thought that GradeGov, by the virtue of the fact that the letters stay on the site, that it's like being able to write a letter to the editor without an editor having to approve it. You can't be disrespectful or ugly or the letter gets taken down. But if you are concerned and you are respectful, your letter is going to be there for all time or until the site for some reason would come down. It's there. That's also a sense of—it lets a little bit of the steam out of the frustration coffee pot for the constituents also. That's why I think it is a little different. The other ways are you're not sure you get heard. And you're not sure you really see results. I think they feel, members of GradeGov feel, like they are at least being heard, they are at least being seen. Sure they're still, they may still be ignored. We can't make people listen and do exactly what they want. But at least they are being heard.

GradeGov is different because it's attached to personal e-mail accounts in the Senate and the House. It's not attached to—you know, a lot of people don't like that. A lot of people in Congress are not thrilled with the fact that these go to personal e-mail accounts. I've had several members of Congress ask that we funnel them through the e-mail system and I've respectfully said that I wasn't going to do that. The e-mail accounts are public knowledge. That is also a difference. People know that they do end up in someone's e-mail box. I can't make them read every word. And you can certainly delete it. But that's the next best thing to having somebody stand in the office and make a phone call.

Scott: I did want to ask you about the back-end in terms of how you have coordinated these responses with the offices. Has that been a formal communication between you, GradeGov, and individual offices? How does it work? Do people contact you first, in terms of the members, or do you reach out and talk to them?

Letchworth: A little bit of both. I would say probably one quarter of the members of Congress have called me at some point. Obviously, not the member of Congress—I've heard from very few members of Congress—their senior staff [call] and they'll say, "Can you redirect the letters here? Or actually you have them going to a press secretary and she would like them to go here. They are better served if they go here." I've gotten a lot of that, which is helpful. Basically what I did in setting up the system was go through 535 members of Congress, go through their office, figure out who their LD

[Legislative Director] was or one of the top senior aides and put the e-mail system to their account. I'm sure that I was incorrect in a lot of instances. A couple of dozen instances I sent them to places where they shouldn't have [gone]. In a lot of cases, that member of Congress's office would call me and ask me to move it somewhere else. That's fine. I don't have a problem with that. The more people watch and look at the site and they go to the right place, of course the more successful it will be.

Scott: Have you watched the number of people reaching out and writing letters? Has that increased over time?

Letchworth: Absolutely. You know what was interesting? I guess this was me being lazy. I was up there and I had talked to a friend in Senator Bennett's office. This is Bob Bennett [R-UT]. We were just talking about different things and he let me know, this was way back in the middle of January [of 2010], maybe earlier than that, that the senator might be in trouble. Of course, I'm [saying], "Oh, no, the senator can't be in trouble. You're kidding me." This was going on his fourth term. His dad had been senator. Senator Bennett is a wonderful person, that can't be true. And he said, "No, no. I really think that we've got some issues." And we talked a little bit about other things. As soon as I got to the point where I could, I checked GradeGov and Senator Bennett was getting a 'D'.

Scott: Really?

Letchworth: The letters from his Utah constituents were clearly not letters of praise. They were very upset with him. So I started watching the site more for the early primaries and GradeGov batted an absolute perfect 1000 for every single primary. The first time it made me take notice was when I noticed that Senator Bennet was doing badly, and then as it got closer and closer to his, remember his wasn't actually a primary, it was a party convention I think is what they call it, as it got closer to that I kept watching and thought, "Boy he's still not doing well. As a matter of fact, it's getting worse." And sure enough we know what happened. That made me take notice as to the other ones. Literally every one where they were, where somebody was facing an incumbent, in other words so that I could track it on GradeGov because the incumbent was there, in every instance, GradeGov was exactly right.

Scott: Wow.

Letchworth: It really just basically reaffirms what it's supposed to be, which is the voice of the people. Another thing that I'm very proud of is that it is pretty equally represented. About every three or four days I look in the membership and see what the

ratio is from Republican to Democrat and Independent. It's high 40s typically for the Democrat and Independent and low 50s for the Republican. So that is fairly even. It just gets out on its own. I do some TV and radio when I can. I do some radio for GradeGov. But typically it gets out on its own.

Scott: That was going to be my next question. How did you get the word out? When you first launched the site what did you do?

Letchworth: I did some TV, Fox News a couple of times, MSNBC, various radio [programs]. I then started to do a weekly radio show. Now I have a twice weekly radio show of my own and then a Wednesday night radio show with a local radio talk show host. All of it is talking about Congress and how you can use GradeGov, you know, the ABCs of Congress. Typically on the Monday show—

[Phone rings in Letchworth's office.]

Letchworth: Let me just peak at this to make sure it's not—Okay, I don't need to get it.

The Monday show typically talks about what Congress is going to do for the week, the schedules of the House and the Senate. And believe it or not, Kate, people care more and more about that. I mean the average guy in the bowling alley is a little interested as to what the Senate's going to do. Now, they are not political junkies. They don't want all the down-low. They don't want to know about cloture votes, and all of that. But they do generally want to know what their Congress is doing. Friday on the show typically I recap the week and talk about whether Congress did what it said it was going to do. Did the Senate do—why didn't they get that bill done? Why didn't the House get that bill done? That listenership has built and I think it is all part of the GradeGov, the Tea Party, the "we the people," whatever you want to call all of this where people have woken up to the fact that they need to watch Congress and watch what's going on in Washington more and more and more.

Scott: Do you think that's out of a sense of distrust for their elected officials? Where does that feeling come from?

Letchworth: I really do believe it started with the slow disconnect, with the slow of members of Congress not being able to connect as often as they used to be with their constituents and not at the level that they used to. We talked about whether they talked about the Girl Scout group or the Boy Scout group. If they stopped talking about that, you as the constituent are going to, at some point, think, "He doesn't care about me anymore."

He's forgotten me. Does he ride in the parade anymore? Does he come home as often?" I think it's a little bit of that. I think it's also a little bit of everybody gets so busy. With everything being so busy I think it's a combination of all of that. Of course with that comes the mistrust and the doubt. One thing feeds off the other. To me it's very unhealthy.

Scott: It's interesting to me what you said about the members and television and the fact that they tend to not talk about those local events as much as they talk about the more global, bigger picture, national things. It would work against their best interests, I would think, because they are technically state ambassadors. They are supposed to represent the interests of the people in their state.

Letchworth: I don't know if that is more staff driven. I think in a way it's slightly staff driven. Think about it. If you're the staffer that ends up working for the member that gets to be the rock star on whatever issue, then you are kind of the mini rock star. I say that because I can remember in the early '80s a senator's press staff was one or two people. A lot of times it was an editor of a medium-sized newspaper from the state that was willing to move his or her family up here, up to D.C. and take on the job. Now they are media mogul machines. Now they've got a Twitter person, they've got a Facebook person, they've got a YouTube uplink guy or gal. You know what I'm saying? It's this whole media machine. So I think some of that is staff driven. I'm not saying it has an evil intent or anything like that. It's just a sign of the times. If someone is going to be relevant you've got to be on TV "x" amount of times. Why would I put you on TV if you are talking about your Girl Scout group, is really what they are thinking.

Scott: That is really interesting. The more ways they have to communicate with their constituents, the more detached everyone feels. It doesn't seem logical.

Letchworth: It doesn't seem logical if you think about it. It doesn't make sense. But then if you think about it with the egos and the whole power thing thrown in, well then it starts to make sense.

Scott: Did you feel that over your time in the Senate? Did you feel some of that changing at the staff level?

Letchworth: I did. I felt it at the staff level. I felt it at the member level. I can remember being very young and talking to senators about—Two senators that come to mind are Senator [Jesse] Helms, who before a recess, especially if it's a day or two before a recess and it was slow because we were waiting from something from the House maybe, and there were lots of phone calls, it was nothing for him to sit in the cloakroom

and talk about going back home and opine almost about what he was going to be able to do and the fun things he would do. He called it "God's country." "I can't wait to get back to God's country. Have you ever been to North Carolina?" he would say. "You really need to come." He was almost like being Mr. Chamber of Commerce for his state. Senator [Wendell] Ford, for example, was another one. I knew more about Owensborough, Kentucky, than I ever knew about any other place before I went there. Now I've since been many times. But I can remember senators talking about their states, really glowing and really being warm. And they couldn't wait to get back there, Kate. That got less and less and less. Going home almost became a little bit of a hassle. "Oh, I'm going to have a bunch of constituent meetings!" That became pretty obvious over time. Again, it didn't happen overnight. But if you look at one, from one—[audio break]

Scott: So you were talking about—

Letchworth: We were talking about the disconnect that happened between constituents and the members and why did it happen and did it happen overnight? Of course the answer is no to all of that.

Yeah, I could see it. You could see it almost from one year to the next. CODELS [congressional delegations] increased. Again, I'm not going to sit here and demonize CODELS because boy, I've been on a bunch of them and they were wonderful. But that became what everybody talked about what they did for the recess. I've started playing back in my head. Five years ago nobody was talking about doing CODELS, they were talking about, "I'm going to do this parade." Or, "I'm going to do this town hall." It was just sort of that general conversation slowly shifted from one to the other. Again, having the fortunate ability to be on the floor with the members, you heard real conversations between them. It wasn't buffered by staff. It wasn't buffered by—nobody had to guard their words. This was just talk they had sitting in the well, or waiting around for another vote. So I guess what I'm saying is that it was true conversation, true, honest conversation. Definitely, clearly from one decade to another, you could see that that disconnect was getting worse and worse and worse. As a result GradeGov seemed like a way to stop that disconnect. It worried me. It still does worry me. It's not good, it's not healthy, it's not good for our country. If there is a way to resolve it, great.

Scott: Is there a generational component to this disconnect, do you think?

Letchworth: I don't. No. You know at one point I thought that, but if you look at the—Let me take GradeGov, for example. I think GradeGov is a small, tiny microcosm of the whole issue. The membership of GradeGov is across the board. The majority of them are 40 and over.

Scott: Interesting.

Letchworth: Yeah. The only reason I think there aren't a lot more young people is the way the site is set up, there is nothing exciting about it for a young person. And it was purposefully set up that way. If you make it flashy like some new Facebook page, then an older person won't navigate. So in other words, an older person can navigate this, a younger person can also much easier. But it's not exciting to them so they are not going to go on it as often as they would say, a Facebook page, because there aren't videos flashing on them. To say there is a generational—I don't think so.

Scott: I was actually thinking more about generational [meaning between] the members and their disconnect with the constituents.

Letchworth: In other words, are the younger ones doing a better job of connecting with the constituents?

Scott: Well, maybe the opposite. Are the older ones, like a Jesse Helms, keeping a stronger connection to their constituents than maybe some of these newer folks coming in?

Letchworth: I think it's a purer connection. A deeper connection. Maybe I should just say that, a deeper connection. I think the younger ones, their connection is more face time on Facebook, tweeting on Twitter. There's nothing wrong with it.

Scott: It's a different connection.

Letchworth: It's clearly not as deep of a connection than if you have coffee with them at a coffee shop. Obviously, the younger you are, the more you realize you can get more people involved with Facebook than going to a downtown coffee shop. But is the quality of the downtown coffee shop [audio break]

To answer your question, yes, I think it is as far as that is concerned. I don't know that you ever can really do much about that.

Scott: No, I don't know. Maybe what will take shape now will be something new that people of that generation can see as a real connection with their members and I don't know.

Letchworth: Maybe that is video conferencing, only it would go out over your TV. Nobody would have to be completely computer savvy to get it. I don't know. I'm sure somebody will figure that part out. I am adding something to GradeGov which might help a little bit. When all the elections were going on and, of course, prior to the elections, people started inviting GradeGov in general. I don't know who they think GradeGov is, and it didn't really matter. But they thought that GradeGov should know about their political events. So they invited GradeGov to every political event, Kate, that you could possibly think of. If you were ever to go to Oregon and want to go to a Tea Party event in Eugene, Oregon, I can tell how to go right to it, where it is, and I can give you a Google map.

[audio break]

GradeGov should know about these. So I'm adding to it a political directory where you in theory can go to GradeGov to find almost any political event you can think of for any political party, whether it's the Libertarian Party or the Green Party in whatever town, if there is something going on, all over America. Which I thought would help give more strength to GradeGov. I also bought [audio break]

So I hope to do something with them ultimately if GradeGov's brand gets as strong as I hope it could be. Then I would launch, let's just say for example, GradeGovVirginia. And that [audio break]

I'm hoping to almost franchise those out because I clearly can't do all 50 states. The issues, I don't know the—There is going to be, I believe, somebody like a Drudge, someone like a Matt Drudge, who will want to do that. They will rent the space. They have to keep certain brand rules, just like a franchise. It would have to be run so you don't taint the brand. Let them run with it, let them do their whole site on their whole state and let the governors and the state legislatures also be under the same scrutiny as GradeGov members of Congress are at this point. That's the future of it, I hope.

Scott: How do you make money right now? What's your revenue stream?

Letchworth: It doesn't. [Both laugh] That's a little bit of a thorn in both my side and my husband's side. Right now all we do is just pay the bills. It's a matter of being patient. It's still a basic matter and in my mind it was the right thing to do and is the right thing to do. It's time will come. I am not interested in ever getting into heavy advertising because you would have to worry about whether it's a Republican ad or a Democrat[ic] ad. Unless it's a vacuum cleaner that has no political persuasion, then I'd have to be balancing it constantly. Ultimately, I'm hoping that the political directory will be able to

make some money. Hopefully I can charge for somebody to upload whatever their event is. I did create something during the election that I was going to hopefully make money on. Kate, I ended up—I guess this was the Senate employee in me—I ended up giving it away. [Scott laughs] We named it POW “Political Opponent Web Servicing” but basically it was API, which means if you are running against a member of Congress, a sitting member of Congress, I would offer to you a link on your site and basically, a picture of your opponent and his or her grade from GradeGov and click on it and it would say, “click more to read about my opponent.” And basically you would be telling everybody what people think of me, if I’m a member of Congress, without saying it. I was going to charge for that. But then some friends were running some campaigns and asked me, “Would you give it to me for 30 days free and let me try?” Anyway, the bottom line is, I probably had 100 POWs out there and they all ended up being *pro bono*.

Scott: [Laughs] You’re going to have to change that model!

Letchworth: I know [audio break] I do know that incumbents have a huge leg up on people running against them. This little bit, if it could be helpful [audio break]. Most of them stuck them on their home page. Most of them kept them as a little postage stamp. Some of them put them on a donation page, for example. But most of them, somewhere on their home page was the postage stamp of their opponent and their grade that you could click and it would go straight to in real time. A couple of them made it the size of a deck of cards, especially if their opponent was constantly getting a “D” or an “F.”

[audio break] but most of them had just a small [audio break] in an effort to bring more awareness about their opponent, about their campaign, just all of that information.

Scott: Elizabeth, if you don’t mind, I’m going to try to call you right back. My Internet connection on this side is terrible. And your voice is coming through very garbled at times. I want to try to get a cleaner connection. Do you mind if I just call you right back?

Letchworth: No.

Scott: Sorry about that.

[Ringing]

Letchworth: Whoa, that seems loud.

Scott: Yes, it does. You’re right.

Letchworth: I didn't touch the volume, did you touch the volume on yours?

Scott: No, I didn't.

Letchworth: That's okay though.

Scott: Well, the connection is much better. Thank you for bearing with me on this. This is a trial run to try Skype for interviews and I can say that it doesn't always work very well.

Letchworth: I think weather has something to do with it. I don't know what it is doing there, but I have seen, I have used Skype a few other times, and if one of the locations is having questionable weather, for whatever reason, it can have some issues.

Scott: Are you having strange weather?

Letchworth: No, it's a little cold for here, but no. I mean, we're not having a tornado or anything like that.

Scott: That's good. I wanted to ask you about your column in Sunshine News.

Letchworth: That's an online a.m. publication, just like Washington gets the *Congress Daily* and *Roll Call*, only it's all Florida news. It's all Florida politics. When they launched, they reached out to me, we have mutual friends. They said, "Would there be an interest," or did I think there would be an interest for them to have something about Washington? And of course my thought was, "Yeah, absolutely." Now people in Florida aren't as interested in Washington but they still want to feel like they know. Even if it's a snippet, even if, having a cup of coffee—it goes back to the same people who listen to my radio. These aren't Washington political junkies. But they still want to know, generally, what are my guys and gals doing this week up there? What are they going to do to me or what are they going to do to my business? Is this something I need to worry about? As the relationship continued with the founders of Sunshine State News, we all came to the conclusion, why don't you write the article? And because I have to stay in touch by virtue of my work at Covington, I already know the information anyway. It's almost like being an advanced cloakroom assistant. I always know what's going to happen so why not put it on pen and paper and let folks that want to read about it, read about it. So I typically do a Monday and a Friday column there, and it's the same thing as the radio. What are they going to do? And then Friday, what did they do?

Scott: What I thought is interesting, reading the last couple that you've written, is how much it sounds like a floor schedule: "Here's what we're going to be doing," except you've got the week view instead of the daily view.

Letchworth: Exactly. Again, maybe that's the floor assistant in me. I found out more—you know, I don't think 15 years ago a column would have gone like this. I don't think a radio show would have, my god, it would have been the biggest yawner in the world. But I think because people have woken up to wanting to know about their legislators and what they are up to, that's why I think it is going as well as it is going as far as the interest. You're right, I do write it as if it's a write-up for, the recording, as if I were making a recording for the end of the day in the cloakroom. I do try to make it simple. Most people don't want to delve into cloture and all that. Calling it a 60-vote procedural vote is good enough for them. As you and I know, that means cloture, but they don't need to know all that, it's not important. So that's how that started. Every once in a while, if there is an issue that either I know really well, or I can provide some background history-wise, I'll do a daily column. I've done a couple on cloture. I've done a couple on the filibuster. I've done—anyway, pieces like that where I can give a little bit of background, provide a little bit of history, I'll throw out to the daily column. But most of the pieces, you are right, they sound like a legislative schedule.

Scott: Well, they are more fun. There are some editorial comments in there, things that you wouldn't hear on the Senate floor, so it's fun.

Letchworth: Hopefully I give a little history sometimes about why they are in a pickle, or whatever the situation is. Again, it's all in an effort to let the people know more and more about what their Congress is doing for them.

Scott: What is your job with Covington? You work as a legislative advisor, is that right?

Letchworth: Senior advisor. Really, I've made a nice niche that I hope that they appreciate. I thoroughly enjoy it. I am the eyes and ears for the firm on the Hill for issues. Also [I take] a pulse on the Hill for what is going on. Not literally the bills so much as, what is the flavor? What is the mood? What is likelihood of x, y, or z? As you know, for client purposes, that can be very time saving and therefore save a lot of money if you can advise the client one way or the other in the proper way. Typically I don't go up to the Hill with a client. I haven't been up to the Hill with a client in years and that's fine. I've very happy with the role I have and I think they are too. It also affords me, it allows me to keep talking to my friends all the time. But you know, I'm not really asking much of them. I get to ask some general scheduling questions, but I'm not asking something of

them. It allows me to keep my friendships, you know, find out about the children, following everybody's life. It's really a nice niche. I really enjoy it.

Scott: How often do you make it up here to Washington?

Letchworth: Typically I go up about once a month and I stay the better part of a week, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday; Monday/Thursday, depending. And that works out really well to keep people thinking of me every so often. But of course I'm on the phone so much of the time and most people don't realize I'm not there all the time. If you think about it, if you can go two or three weeks and not see somebody, the assumption isn't that they are in Florida, the assumption is that you've just been busy and they've been busy. [Scott laughs]

Scott: Do you use a lot of video conferencing and things like that?

Letchworth: I do a little bit with clients, but most of it is conference calls. And if you are just very careful not to ever talk about the weather or the traffic, then it works out pretty well. [Both laugh]

Scott: How did you come into that position? Through connections that you have, or did they approach you?

Letchworth: It was a little bit of both. There was definitely a need that Covington had to fill. I knew I wanted to keep doing this. I had done this while we owned the golf course in South Carolina. I had done this for a couple of clients when I was down there. Then we sold the golf course and moved to Florida and I wanted to keep on that end of it, but I didn't want it to mean relocating back in D.C. So meeting with the Covington folks was a little bit of an ask on their part. I'm not a lawyer. I want to do something that they've never done before. I want to do it from Florida. And by the way, I've owned a golf course for the last couple of years. It was really strange for them, I think, at first. But once they thought about it, it made sense. It's been a good marriage as far as I'm concerned. I think they think that I love the firm. They are wonderful to me. So I'm happy and again it affords me the ability to stay in touch with all my friends and keep relevant on the Hill and keep getting the inside information. I share it with clients but then I also share it in this other way with the other outlets like the radio and Sunshine State News.

Scott: You and I had a scheduling—we pushed back one of our interviews right after the midterm elections because you were busy, I think advising in some capacity

these newly elected members to Congress. What kind of role have you played with members and staff on the Hill? It sounds like you still have a lot of ties there.

Letchworth: I do. A lot of it is helping to navigate, helping some of the new members navigate. They want to know what is going to happen, how the committee assignment process will work, what's my best shot at getting "x" committee or "y" committee? If I can let them know, boy, you are wasting your time or you're wasting your chits asking for Appropriations if you are a brand new member. Or, do you want to paint yourself as a victim? Do you want to ask for the moon and get nothing and have people feel sorry for you and get more? Is that where you want to go? Do you see what I'm saying?

Scott: Yes.

Letchworth: There is a lot of behind-the-scenes strategizing if they know how to strategize. It's obviously nothing to do with their intellect, it's just knowing how to navigate. Several of the new members of Congress have staffers that I've known for years so they've reached out to me for help. If you help them understand what is going to happen, how it's going to happen. I know you know this. Your committee assignments can, obviously, make or break you, as far as a career in the Senate. And if you pick wrong, and you have to keep moving around until you sort of pick the right one, you can waste a lot of years, a lot of seniority. I remember Senator [Ted] Stevens had been there, I have to check on the dates, I want to say he'd been there at least two terms, before he found the committees that he really wanted. And he had wasted 12 years of seniority bouncing from committee A to B to C until he finally found the ones that he liked.

If you can find them initially, and that takes some doing on your part, it takes some homework on your part as a member of Congress, but if you can also find somebody like me that can help you traverse that, you can save a lot of time and you can get places very quickly if you navigate the beginning of it.

As you know, the beginning of being a member of Congress is very overwhelming, and this class is the biggest class they've had in modern history. In 1980 they had 12, this is 13. You can't possibly, the floor staff, the party secretary, can't possibly educate every one of those members to the level that they need to be educated. It's just not possible. There aren't enough hours in the day. I remember when Fred Thompson [R-TN] became a senator, and because I had known him personally as a Baker staffer and a friend, we had a couple of meetings, sort of pre-meetings, before he was having to pick his committee assignments, about what would be best for him. And he and I talked probably for an hour and a half: "What is your vision? What do you want?" And

he clearly did not want Judiciary. He did not want that whole image of "what did you know, when did you know it?" As a staffer, he didn't want to constantly be reliving that. He wanted to establish himself as his own man. Even though everybody was tugging at him to come to Judiciary, as a sort of legend, or rock star, he didn't want to have to go through all that. So the bottom line is we found he could really have a deep love for Government Affairs, so he got on there, which at the time people thought was kind of a lame pick. But gosh if you look at the history of it, within six years he was chairman. I think that was precedent setting for someone that young, I don't mean necessarily in age, but for someone of the Senate to have risen that quickly in a committee. And that really came down to picking well when his committee assignments were offered to him. It's that kind of [advice] that a seasoned senior staffer can really help a new member with. People reach out to me all the time and I'm happy to do that. If I can help people make the transition easier, that's wonderful. I'm happy to do it.

Scott: Do you speak to the members-elect directly, or do you tend to speak to their staff?

Letchworth: Both. In the case of Marco Rubio [R-FL], I've spoken to him a couple of times, but I've also spoken to his staff. A little bit of both. In some cases, the member will want to speak to you first I think to get a comfort level with you. Usually my tie to them is because they have taken on a consultant or a friend of mine or hired somebody that knows me and knows that I would be good inside information for them. Sometimes it works out on a trial with them, and I don't mean that in any kind of formal way, but you know, chat with me for a few minutes and then the rest of it will be, "Oh, by the way, check with Elizabeth before we make this decision." So I'll get a quick call. It won't be necessarily long and involved. Just want to make sure I'm not really stumbling over the wrong thing. And I'm happy to do it, I enjoy it.

Scott: What do you think has been the biggest change in the Senate as an institution during your 26 years?

Letchworth: Obviously the TV for all the reasons that we've talked about. That was probably the biggest change. The partisanship has gotten so much worse. I'm sure that is a lot to do with the 24-hour news cycle. It has a lot to do with the function of TV being part of the Senate and the House because as we've talked about you can quickly become a rock star overnight if you want to be. I'll use Alan Grayson, Florida congressman Alan Grayson, as an example. If you wanted to be on the nightly news, just go say something exculpatory. He figured that out and did that a handful of times and then it became YouTubed and then it became viral. I think that kind of politics, if you want to call it that, creates people being really, really divided. That is probably the most

dramatic [change] that I've seen the Senate go through. The politics being so polarized. In part, it's TV but in part it's just a function of no time. No time for members to really get to know each other anymore.

I think the third leg of it is that the [Senator John] Tower [confirmation] debates changed the United States Senate. When they hung one of their own out to dry I think that ultimately had a huge, huge effect on the Senate. I'm not sure they have ever gotten over it, and they may not get over it. There was an instant distrust because basically friends threw him under the bus. I think before, that people would have said the Senate or in the House for that matter, that would have never happened. But when they threw him under the bus and ultimately defeated him, there was a lot of looking over the shoulder. I even remember hearing from members of the Senate that the wives weren't as close. All because if a wife is a confidant with another wife and says [something] about some flaw in the senator and what if the senator is in two years trying to be a cabinet member? So you had all of that which made it very real very quickly. Of course, that happened very quickly. Beforehand people would have thought that would never happen. There was a feeling that the Senate is a club, that they protect their own. And that clearly showed that that was not the case. You could feel it almost immediately after that.

Interestingly enough, very soon after the Tower debate and Senator Tower's nomination was defeated, the administration sent up another former senator, [Jacob] Chic Hecht [R-NV], to be an ambassador. And the members of the leadership really circled around him. But more importantly, or as importantly, they became very paranoid that he would get "Towered," that that would happen again. I was contacted, I'm going to exaggerate a little bit, but almost hourly: "Elizabeth what do you think about the clearance process? Do you think this is going to happen? What's going on with it? Are you going to be able to [confirm] if not, why?" I was constantly being asked, "How is it going trying to clear him? Why can't you clear him?" Because they were afraid it would happen again. Again it created a level of distrust that was not there beforehand, and I don't really think it went away. I think there is always this feeling of "I don't want to get too close to you because I might tell you something, your child might tell my child, or my wife might tell you, or my husband—" See what I'm saying? "That's going to come back to bite me. It could end up on a YouTube video and end up on the news. Therefore I can't really afford the friendships that I think are necessary to try to get over the bipartisan, or partisan, bickering." You know, a lot of partisan bickering of the past was resolved through families, through lives, through relationships. Kids played together. Therefore, how you could hate the dad or hate the mom if their child is over at your house when you come home? And you really don't have a lot of that. Not nearly as much as you used to. Again, it's a function of time. Families aren't up here like they used to [be].

Scott: Right. A lot of members don't bring their families to Washington.

Letchworth: And I'm hearing 15 to 20 percent of the new group are not [bringing their families]. That's high. That's high. I think typically it runs around 10 percent. Apparently it's going to be a little higher. There you are going to have, again, another whole group that won't have that extra way to reach out across the aisle. Kids don't know whether they are playing with a Democrat or Republican, you know?

Scott: Right. That brings up an interesting question that we haven't touched upon. What is the role of a party secretary in the case of nominations?

Letchworth: Basically the same role as in the clearance process in the orchestration of the passage of a bill or the stopping of a bill. It's the exact same thing. You arrange the speakers, you arrange the people that are going to—of course they are not going to offer amendments in the case of nominations—who is going to do the debating and what are you going to bring up, and all that. It's basically all the same thing. The nomination clearance process goes through the same process as a bill. It gets hotlined. The concerns are then put together in meetings, if that's helpful. Whatever is helpful to move the process along. It's all basically the same thing.

Scott: Is that the most contentious confirmation case you can remember, the Tower case?

Letchworth: Yes. It definitely was the most contentious. Even at a different level for me than Clarence Thomas, or [Robert] Bork, for example. My mother worked for Senator Tower. I had been to his home. I knew his wife, his first wife. I knew his daughters. All of this became personalized. As a matter of fact, the legislative scheduling office, when it was down on the first floor, S. 123, was used as sort of a war room for the Tower family when the vote was getting close to hitting the floor. The girls, the three daughters, used the office and used it as sort of a base to make phone calls. They did their own personal lobbying. I'm talking about his daughters. They went around and met with members saying, "My dad is not what you think he is." Or, "Can I tell you what my dad really is all about?" It was very personal for me. Robert Bork of course was very contentious. Clarence Thomas was, well you know, was very contentious. That was very personal for Senator [John] Danforth [R-MO], for example.

Scott: How so?

Letchworth: It was a personal friendship, and I don't remember how they knew each other. But isn't Clarence Thomas from Georgia?

Scott: I don't recall.

Letchworth: I think it is Georgia. Anyway, I'll look it up. It became very personal for Senator Danforth. And he went back to the leader over and over and over again with various different strategies as to how to keep moving it along and moving it along. And if it wasn't for him, I don't think that the nomination would have gotten through.

Scott: Interesting.

Letchworth: Yes. He was very persistent. And you know what? Senator Tower didn't have that. Because he'd been a former member, he didn't need that. Why would he need that because these were his former friends? And literally he had served with every single one of them so they all knew him. So you would think he wouldn't need sort of a lobby that someone else does. Of course, now the White House for a cabinet member, they usually assign, a lot of times it is a former member that they assign for that person to help the process along. Clearly Senator Tower didn't think he needed that.

Scott: Maybe the case of Tower taught the White House a lesson.

Letchworth: It could be. It could be. But that was one of those things that kind of spun out of control. It was the spin machine that got out of control. And nobody came to his rescue and everybody thought everybody was going to come to his rescue. And that is the funny part. Many of the Republican members that did want to come to his rescue sat back waiting for somebody else to do the work. And nobody did the work and it all of a sudden started piling up and it was almost like, "I'm not going to get into it now, it's too much of a tar baby." It was a little bit of that too.

Scott: How did Senator Tower feel about it? Did you ever talk to him about it?

Letchworth: I did. To say he was bitter, no. He was probably one of the most surprised of anybody. And it happened so quickly. He was sorrowful, he was sorrowful for the Senate. Obviously, we can't ask him the question, but I think he saw what it did to the Senate and what a scar it was going to be on the Senate. It really, really is. And not that a Republican nominee got—it wouldn't matter who it was. It was the fact that a former member was treated that way by other members so quickly. It was interesting toward the end when Senator Dole was trying to salvage it. I don't know that this is a part of any kind of record. But he actually proposed, after we figured out that the nomination was probably going to go down, he proposed something that had never been proposed to

my knowledge out loud—I don't think it had been proposed before him—which was make him secretary of defense on a trial basis. In other words, make him secretary of defense for, I want to say it was six months, it might have been longer. And we'll revisit it.

Scott: It would still require Senate approval for that interim basis?

Letchworth: Yes. It would require Senate approval but then it was almost going to—we tried to construct some kind of mechanism so that it would require another Senate approval whenever the time period was up. I can go back and look it up. I think it was six months. Which sounds kind of bizarre, if you think about it, it's a little odd. Who would take him seriously if they knew he might not be there, you know what I'm saying? There was a little bit of that thought process. But the level of desperation the leadership went to to try to save the nominee because, of course, the leadership believed he would be a good secretary of defense. And all the stories and all of this out-of-control media frenzy was all just noise. That if you just go back to the basics, this was the best guy to be secretary of defense, obviously, or the president wouldn't have picked him. But it didn't work and Senator Dole didn't get an opportunity to try the other alternative and of course we know what happened.

Scott: Elizabeth—

Letchworth: I think—

Scott: Oh, sorry. Go ahead.

Letchworth: I think to sum it up the three things: the disconnect, the TV—maybe four things—the lack of time, people just losing control of their time, you know how that goes, and then Tower creating this complete distrust amongst members, all have created a perfect Petri dish for partisan politics to thrive. And it does.

It was interesting, Senator Baker realized how crazy the time schedule had gotten. I want to say it was in the early '80s. He saw Senator [Dan] Quayle [R-IN] as an up-and-comer and asked him to start, I think they call it the Quayle Commission to study the committee assignments. Do they have too many? Are we trying to do too much? And we're not doing anything well. We're doing too much. And basically that is what Senator Quayle came back with. Senators had too many committee assignments [and] they couldn't do anything real well because they were spread too thin and we should shrink them and all of that. Of course within a couple of years the Republicans lost control and

so much for that. It just fell by the wayside. But that was also a realization by the leadership that time is getting away from everybody. What do you do about that?

Scott: What [was] your happiest memory in the Senate? Or one of them?

Letchworth: I would have to say the passage of welfare reform. That was such a big victory because it was such a long victory. It took so long to get. I can remember Senator Dole having meetings after meetings after meetings, but nobody necessarily knew about the governors, trying to lay the groundwork, trying to write the best bill that he could. There was just so much work put into it by so many people. And so many people believed wholeheartedly in it.

[Phone rings]

Let me take a peek at that.

I'm going to grab this Kate.

Scott: Okay, I'll call you right back.

Letchworth: Okay, thanks.

[End of interview]