

# William F. Hildenbrand

Secretary of the Senate, 1981-1985

Secretary to the Minority, 1974-1981

Administrative Assistant to Senator Hugh Scott, 1969-1974

Assistant to Senator J. Caleb Boggs, 1961-1969

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## Preface

by Donald A. Ritchie

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On March 7, 1984, when William F. Hildenbrand gave his last testimony as Secretary of the Senate to the Legislative Appropriations Subcommittee, subcommittee chairman [Alfonse D'Amato](#) and Appropriations Committee chairman [Mark Hatfield](#) engaged in the following dialogue with Secretary Hildenbrand:

*Chairman Hatfield.* . . . I came this morning to participate out of my deep respect and appreciation for the leadership that Bill Hildenbrand has given to the Senate. He speaks of his last appearance before this committee, and plans to leave the Senate. I have been saying extra prayers for the survival of the Republic when he does leave. He is an example of a man who had a vision of wanting to be identified with a part of his government and that vision was realized. He has expressed his love for people, and the tenure he speaks of is only a very small fraction of his service to the Senate.

I have always felt that Bill Hildenbrand is a person who had the information, who had the knowledge, who had the background, but also who had the good judgment in human relations to give political advice so often times lacking in people of intellect. So with this rare combination, he really has made a contribution.

I have only one question, and that is, I am very much involved in the preservation of history, and I note by your report that we have completed two oral histories. What I want to know is, are you committed to do an oral history before you depart your present duties?

*Mr. Hildenbrand.* Let me first thank you very kindly for the remarks that you gave, Mr. Chairman, and to give you a very, very short answer -- no.

*Chairman Hatfield.* Well, Mr. Chairman, I would move to suspend his salary at this point in time and no payment be made to him until that oral history is either arranged or has been completed.

*Mr. Hildenbrand.* I might say, Mr. Chairman, I have not been asked.

*Chairman Hatfield.* Well, I'm asking. Seriously, Mr. Chairman, we note in the oral history that Mr. Ridgely has completed one -- and who was the other?

*Mr. Hildenbrand.* Carl Marcy.

*Chairman Hatfield.* I would hope that our former parliamentarian, Dr. Riddick, and -- what number of years, Bill, did you spend?

*Mr. Hildenbrand.* Since 1961, sir.

*Chairman Hatfield.* Since 1961, twenty-three years of the Senate's life. Bill Hildenbrand has made a very significant part of the archives that are being set up for world history and I think that there has to be some kind of calling to do this. I think this committee can certainly issue that call and make it a reality.

*Senator D'Amato.* We will submit that as a formal request the committee has made.

I would also like to associate myself with the remarks of Senator Hatfield. In the short time that I have been in the Senate, Mr. Hildenbrand has given this senator great counsel and wisdom; most of it basically his own. I would not bring up the subject, senator, but had I listened to him more often I would have escaped in better shape. I think we should undertake that project, should you consider the chairman's request and do that.

*Mr. Hildenbrand.* No question, Mr. Chairman. Any contribution that this committee or any other committee feels that I could make to this institution I would be more than happy to take the time to do it.

*Chairman Hatfield.* For the record--

*Senator D'Amato.* If the chairman would yield for a moment, who has to trigger the mechanics? Is that you?

*Mr. Hildenbrand.* It belongs to us. The Senate Historian is an employee of the Secretary's Office.

*Senator D'Amato.* Will you ask yourself to do this?

*Mr. Hildenbrand.* I shall make a note for myself.

As a result of this unusual exchange, William Hildenbrand agreed to participate in an oral history interview for the Senate Historical Office. It was fitting that his review of twenty-six years of association with the Congress of the United States should come as a formal request by a committee chairman, making the interview his last official service to the Senate.

William F. Hildenbrand was born in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, on November 28, 1921. After attending schools in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, he entered the

Army in 1942 and served as an infantryman in the European Theater. After the war he settled in Philadelphia and working as a radio announcer, began a career which was interrupted by a return to the Army during the Korean war. In 1957, Hildenbrand joined the staff of the newly-elected Representative Harry Haskell of Delaware. Although Haskell was defeated for reelection in 1958, Hildenbrand remained in Washington as a congressional liaison for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. In 1961 he joined the staff of Senator J. Caleb Boggs of Delaware.

The election of Pennsylvania Senator Hugh Scott as Republican whip in January 1969 helped bring Bill Hildenbrand into the Republican leadership. He was invited to become administrative assistant in Scott's office as whip, and continued in that position after Senator Scott was elected Republican minority leader in September 1969. His years in Scott's office coincided with the Nixon administration, which was frequently estranged from its party's floor leader in the Senate, and Hildenbrand recounts the difficulties the Republican leadership encountered while trying to work with John Ehrlichman, H.R. Haldeman and other presidential loyalists.

In 1974, following the retirement of J. Mark Trice, Bill Hildenbrand was elected secretary of the minority in the Senate, serving in that post under Minority Leaders [Hugh Scott](#) and [Howard Baker](#). As Republican secretary, he gained a reputation as one of the best "head counters" in the Senate, keeping the leadership apprised of how members were likely to vote. Ever-present on the Senate floor and in the cloakrooms, he kept careful watch on both the legislation and the legislators. Shortly before the election of 1980, as a jest he hung a sign on the door to the office of the Secretary of the Senate: "Closed, Opening Under New Management." To his own surprise, the sign proved to be prophetic. For the first time in twenty-six years, Republicans won the majority in the Senate. Hildenbrand was elected Secretary of the Senate, but his involvement in the legislative battles on the Senate floor continued unabated. In these interviews he describes the historic transition of Senate Republicans from minority to majority, and their success in enacting the budgetary program of the Reagan administration. After the 1984 elections, William F. Hildenbrand retired as Secretary of the Senate, concluding twenty-six years of service to the United States Congress.

"He is as close to the total Senate man as I've ever met," said Senator Howard Baker, adding that: "He is a strong and assertive person, 180 degrees from being a 'yes' man. Bill Hildenbrand has a view on everything in the Senate, I cannot recall a position of neutrality." Senator Hugh Scott concurred, noting that "If he has something to say, he'll say it, but always in an appropriate way. He'll say, 'Can I make a suggestion?' and then he'll make a proposal that no one had thought of before and that would lead to an agreement." Outside of those elected to the Senate, few individuals have had a more intimate perspective of its workings than has Bill Hildenbrand. As he once described his role: "I can do everything a senator can do, but vote." Mr. Hildenbrand died on July 21, 2011.

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**About the Interviewer: Donald A. Ritchie** is a historian with the Senate Historical Office. A graduate of C.C.N.Y., he received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Maryland. He has published several articles on American political history and oral history, including "Oral History in the Federal Government," which appeared in the *Journal of American History*. His books include *James M. Landis: Dean of the Regulators* (Harvard Press, 1980); *Heritage of Freedom: History of the United States* (Macmillan, 1985); *The Senate* (Chelsea House, 1988); and *The U.S. Constitution* (Chelsea House, 1989); *Press Gallery: Congress and the Washington Correspondents* (Harvard University Press, 1999); and is editor of *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Democratic Conference, 1903-1964*, recently published (Government Printing Office, 1999) and available online in [Text](#) and [PDF](#) format. He also edits the Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Historical Series) (Government Printing Office, 1978-). A former president of the Oral History Association and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region (OHMAR), he received OHMAR's Forrest Pogue Award for distinguished contributions to the field of oral history.

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