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Baker, Howard H. oral history interview

Don Nicoll

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Interview with Howard H. Baker by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Baker, Howard H. (Howard Henry), 1925-

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

February 28, 2001

Place

Washington, DC

ID Number

MOH 262

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Biographical Note

Howard Henry Baker, Jr. was born in Huntsville, Tennessee on November 15, 1925. His father was a Congressman from Tennessee, and his mother died when he was eight. He attended Tulane University, and graduated from the University of Tennessee Law College in 1949. He served in the Navy from 1943 to 1946. In 1964, he unsuccessfully ran for the United States Senate. He was successful on his second attempt in 1966, being elected as a Republican. He served from 1967 to 1985, was Minority Leader from 1977 to 1981, and Majority Leader from 1981 to 1985. He served on the Environmental Protection and Public Works Committees. In 1980, he ran unsuccessfully for the Republican presidential nomination. He served as Chief of Staff to Ronald Reagan from 1987-1988 and as Ambassador to Japan 2001-2005.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: family political history; committee assignments in the Senate; meeting Muskie; debating issues with Muskie; environmental legislation; operation of the subcommittee; working with Richard Nixon on particular issues; going to Nixon's home for a meeting; encounters after Muskie's career; Muskie as Secretary of State; and Muskie's contributions.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Wednesday afternoon, the 28th of February, the year 2001. We are in the law offices of Senator Howard Baker, and Don Nicoll is interviewing Senator Baker. Senator Baker, would you state your full name, spell it, and give us the date and place of your birth?

Senator Baker: Sure will. My name is Howard Baker, actually it's Howard H. Baker, Jr., and Howard is spelled as it sounds, H-O-W-A-R-D and the Baker is the same, B-A-K-E-R. And I was born on November 15th, 1925 in Huntsville, Tennessee which is a little town in the mountains of east Tennessee.

DN: And how did you get interested in and then involved in politics?

HB: I don't know really. You know, I've thought something about that and I've been asked that question before and the truth of the matter is I'd never given much serious thought to being in politics until just before I ran for the Senate. Actually, I had come from a political family. My father was in Congress from 1950 until he died in 1964, and my stepmother took his place.

She was elected for the balance of his unexpired term and then did not run for reelection. So I had that congressional background.

Actually I didn't spend much time in Washington during his tenure because by that time I was in school, or out of school, and I remained in Tennessee. My two younger sisters, Beverly Baker and Mary Baker, did grow up here so to speak, and went to school here. In addition to that, my maternal grandmother . . . I spoke of my mother, actually it's my stepmother but, my mother died when I was eight. And her mother was briefly elected sheriff of Roane County, Tennessee in the late 1920s, which was a, I guess, a unique situation back in those days when women barely were able to vote and were seldom considered for public office, let alone for the sheriff of an east Tennessee county. But I have that traditional background.

My grandfather on my father's side was involved in politics to a degree. He was a lawyer, a successful businessman. He divided his time between Knoxville, which is a much larger town, and Huntsville. And he was a delegate to a couple of Republican national conventions and was a great supporter of William Howard Taft and was a delegate for Taft in Anyway, that's enough of that.

But to answer your question, how did I get involved in politics? It wasn't until after my father died in 1964 that I gave any serious thought to running for political office. And indeed, the only other elected office I ever held except United States senator was president of the student body at the University of Tennessee. And I like to say that on occasion in political settings, but that's true. And it wasn't until after my dad died that I gave any thought to running. Actually the two years left in Estes Kefauver's term, it was under Estes Kefauver's term was, Kefauver had died also in 1964. And by the way, he and my father were great friends and classmates at the University of Tennessee.

But I was encouraged by a handful of friends to think about running for those two years left. And to be honest with you, the only reason they were encouraging me was they thought, nobody, no Republican had a chance and they might as well show a new face. So I did that. And to my surprise and their surprise, Athey" meaning the Republican establishment, I almost got elected. I lost by two percentage points, but that set the stage then for running in 1966 which I did and won. So I came to the Senate in January of 1967.

Speaking of my political lineage, my first wife was Senator Everett Dirksen's daughter and it was very interesting. He was Republican leader of the Senate when I was a very junior and freshman senator, so we served at the same time for three years, which may be unprecedented. I don't know of any other father-in-law/son-in-law relationship of that sort in the Senate. But anyway, I have a great and high respect for him and he, well he and my father were role models so to speak in my political ambition and career. That's a long winded way of saying what my political background is.

DN: You -

HB: Which, by the way, is more than I've ever told the oral history at the University of Tennessee.

DN: Now, in your time learning from your father and from Senator Dirksen, what were the principal lessons they taught you about the Senate and the House?

HB: Well, I don't know how to say that, how to answer that. Role model, of course. My dad had a reverent respect, not only for the House, but for the Ways and Means committee, which he loved to point out was older than the Congress itself, having been one of the committees of the Continental Congress. He took a somewhat dim view of the Senate. He thought it too aristocratic, too special, and on occasion said so. My late father-in-law, on the other hand, to me seemed to be the personification of the Senate, that separateness and speciality. And so they were different in a way, but they were identical in a way, too. But both of them by example infused me with an almost reverential respect for the Congress and for the House and Senate. Which I still have to this day.

DN: When you came to the Senate, what were your initial committee assignments?

HB: I was seniority number ninety-nine, since I had no previous federal service, nor had I been elected a governor. I would have been number one hundred except Senator Mark Hatfield from Oregon was elected at the same time and chose to serve the last remaining days of his governorship in Oregon before he came to the Senate. So he was a hundred and I was ninety-nine. Which is a backhanded way of telling you I didn't have much choice either in office assignments or committee assignments. And for a while Senator Ed Brooke of Massachusetts and I shared one office suite in what is now the Russell Office Building, which consisted of six rooms and we shared a reception room and each had two other offices.

But I joined the, what was then known as the Public Works committee, it's now known, and was later during my tenure, known as the Environment Public Works committee. Senator Jennings Randolph of West Virginia was the chairman, Ed Muskie was a member of the committee on the majority side and was chairman of the air and water pollution subcommittee. I was assigned to the air and water pollution subcommittee, and I've forgotten what other subcommittee to tell you the truth. But air and water pollution subcommittee became my principal committee interest and activity on Public Works. I then joined the, I think it was Government Operations committee during my freshman year. To tell you the truth, I'm not certain about that, but I believe that's right. But Public Works was my principal responsibility. It had, as I say, the air and water pollution subcommittee. It also had jurisdiction of the Corps of Engineers, which is a big thing in Tennessee with the Tennessee, I mean with the Cumberland River system. TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] was separate and apart, but Public Works committee also had supervisory jurisdiction, oversight jurisdiction of TVA. So these were all very Tennessee enterprises and that's where I spent most of my early years, most of my effort in my early years in the Senate.

DN: When did you first meet Ed Muskie?

HB: Don't remember. Probably the first day I came to the Senate. Certainly the first time I met with the committee, and then almost, and most assuredly as I joined the air and water pollution subcommittee. Muskie, I have only dim recollections of those first months, but Muskie was friendly, cordial's probably a better word. He appeared to me to be, and later I learned was,

a very strong, sometimes, and a very carefully calibrated person, but he could also be very volcanic.

And I must confess then and perhaps now also had a temper at times. Not often, but sometimes. I remember the wags around the Senate staff used to be that Muskie and I would regularly get into shouting matches which is an exaggeration, but we sometimes did. And I'd look around and the staff would be cowering on the sides, wondering how they were going to repair the rift, but there was no rift. Muskie and I took care of that without any difficulty. But it was through those early years, early months maybe, that I thought of Muskie as a contemporary, although he was older than I was, and came to respect his ability. And to be honest with you, I sort of enjoyed jousting with him. I can't remember specific episodes but I can remember, I recall that on occasion I joined issue with him on matters that were not, did not grow out of strong conviction but rather because I enjoyed that.

DN: You could enjoy your lawyerly skills.

HB: And I rather suspect he did the same. But we used to bait each other a little bit.

But when it came to the business of the subcommittee and committee we were almost always together. And I remember I was a co-sponsor of the clean air amendments of 1970. I guess I was the principal Republican co-sponsor. I'm not certain of that, but I believe that's so, and we worked on both air and water pollution. I was a member of the National Water Quality Commission which was chaired by former vice president Rockefeller. And Muskie did, as I remember. But anyway, we, I developed a, I developed a good working knowledge, even an in-depth knowledge of the theory of air quality control. And I remember that we used to have fundamental discussions about whether the best technique was controlling air pollution at the source, or whether it was remedial, later became known as stack standards versus ambient air quality. Those were the buzz words at the time, and I guess they still are. But as often happens in a congressional setting we ended up with both, in different configurations.

That was an exciting time for me. I remember when we were debating within the committee and later in the Senate and in the Congress, mandatory pollution control requirements for automobiles. There were all sorts of different views, points of view. Jennings Randolph was chairman of the committee and he had one set of views and I guess Muskie had another and maybe I had still another. I remember that I took a dim view of the Rube Goldberg contraptions that were being grafted onto perfectly good internal combustion engines. I'm a car buff.

And then along came Eddie Cole, Ed Cole who was CEO of, was chairman, CEO of General Motors, with this idea about catalytic converters using noble metal filaments within a muffler type contraption that became heated from exhaust gases and served as a catalyst to take out certain gases and particulate matter. And I was all for that. I thought . . . I'm sort of a gadget buff too, and I thought that was just a lot better than all those pumps and valves and stuff, especially Chrysler, was encouraging us to do. And the cars had no power, they were terrible machines. And I saw the catalytic converter as a way to address that. I don't remember now the interaction with Muskie on it but he came to be a fellow supporter of that. And we sort of rolled Jennings Randolph, who was chairman of the committee. I don't think he liked that much. But

that may have been the first time that Muskie and I set up an alliance on a major issue. I can't give you dates and I can't give you any more detail than that, but that's my recollection.

DN: How did the subcommittee work?

HB: Well, it worked . . . you know, the Democrats had been in control of Congress for so long they could not even think of a Republican control of the Senate or the Congress. So the minority was there really at the sufferance of the majority. We seldom had much stand. We had very little opportunity to set the direction of the committee's deliberations or to decide on what bills would be reported in what form, much more so then than now. And much more so then, than when I became a leader. And even though Republicans, when I became leader, had a pretty good majority the first couple of years, even so it was not as, it was not as clear cut majority-minority as it was when I first came to the Senate.

Democrats thought of themselves as the permanent majority, and they ran the committee that way. I don't mean that it was hostile. I rather mean to say that they thought that their birthright and that's the way they ran it. And I used to chafe under that, but I used to chafe also at the Republicans in Tennessee in never having a Republican senator, which was probably my prime motivation for running. I was young and feisty enough to think that that was possible to do. But the committee system ran on a very personal basis and there was all sorts of opportunities for Republicans, even junior Republicans, to say what they wanted, but the Democrats controlled it. They decided the agenda and they moved it.

DN: During those years, was Bill Hildenbrand still deeply involved in that subcommittee work?

HB: He was. He was on staff there, and he was on the Republican staff there. I think he was on the Republican staff. But anyway, yes he was. And later, of course, Bill became in effect chief of staff for Hugh Scott, Senator Hugh Scott, who was Republican leader and later became Secretary of the Senate when I was, both minority and majority leader. He was secretary of the minority first, of course, but then secretary of the Senate. (*Interruption*) Where were we, I forgot?

DN: We were talking a bit about Bill Hildenbrand and you were talking about the, both the Senate in general and the committee and the fact that you were then regarded as the permanent minority.

HB: That's right. And I always thought I was the resident bomb thrower in the committee and pretty much in, somewhat in the Senate, and that was intensified by the fact that my father-in-law was a Republican leader and I almost never agreed with him. But that's sort of the way it was in the committee, too.

DN: Did you and Senator Muskie continue through the remainder of your time, before you went to the White House, as colleagues on that committee?

HB: Yeah we did. As I remember Muskie stayed on that committee throughout his Senate tenure, and so did I. And then when he went down to State, when he became secretary of state I

remember we talked about that. I encouraged him to do it. And I was right, he should have done it and did it, but I also remember that you could read in his eyes, I wonder if he's telling me that just so he won't have to deal with me on the committee. But he didn't mean that. We were good friends. We did a lot of things together. We continued to disagree sometimes enthusiastically about things, but we were close.

DN: When you were at the White House, I've been told there was a time when you and Senator Muskie went to President Nixon on some issues.

HB: Yeah, I wasn't at the White House, oh, you mean, oh, after Nixon left the White House. Yes, we did. And one time in particular, and that was the first time after Nixon left the presidency. Alton Frye, who was then I guess, he was active director of the Council on Foreign Relations chapter in Washington, who is now I believe a New York organization. But Alton Frye came to me and said that President Nixon had indicated that he'd like to talk to me and to Muskie about arms control, which I found astonishing, given the fact that I assumed that Nixon hated every bone in my body, considering my service on the Watergate Committee. But I said, "Sure, I'd be glad to do that." And Muskie and I went up there and there were just four of us at dinner, Nixon, Frye, Muskie and me at his home in Saddlebrook, New Jersey, I think it is.

Anyway, we flew up there and had dinner with Nixon. It was a nice dinner, at his home, and he had a nice wine. And he took us down and showed us his wine cellar, and then gave Muskie a bottle of wine that was laid down in the year of Muskie's birth. And I thought two things, only Nixon would do that, and I wonder how much that wine costs, but it must have been very expensive. But I must say, it was a dramatic gesture on Nixon's part. Muskie seemed moved by it.

But by the way, I must say that Nixon that night once again verified his credentials as perhaps the world's leading expert on arms control with the Soviet Union. And it was absolutely astonishing to me that: one, his ego remained intact after his political humiliation; two, that he'd choose me and Muskie to talk to; and three, that he was such a master of the subject and that he used no notes. It was a continuous flow of carefully reasoned, logical presentation of a sound, what I think was a sound point of view on relationships with the Soviet Union and arms control in particular.

And to digress for a minute, let me say that when I was chief of staff and was helping prepare President Reagan for the Moscow summit, we had the usual, *he* had the usual briefings from State, CIA, Defense and all the other departments and agencies of the government, but And I told the president one day, "Look, you need an outside point of view. Let me find two or three people to come in here and brief you on that." And I did . . . three people, but one of them was Richard Nixon. I said, "Mr. President, do you mind if I brought President Nixon down here to talk to you?" And then I recited my experience with him at his home, on arms control. And Reagan, to his credit said, "Well I'd be delighted." So I called Nixon. Nixon said, "Howard, I just don't travel much, I'm not well and it's a chore." And I said, "Mr. President, we still have airplanes out of Andrews Air Force Base and if I send one up for you, will you come?" And he did.

And I had a car meet him, they met, they landed at National Airport instead of Andrews and brought him to the southwest gate of the White House which is, as you know, probably the way you go in if you want to avoid the press, and took him through the diplomatic reception entrance up to the living quarters. And Nixon proceeded once again to give a stellar performance without a note, nobody there but Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon, me, and Frank Carlucci, just the four of us. And he went on for two hours and twenty minutes with the most effective, thorough presentation on Soviet-American relationships and on arms control philosophy that I ever heard. And Reagan absorbed it, and I heard it come back then in his negotiations in Moscow, sometimes almost verbatim. But that stemmed from the dinner that Muskie and I had with Nixon at his home in New Jersey.

DN: Did you ever get a clue as to why President Nixon wanted the two of you to meet with him?

HB: Not the slightest. And I don't know to this day whether others have done that before and did it later. But I had the impression that they didn't, but I don't know why. Maybe Alton Frye suggested it, but I don't know why that either. But I just don't know. But it was a fascinating experience for me, and as I say it served me I think well later when I recommended that President Reagan hear Nixon's views. You know, it's absolutely amazing that Nixon survived that and remained intact and a fully functioning personality. It's also clear to me that notwithstanding his fatal political mistake in Watergate, which consisted mostly of just trying to contain it instead of liquidate it, that he remained an important political figure in the country.

DN: The links between different leaders over time and the repeat encounters in different settings is fascinating.

HB: It is fascinating. It's a small world. And you know, the consequences of Republican - Democrat confrontation recede quickly when you're not in the arena. And I don't know whether that's uniquely American or not, but I'm just finishing a book about John Adams by Ellis [*The Passionate Sage: The character and legacy of John Adams* by Joseph J. Ellis], you know, their hostilities went on long after they, Adams and Jefferson for instance were virtually mortal enemies politically until near the end of their lives. By the way, the greatest line of that book to me is in a letter from Adams to Jefferson when they were both very advanced in years, and Adams says, "We must live long enough to explain ourselves to each other."

DN: An attitude well worth remembering. Did you and Senator Muskie encounter each other again after you were majority leader?

HB: Well we did. I'm trying to recall how. Of course I knew him when he was secretary of state, and I was minority leader then I guess. I don't think Muskie prospered as secretary of state. I think he was much better in the congressional arena. I don't mean he was a bad secretary of state. He was a good secretary of state, but he didn't seem to have the same flare. And this is unfair to Muskie and I apologize to him and his heirs, but it seemed to me that the grandeur of that job diminished the spontaneity of the personality. He didn't seem to be quite the same Muskie that I had jostled with, and who had original ideas that fairly sparkled. And maybe that job does that to people.

I told him a story, by the way, and I've told this to every secretary of state I've ever met. You probably don't remember but Cordell Hull as secretary of state, longest serving secretary of state, he was from Tennessee, from the same mountainous area I am. He's a Nobel laureate, peace prize. And I was out one Sunday in the seventies taking pictures of country stores and I found this clapboard store with a Coca Cola sign on the side and it said, "Hull's Store". And being from the same area, I went in and I said, "Pardon me, but is the Hull on the sign related at all to Cordell Hull?" And there were three old men there sitting around and paused for a minute and finally one popped up and said, "Is he the one that went off to Washington?" Which has a leveling effect on the ego of secretaries of state.

DN: That's something that-

HB: I told Muskie that story, too.

DN: Was this before or after he became -?

HB: No, when he became secretary of state.

DN: He would appreciate that.

HB: He did, he did. There have been some secretaries of state that just look blank at me when I tell them the story. But Muskie liked it.

DN: Did you have any involvement with him or discussions with him during the Tower Commission program?

HB: No, I didn't. I may have spoken to him but I was not directly involved and don't remember any interaction. Of course, I came to the White House right after the Tower Commission Report, but no, I don't recall.

DN: And what about the Cambodia project that he was involved in after he had left State?

HB: No.

DN: No, not in that either.

HB: If I did I don't remember it.

DN: As you look back -

HB: But on the other hand, most of the things I remember never happened, as a friend of mine told me that in Tennessee the other day, and I think it's wonderful.

DN: That happens to all of us. Former Congressman Frank Coffin, and now judge, is writing his memoirs and in doing so went back and checked the records. And he and I discovered that

stories we had been telling about what went on in the fifties were not true.

HB: But it's such a shame that you check those things, you know. I've told my stories so often and so long that it would be devastating if I found out they weren't true. My wife says I embellish, and I say only to the extent necessary to carry the message. And the truth, the literal truth is sometimes a great inconvenience.

DN: Within your family you have all sorts of lines out to the history of the Republican Party in the twentieth century.

HB: I do, that's right.

DN: Had you ever known your wife's father?

HB: Well, I knew him when I was in the Senate. Do you mean did I know him before I came to the Senate?

DN: No, I mean -

HB: Oh, Governor Landon, oh yeah, no, only once. It was once again while I was at the White House with President Reagan that Reagan decided to stop in Topeka on Alf Landon's hundredth birthday. Actually I don't think it was actually on his birthday, but that was the occasion. And we stopped, and my staff prepared a couple of little points in case the conversation flagged and sure enough at some point I thought out to chime in and I said, governor, I understand you used to ride your horse daily, do you still do that? And he said, goodness, no, that horse is getting old. But Landon was, he was, as I say he was a hundred at the time. His wife was also still living and was pretty frail, but, you know, we had a visit. He's a remarkable fellow. And I guess it's remarkable also that his ego remained intact after his loss in thirty-six, but that was an interesting time.

DN: As you look back on your years associated with Senator Muskie, what strikes you most about him, his contributions, and his shortcomings?

HB: Oh, I'll let you sort out whether they were attributes or shortcomings, but the thing that appealed to me about Muskie was his, he never took himself too seriously. Sometimes his debate in our agreements and disagreements would be very serious indeed, and we could, as I said earlier, we could I mean, sort of go at each other sometimes. But the truth of the matter is it never became personalized, and that to me is in the best traditions of the Senate. He was an affable and agreeable person, but he was also a fiery personality. It's hard, it's always hard I suspect to say why two people are attracted to each other, but Muskie and I were. And at this late point I'd prefer not to try to rationalize the reasons.

DN: Thank you very much.

HB: You're welcome, I hope that's useful.

DN: Yes.

End of Interview