

ROBERT J. DOLE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with
SENATOR HOWARD BAKER, Jr.

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Interviewer
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Smith: First of all, I'd love to know the difference. You were in the House before you were in the Senate?

Baker: No, my dad [Howard Henry Baker] was. My dad was in the House; I never was.

Smith: The Senate that you came into in 1967, how did that differ from the Senate that you left and the Senate today?

Baker: You know, honestly, I've avoided answering that question for a lot of reasons. One, because I try not to second-guess those who followed me. The other is, in all fairness, you do not know the Senate unless you're there. And even though I was then out only a brief time, when you speak of, you just don't know. You could lose it in a matter of weeks or months, the real touch, the real understanding of what the Senate's like. So I avoid trying to do that. I acknowledge that it would appear from outside that things are tougher now than they were and more personal and more confrontational, but I can't say that because I'm not there.

Smith: Describe the Senate that you walked into.

Baker: Well, the Senate I walked into in 1967 was still a Senate populated in large measure by the grand earls and dukes. We not only had [Everett] [M.] Dirksen, we had [Mike] Mansfield, we had so many of the ones who had gone before and made such a mark for themselves, [J. William] Fulbright, in so many ways. I approached the manor as the youngest member of the Senate at that time and the second most junior person in the Senate. Mark [O.] Hatfield, by the way, was number 100 and I was 99, and the reason was Mark stayed back for two days to complete his term as governor. So I jumped him by one term. [laughs] To this day we refer to each other as 99 and 100. I stood in awe of these people who had been there so long, and in looking back on it, honestly, I must tell you that has a returning effect on a new senator's ability to jump into the mainstream. I think that's probably less so now, but it was certainly so then, and I was pretty reverential and respectful.

If I may, I remember when I made my maiden speech on the floor of the Senate, which all freshmen are destined to do. I went there fully prepared, excessively prepared, carefully prepared, and I was solo on the floor except one Democrat and my father-in-law, Senator Dirksen, who was Republican Leader and he was there out of curiosity, I think. But I spoke for forty minutes, and when I finished and sat down, Dirksen came over and sat down beside me in his careful and methodical and deliberate way, in that wonderful resonant voice, said, “Howard, perhaps in the future you should guard against speaking more clearly than you think.” [laughs] That was my introduction into the Senate. That was the hazing of new members of the Senate.

Smith: Of course, Bob Dole comes along just a couple of years later.

Baker: Not much later, that’s right.

Smith: Did the younger members look out for the still younger members?

Baker: Not really. [laughs] Not really.

Smith: How were they brought into the fold?

Baker: Well, number one, Dole was not outside the fold. We all knew who Dole was, and many were surprised that he was elected. I was pleased that he was elected and got acquainted with him first off. We established an early and pretty warm friendship from the beginning.

But, no, the older members—it was more like a sophomore-freshman relationship than anything else. You’ll recall that sophomores were full of themselves, having gone through the freshman year, and that’s sort of the way it was. But the Senate is essentially an homogenous group, and notwithstanding seniority or age or prestige, it isn’t very long before everybody is swimming in the same stream. Almost everybody had a different view of almost everything, but they developed an early—in my time, at least, it seems to me they developed an early understanding that we’re part of this group, we’re part of the Senate, and that’s something very special. We don’t really understand what, but we

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know it is. And that continued, I think, for—well, it continued till I left, actually. I'm not sure it's so now, but once again, I'm not there and I can't say.

Smith: But you're saying there's a real kind of institutional loyalty to the Senate as a body.

Baker: Almost. It's not loyalty as such, but it's a recognition. It's not a family relationship, but a commonality of interests and whatnot. There's very little of this protecting your younger brother.

Smith: The Republican caucus was very different.

Baker: Certainly.

Smith: In 1967, '68, '69.

Baker: It certainly was.

Smith: You had a significant number of moderate, even liberal senators.

Baker: That's right.

Smith: How did that work?

Baker: It worked very well. It never dawned on me that it would not be that way, and when I got there, I was not surprised to find that there was a significant number of liberal senators, as I recall, and an even greater number of moderates or center-of-the-road senators. I haven't done a count, but I'd say that when I went there, the two—that is, the liberal and the centrist Republican senators—were probably in the majority, but that gradually eroded and it began to go away in spades with subsequent elections. By the time I left, the moderate Republicans were almost a vanishing breed. But that's not going to stay. That's not going to be the way it is. If the two-party system survives, as I think it

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will, you're going to see a resurgence of this complex of different points of view. I think that's good.

Smith: When Dole arrived, any rough edges? One senses that he was someone who was very much a man of his place, of his culture of western Kansas, very conservative House voting record. How does that over time evolve in the Senate?

Baker: Well, you make an interesting point. When Dole arrived, he had a reputation. His reputation being very tough, very Republican, and I guess very conservative, although I don't recall that that was one of the hallmarks of his early career in the Senate. That began to wane. He began to establish friendships and relationships in the Senate, and all those things, that previous image, began to be subsumed by his newer relationships with members. He fit in. He didn't have any trouble fitting into the group. He did it very easily and very effectively.

At some point in this interview I want to tell you a true story about the Republicans gaining control of the Senate, and that was in 1980.

Smith: Right.

Baker: I was Minority Leader, about to be Majority Leader, and we were all full of enthusiasm. Late at night as the results came in, I called Bob, who was in Kansas. I don't remember where in Kansas, but he was. I said, "Bob, just think. We've got the majority. You're going to be chairman of the Finance Committee."

And Dole thought for a minute, said, "Well, who's going to tell Russell [B.] Long?" [laughs] And there were days when I thought nobody told Russell Long. But Bob moved right into the role of chairman of one of the prime committees of the Senate and did so with ease and did so effectively.

Smith: Let me ask you, because that does raise this question. I've heard him talk about the difference between when you're in the minority, you can sort of govern by press release.

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Baker: That's right.

Smith: And then all of a sudden you realize you're responsible.

Baker: That's right. You've got to govern.

Smith: And it's also, for someone like him, or anyone, I suppose, an opportunity to disprove the doubters and to prove what you're capable of doing.

Baker: It is. It's really a remarkable transformation, and the Republicans had a big problem with that in the Senate because they hadn't been in the majority since 1954 or '56. There was not a single person in the Republican caucus in the Senate who had ever been a committee chairman at that time, except for Strom Thurmond, who was a Democrat at the time. So it was a brand-new experience, a learning experience, a high level of cooperation between members, but the sudden realization that not only were we in the majority but we were responsible for the agenda, the timing, we could focus on what the country—at least the Senate—will be concerned about and, just as important, what they won't, what we're not going to do, and that's a big issue, a big deal. For a while they said, "Well, the president will do that," but clearly after a little while, a matter of weeks, it was clear that the Republican Senate, majority in the Senate, had, if not an equal role with the president, even a new president, but significant role in setting the national agenda.

I remember at the time we first gained the majority, '81, even in '82, that I think things were different. We thought of ourselves as equal partners with the White House, and we asserted those views. We would visit with the president, the leadership would, and we would invite the vice-president up to policy luncheons on Tuesday. Maybe it's just the nostalgia of retrospection, but it seems to me that there was a better understanding of the interrelationship between those two branches at that time than had existed for a long time, maybe ever. It worked very, very well. But it had a sobering effect on Republicans in the majority because they suddenly realized, "This is our game. We get to run the show and we have to decide what to do or what not to do, and we're going to be responsible for it."

Smith: What you say suggests that that kind of relationship could only have worked because you had a president who was willing to buy into that kind of relationship.

Baker: That's also true. That's right. And maybe it would not have worked with anybody except Ronald [W.] Reagan.

Smith: What was it about Reagan that made it work?

Baker: I don't know, except that he never looked down on the Congress. He never ignored the Senate. He was always willing and then seemed to be anxious to hear what they had to say. It was a remarkable relationship, and the Republican leadership—and Dole was, as chairman of the Finance Committee, involved in these things, Ted Stevens, me, Dole, one or two others, Hatfield, would meet regularly at the White House, at the president's invitation, and we'd talk frankly about the agenda. I also seem to recall that the candor between the congressional types and the White House was remarkable, and I wonder if that's still so. But it certainly was so with Reagan, and it may be that Reagan's personality made that possible or practical.

Smith: For example, clearly not everyone agreed on the original tax cut, budget cut package. I mean, Bob Dole himself was not in supply-side.

Baker: You're a kindly person for not recalling that when we went to the White House and the president outlined his plan, his budget, I unwisely went outside and was asked about it and said to the press, to the TV cameras, "Well, we hear it, we understand it, we're going to support it, but it's a riverboat gamble." And I caught all sorts of hell about that. But the truth of the matter is, it *was* a riverboat gamble, and the truth of the matter is, it worked. It's near the top of the list of things I should never have said.

Smith: I have a hunch Dole agreed with you.

Baker: Oh, I know he agreed with me. As a matter of fact we talked about it, not before but afterwards, and we certainly did agree. I guess, in all fairness, I have to say that a good part of my evaluation of that message was based on what Dole and I had talked about. But he was an important and influential person not only in the Senate, but to me, because he—there's one other thing you should know, and I don't know whether it still happens or not. I had a meeting we called the Committee of Chairmen in the Leader's office, over which I presided, all the chairmen of the standing committees came. Then we invited one freshman at each meeting who hopefully just sat there. But anyway, that was an extraordinarily important thing to me because it was an opportunity for chairmen to say what they had on their plate, what they wanted to do, and to bid, in effect, for time on the Senate schedule. But that's where I got insights into what was going on and what might go on, and that's where I first came to have such a high regard for Bob Dole's ability as chairman of that committee. His analysis was good, but maybe even just as important, his presentation was lucid and prompt and it worked out well.

Smith: What qualities made Dole a successful chairman of Finance?

Baker: Well, I don't know. I was not a member of Finance except as an ex-officio member. But it's undeniably so that personality has a lot to do with success or failure of a senator and certainly of a committee chairman, and Dole, from the very beginning, was a highly successful chairman, not only in administering the staff and providing for the housekeeping details of the committee, and also in terms of deciding on the agenda of the Finance Committee, but the people respected his point of view. Not everyone agreed with his point of view, but they respected it, and I continue to.

Smith: The '81 tax cuts and budget cuts were—I mean, not that they were easy, but relatively easy, I imagine easier to pass than the subsequent non-tax-increase tax increases.

Baker: That's right.

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Smith: I mean, TEFRA [Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982], especially in 1982, where you basically try to take the ornaments off the Christmas tree. [Baker laughs.] How did that happen, and how did the White House feel about taking a step back?

Baker: Well, you know, by that time a little of the luster had gone out of the new Republican leadership of the majority of the Senate, and they were flexing their muscles here and there, and the White House was a little less reluctant to join issue with them. A long way of saying that the potential for controversy between the White House and the Senate was greater, and the willingness to disagree with the president or with the administration was a little greater. But even so, it was not a hostile relationship, and the fact that they would talk—the White House and their representatives and the Senate and our representatives would discuss these matters even with great enthusiasm sometimes, helped reduce the prospects of great controversy within the House and Senate.

Smith: Let me ask you, because one of the things we're trying to get at on one level is what is it that Dole did behind the scenes that made him Dole. I've never really seen it spelled out. But beyond that is this whole question of institutional--what are the tools at the disposal of a Majority Leader to get the desired result?

Baker: Richard, the Majority Leader is not a statutory position. It is certainly not a constitutional position. It is a device created by the Senate itself to bring orderliness and dispatch to the operations of that body. It had to be, and I'm told that early on, before the Majority Leader was so designated, that the chairman of the Finance Committee or the chairman of the Appropriations Committee did that. But in any event, by now the Majority Leader, whether Republican or Democrat, has taken on special and unique opportunities and responsibilities. But the power of the Majority Leader resides in only two things really. One is the tradition, the precedent that in case more than one senator seeking recognition on the floor, the chair is obligated to first recognize the Leader. It doesn't sound like much, but, my friend, it is a lot, because it means that you get a chance to speak first. It means you have a chance, if everything else fails, to adjourn or to have a quorum call and try to reason with these people. But that's a powerful thing.

The other is purely by example. I guess it goes back to the human condition that everybody has to have a leader someplace, and even though it is not statutory or constitutional, that role falls to the Majority Leader, and to a degree the Minority Leader. I was Minority Leader the same length of time I was Majority Leader, but as Minority Leader there was a special opportunity to go over across the aisle to Mike Mansfield or, later, to Bob [Robert C.] Byrd, say, “Boys, look. I know what you’re doing and I understand it. I’m even sympathetic. But that’s not going to work.” And as long as you had enough to stop it, meaning at least thirty-nine votes, or forty-four votes, that you could stop it. So both leaders have an important role.

Let me say this self-serving statement, but recognizing the importance of both leaders, majority and minority, when I was first elected Majority Leader and first went on the floor that day, the first thing I did was go over to Bob Byrd, and I said, “Bob, I will never know the rules and precedent of the Senate the way you do, but I’ll make you a deal. I will never surprise you if you won’t surprise me.”

He said, “Let me think about it.” [laughs] He came back later that afternoon, said, “Okay,” and we never did. And I think that tradition has carried on. I think Dole adopted that point of view as well, and it’s a good, sound position, even if I did first advocate it, because the system itself and the rules of the Senate are such that there’s plenty room for disagreement, plenty room for controversy, and to do so within the framework of the organization without sneaking up on your adversary.

Smith: It’s interesting, because clearly, I think, Dole learned some things from watching how you operated, but I wondered, did you learn some things from watching your father-in-law?

Baker: I’m sure I did. He was a great man, he really, really was, and I’m sure I did, but I’d be hard put to—the one thing I would say about Dirksen, other than I have a great admiration for him, that relationship, though, between father-in-law and son-in-law was potentially very delicate, and I believe—I don’t know; I haven’t really run the records—I believe I may be the only person, was the only person in the Senate that Dirksen never asked to vote one way or the other, and I think that was in recognition of the sensitivity of that relationship. But we discussed freely, and I sought his advice, which he gave freely,

but he never tried to convince me. I don't think it was rebellion on my part, but it was an assertion of independence, anyway, and it worked very well.

Smith: How does this contrast with the legend of Lyndon [B.] Johnson in the fifties, the kind of larger than life, arm twister—

Baker: Well, that's true. All those things about Johnson were true, I'm sure, but it's interesting to me that Dirksen and Johnson were not only one Majority, one Minority Leader, but they were very close friends. I think that facilitated the operation of the Congress, of the Senate, the fact that they would talk freely and I'm sure agree and disagree freely.

But what did I learn from Dirksen? I will choose one thing to tell you. I remember I was grumpy about some item of foreign policy. I've forgotten what it was. I also remember I was traveling with—who was it? Abe Ribicoff. Senator Ribicoff, a Democrat, a very senior Democrat from Connecticut, we were traveling in the Middle East and we were in [unclear] in Egypt. We approached the plane, the press was out there, and I made some smart remark about some item of administration policy, and we got on the plane. Ribicoff very quietly said, "Howard, I have discovered over the years that if I save my criticism of the administration until I get home, that both I and the country are better off." I've always remembered that and I've always followed that.

But Dirksen, in the same vein, and I, Dirksen came to me one day and says, "The president's arriving at Andrews [Air Force Base] and I would like you to go with me to greet him."

I said, "Really, Senator? I don't want to do that."

He said, "Well, you should." And I did. He said, "Notwithstanding our difficulties, the president is the embodiment of our national sovereignty, he's returning from overseas, and we should be there to express our support, not of his issues, necessarily, or his positions, but of his role as president," or as Dirksen would say, "as chief magistrate." I loved that expression.

Smith: Let me ask you something. I realize this is speculative, but the whole relationship between Dole and Richard [M.] Nixon, which is clearly pivotal and which mystifies a lot

of people, given, frankly, the way Dole was treated after '72, and I've often wondered if there wasn't an element in their background that was common, that Dole looked at Nixon and saw this scrappy kid who in some ways wasn't a natural, but who through sheer work and effort forced himself, framed himself to be what he wasn't, obviously economically overcame great odds, whether there was some kind of identification, cultural identification, that he had with Nixon.

Baker: I'm sure he did. I never discussed that with Dole, but as you bring it up, I agree with every word you just said. And, you know, honestly, Dole and Nixon had that and other things in common. They are both—and were, in Nixon's case—great patriots.

I must tell you that I guess I'm thought of as being instrumental in the downfall of Nixon because of my role on the Senate Watergate Committee, but the truth of the matter is, I continue to have an admiration for Nixon as president. In so many ways he was a great center-of-the-road, even moderate president, but he made one fatal error, and this my private theory, that he didn't know a thing about that break-in before it occurred, but he found out about it within hours after it occurred. He was in California; he was called. His fatal error was that when he came back, instead of liquidating that problem by lining up those folks and firing them on live television, he decided to contain it. And in that case, and I think in most cases, proves to be fatal. I don't know if Nixon ever thought those thoughts or not, but I bet he did. And it was a great loss. It really was. A great trauma to the country, we lost a great talent in Nixon, but it was the right result, because he made a fatal political mistake.

Smith: As this unfolded, did you and your colleagues have a sense of astonishment that these revelations kept coming?

Baker: Daily. And Dole and I talked about that. Dole was thought of as closer to Nixon than I ever was. I can remember Cloakroom conversations between us about that, and the amazement of the things that came out.

Smith: You were both amazed?

Baker: Yes, we were both amazed. I'm sure he was. He said he was, and I believe him. I know I was. But they just tolled out one after the other and never ended. Oh. It was a terrible time.

Smith: The tapes. Were you astonished when you heard that there was a taping system?

Baker: You know, honestly, I wasn't. I think every president before him had had some sort of taping system. [John F.] Kennedy did. Johnson did. Franklin [D.] Roosevelt did. No, I wasn't outraged at that. No, no, I wasn't. But it proved to be the ultimate downfall of Richard Nixon.

I was interested to see now that Ronald Reagan's diaries are being released, have been released. But I am astonished that Ronald Reagan kept that diary daily, and I saw those diaries. He never let me read them except in one case, but those diaries were written in longhand in leather-bound books. They weren't loose-leaf books; they were leather-bound books, and there are rows and rows and dozens of them. Some day they'll all be published, and it must be the most important and thorough contemporaneous record of a presidency that's ever existed.

Smith: Among other things, it does give the lie to the notion that Reagan was either lazy or undisciplined, because he clearly was the opposite of both.

Baker: He was the most disciplined person I ever knew. He really was. He would show up every morning at nine o'clock on the button in the Oval Office. When I was chief of staff, I used to meet with him at nine o'clock, and we would have a meeting that lasted no more than thirty minutes. By the way, he would start each meeting with a funny little story. It was a meeting or two before I realized that when he finished, he expected me to have a funny little story. But that was his stock and trade, and I treasured that. And Dole also had that same—has that same talent, you know. He can put things in perspective with humor more effectively than most philosophers can do it with a serious dissertation, and I admire that.

Smith: Do you think that's a real weapon in making the Senate work?

Baker: A tool, not a weapon. A tool. But it's valuable. It's extraordinarily valuable. And sometimes Dole may be criticized for a rapier-like wit. I don't think of it as a rapier-like wit. Maybe it was. I think of it as a quick mind that was able to put things in perspective, and not everybody appreciated it, but you think back on it, most of the, quote, rapier thrusts were right on the mark. He still has that sense of humor.

Smith: It sounds like a cliché, but I think it's true of Dole more than most people, he really never forgot where he came from. At heart he's still Russell, Kansas.

Baker: That's right.

Smith: And there's an element of the populist in Dole. I mean, there's a real disdain for pomposity and stuffed shirts. That's bipartisan. And the notion of the Gucci, the loafers, the lobbyists. The relationship with Reagan, it would be fascinating to know, because, of course, you were thinking about running in '88 yourself.

Baker: That's right.

Smith: And obviously put those plans on the shelf to become chief of staff. Then you had this very unusual situation where the vice president is clearly running, and your Senate leader is running. How did the president handle that somewhat awkward [unclear]?

Baker: My recollection, Richard, is that he didn't handle it at all. He just let the chips fall where they would. He showed no preference, he showed no priority between them. I admire that. It was a delicate situation, an unusual one, but I don't think he ever did anything about it. He certainly never talked to me about it.

Smith: But your sense is that he had a very good relationship with Dole?

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Baker: Oh yes, had a great relationship with Dole, but I do remember the first time that Dole came to a leadership meeting, and before it started I went down a little early, which he invited me to do. He asked about Dole. He did. I don't remember what I said, except it was favorable. But he was curious about Dole. As I recall, he's the only one he asked about.

Smith: Really. It's doubly interesting, because, of course, the story in '76 was that one of the reasons Dole wound up being on the ticket was the people around [Gerald R.] Ford, at least, had been led to believe that he had Reagan's imprimatur.

Baker: Yes.

Smith: Whether that was, in fact, true or not, but—

Baker: I have an old friend in Tennessee who has a philosophical statement that I've come to admire. He called me the other day and said, "Howard, we've reached the age where most of the things we remember never happened." [laughs] It is more often true than not.

Smith: It's been said—I've heard it said that in some ways it's more fun to be Minority Leader than Majority Leader.

Baker: Yeah, don't you believe it. [laughs] I've been both, and majority is better. Minority Leader is interesting, it's challenging. It may have fit Dole's personality better than Majority Leader.

Smith: How so?

Baker: Well, it is, because he was able to crystallize an issue and formulate a position that would go right to the heart of the issue. As Majority Leader he had to take account of a whole lot of different opinions by different people and try to synthesize a point of view.

But I must tell you, Majority Leader is the second best job in Washington. I said that to Ronald Reagan once. He said, “No, Howard, it isn’t the second best job in Washington.”

I said, “Mr. President, I’m sure that’s so in terms of the historical standing, but look around. I’ve got a nice office, I’ve got a big staff, I’ve got a car, I’ve got access to an airplane, and I don’t have Secret Service, and I still have a life of my own.”

And he thought for a minute, says, “Well, maybe so.” [laughs]

Smith: I want to get back into the first Reagan term, which was a revolutionary period in this country. I mean, almost a U-turn in a lot of ways, in policy, in the whole relationship of government to the economy and the individual. Dole was a good soldier and apparently a very effective soldier, but he couldn’t have agreed with everything that he was being asked to implement, did he? I mean, balanced budgets are almost a spiritual thing. [laughs] And I assume that’s the result of where he came from or what he lived through.

Baker: Right, right, right. That’s right. I’m sure that’s true, but the first thing you said, that Dole was a good soldier, is the most important part of the conversation, because he was. I cannot tell you [unclear] that’s where he acted against his own native instincts, but I’m sure there were. I can tell you that when I was Leader I never went to Bob Dole to ask him to do something that I felt that he didn’t want to do and he didn’t respond in the affirmative. He had a heavy understanding of the importance of his role as a senator and a clear understanding of the relationship between the Senate and the president. He did not confuse the two. He knew of the separation of powers and the special responsibilities that each had. It’s as if he had studied at length—and perhaps he had—how these relationships had existed in the past, imperfect as they were, and that he was determined to create a new relationship that would best serve the country, and I think he did that in large measure. He served as a model for all of us. I know he served as a model to me.

Smith: How so?

Baker: In establishing a willingness to talk to the White House, but without feeling that you were in a subordinate role. Dole was never in a subordinate role. Dole was Dole, and nobody doubted that.

Smith: But the implication is that a Dole who's operating in '81, '82, '83 is different from the freshman senator of '68, '69, '70.

Baker: He was different, absolutely different. But that difference is something that happens to all, I think, conscientious members of the Senate. You're different after a month or a year or your first term as you begin to understand the relationships and responsibilities, and when you're no longer overwhelmed by your own importance.

I remember Norris Cotton, senator from New Hampshire, may have been my first day of the Senate, but I did go into the Senate chamber and he was there to greet me, as were others, and he said, "Howard, can you smell the marble?" [Smith laughs.]

I said, "Senator, I don't think so. I don't believe marble has a smell."

"Oh yes, it does, and once you smell it, you'll be ruined for life." [Smith laughs.]

And I thought about that a lot. I don't think I ever smelled marble, and certainly Bob Dole never smelled marble.

Smith: Conservatives don't like to hear the word "grow." [laughs] "He grew in office," that means he moved left. Can you explain what real growth is and why it does tend to—

Baker: No, I can't.

Smith: --terrify the Right?

Baker: I cannot. It varies from time to time. It's that old saying, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. But I don't think you necessarily grow to the right. In my own case—forgive me for bringing up my own experience, but in my own case I think I grew to the left, not by design, but by force of circumstance. You know, the Panama Canal was a good example in my life career. I started out in the mainstream of Republican opposition to the Panama Canal Treaty. The more I thought about it, the more I was advised on it,

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studied it, the more I was convinced I was wrong and that I should support it, and I did. And for those who care to see, I'll show all the scars and bruises about my head and shoulders. But there's some who say, they're some in Tennessee who still think I'm a Bolshevik. [laughs] They think I grew to—

Smith: That's what I mean. Growth is always assumed to be kind of a co-opting by the left.

Baker: That's right.

Smith: And Dole was certainly regarded as a Bolshevik by some in the Party. Of course, what does that say about where the Party has gone in the last twenty-five years?

Baker: Yes. Well, I don't know, but I think the Party is permanent. I think it is not about to collapse. I think its center of gravity will shift and change. I think it's an essential part of our governing mechanism, and I think it must endure.

Smith: For example, you both came into this position. Dole strikes me, like Gerald Ford, as a kind of Midwest conservative. His conservatism in many ways is grounded in economics.

Baker: Right.

Smith: And who had a kind of healthy skepticism about what government could do, particularly overnight, to bring about the millennium, and at the same time, a kind of healthy "leave me alone," not a Libertarian, but basically government should probably stay out of the classroom, out of the boardroom, out of the bedroom.

Baker: That's right.

Smith: That's not for the public discourse. And yet clearly in your political career that line has been crossed and conservatism was redefined. How uncomfortable, if at all, was that process of having the social issues increasingly come to define conservatism?

Baker: It's certainly important to me, and I'm sure it is to Bob Dole. But the Party has moved. The country has moved. You know, we owe a responsibility to understand that and to respond to it, not necessarily to agree to it, but to understand it. You mentioned how it has moved. My dad was in the House for many years and he was adamantly opposed to any sort of federal aid to education, either directly or by implication. Now it's an article of faith that if you're in the House or Senate, you'd better get our share, and it's a big share. So it's changed. But change, once again, is one of the hallmarks of a vibrant economy and a vibrant democracy, and it will continue to change. I don't know how it's going to change. It may go forward or backward or sideways, but change is not a bad word, in my view at least, and it's inevitable, in my view at least.

But in terms of parties themselves, I hear especially young people say, "Well, the Republicans are conservative. The Democrats are liberal." Truth of the matter is, they are neither, in my view. Their center of gravity will vary from time to time numerically, if nothing else; there will be more liberals or conservatives or moderates in one party or the other, and those things will change. But the great center still runs America. I don't think it's a mathematical center. I think Bob Dole understood this more than most anybody. It's not a mathematical center, but rather it's a consensus view that certain things are at the center of our political system, and that's what should drive our determination of other more complex issues.

Smith: There's a thing that I remember Dole telling me about. I think it involved you and Jesse Helms. It was a vote. I mean literally Jesse's was the vote, and I don't know whether it was TEFRA, but it was one of those post-'81 tax—

Baker: I'll tell you that Jesse Helms story if you want to hear that. It may be the one that he's talking about.

Smith: Sure.

Baker: It may be the one that he's talking about. I remember I guess in February of '81, the first serious challenge I had as the new Majority Leader in the United States since Bill [William F.] Knowland, the first Republican Leader since Bill Knowland of California, that the first challenge I had was when we had to vote on a debt-limit increase. I assumed that that would all go okay, but then as I began to count heads, Howard Greene came to me and said, "I don't believe you're going to win this." I got a bunch of the freshmen senators together in my office around the conference table, and we talked, carried on, and it was clear that I hadn't convinced anybody. We were going to lose that thing. The bells rang for a vote, and we all left my office and went up to the floor to vote, and as I went out, I saw Jesse Helms and I said, "Jesse, I got a big problem. I don't think I'm going to get these new freshmen senators to vote for this debt-limit increase."

And after we voted, he said, "Howard, can I talk to 'em?"

I said, "Well, of course you can talk to them."

So he came back in, Jesse did, Jesse Helms, and they were all gathered there, and he said, "Gentlemen, I understand you're not going to vote for this debt-limit increase." And he said, "Well, I understand that and I understand many of you ran against it. I want you to know I never voted for a debt-limit increase, but I never before had Ronald Reagan as my president, and I'm going to do it and so are you." And I got all of them but one. [laughs] But that was repeated with Strom Thurmond, who did the same thing. You know, the old heads—your earlier question, what effect did senior service have on the new members, in that case the ones with experience had a profound effect on the outcome of that vote, and without success of that vote, I don't know what our leadership would have been like.

Smith: I remember asking George [J.] Mitchell if he could describe what it is, whatever quality or qualities Dole had, that made him succeed in the leadership position, and he said it was a combination of things, but almost a sixth sense about what combination of personalities and legislative change, I mean what mix would work. It's not something you can quantify, it's not something you can learn in a textbook.

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Baker: Not only that, it's not really an intellectual exercise, it's more an empathetic personality arrangement. You sort of sense these things rather than hear them or understand them. You sort of guess, but if you guess right, you usually win.

Smith: It's a psychological gift.

Baker: Right, and it's not based on a whip check necessarily; it's based on how you evaluate this person's basic views and beliefs and his prejudice and the opposition. But that's the quality of leadership, and I think Dole had it in spades.

Smith: That suggests that you get to know all of your colleagues inside out.

Baker: You've got to know them, but it's more than that. It's hard for me to tell you what I think about, because I don't think it's just knowing. In some strange way you've got to understand. You've got to be able to anticipate what they're going to say on a particular issue. Maybe that's too ethereal for this circumstance, but that's what I think.

Smith: [laughs] And that's not something you can teach in a classroom.

Baker: No, it's not something you can emulate. Either you've got it and do it or you don't.

Smith: Do you sense that he was impatient?

Baker: Dole?

Smith: Dole.

Baker: Oh yeah. [laughs] He was impatient, he was ambitious, and he was sometimes criticized for being overambitious, but I never thought that.

Smith: Dan Rostenkowski told me a story about how before the government shutdown—

Baker: The first government shutdown.

Smith: Yes. Bill Clinton called him and he said, “Tell me something about Dole. Give me a leg up when we negotiate.” And he went on about what a great guy Dole was, so forth and so on, and he said, “But I’ll tell you, he’s the most impatient man on the planet.” And he says, “There’ll come a time when he’ll be so desperate to get out of that room he’ll just give you whatever you want and walk away.” [Baker laughs.] Now, that may be an exaggeration, and yet, you know, that’s the fascinating thing, because that impatience that I saw, and yet what you’re talking about and what Senator Mitchell talked about requires an extraordinary amount of patience not only to know people, but to wait all night if that’s what it takes to bring these things together.

Baker: Well, impatience is a tool in Dole’s arsenal, I think. I think it was in mine. But Dole was not arbitrary or capricious in his opposition. Had I been talking to Clinton about that, I would not; I would have said, “Look. He’s grounded in deep conviction on a variety of issues, and it’s going to take a lot to dislodge him from his point of view, but he’s a man who will listen.” That’s what I would have said. But he was a tough adversary.

Smith: Yes.

Baker: I was surprised, by the way, that he was elected as my successor.

Smith: Tell me about that process. How early did you decide you weren’t going to run?

Baker: When did I decide?

Smith: Right.

Baker: I decided two years, I guess. A year and a half before I—

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Smith: And what led you to—

Baker: Why?

Smith: Yes.

Baker: Well, I guess I always thought that being in the Congress was not a lifetime job, but really the most immediate thing was my wife then had terminal cancer and I had to take care of her, so I left. I had no regrets about that, and I'll always be grateful for the eighteen years I served in the Senate, but I had no difficulty in leaving.

But the question of my successor came to be very interesting. I thought, and I think most people thought, that Ted Stevens, who was my deputy, who was Whip, would succeed. Some thought, no, it'll be Pete [Pete V.] Domenici, and others thought this, that, or the other. I don't think most anybody felt Bob Dole was going to be elected Majority Leader.

Smith: May I ask why?

Baker: No, I don't know why, but that's what I think. [Smith laughs.] I also remember—you know, I didn't vote. I wasn't going to be back. But I was there in my role as sitting Majority Leader. I remember John [G.] Tower was chairman of the Policy Committee, and thus responsible for the election, and I remember when they announced the vote by only, I think, one vote or two votes that he was elected, John Tower leaned over to Howard Greene and says, "Burn the ballots." So nobody would ask for a recount. [Smith laughs.] But Dole was a fortunate choice, and I congratulated him then, I congratulate him now. He served with distinction.

Smith: A couple of quick things. Is the chief job of a Majority Leader persuasion?

Baker: It's a combination of things. Certainly persuasion is part of it, but not the only part of it. It's too complex to define in a short time, but it's not just persuasion.

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Smith: Part traffic cop.

Baker: Well, you are, and that has great power. When somebody wants, especially the younger members want to get on the agenda or want to get a particular point across, the Majority Leader has almost unchallenged authority to deal with that. I cannot remember a single time when I was Majority Leader that I set a schedule and anybody successfully challenged it. That's a powerful thing. That may be persuasion, it may be intimidation, but it's powerful and it's more than just persuasion. But I'd say, yes, Majority Leader is ill defined, it's not constitutional, it's not statutory, but it's the second best job in Washington.

Smith: When Dole was running for president, '88 or even more, later, in '96, and decided, I think wrenchingly, to leave the Senate, my hunch, it was harder for him to go than it was for you.

Baker: I think so, probably, yes.

Smith: He asked for advice?

Baker: Did he ask me for advice?

Smith: Yes.

Baker: No. Nor would I have volunteered advice. Everybody has to make that decision. That's a very personal decision. Nobody advised me and I would not have advised Dole had he asked.

Smith: One last question. How do you think—big question, but, you know, say ten, twenty years from now, a generation for whom Bob Dole is a name in a history book, how do you think Dole should be remembered?

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Baker: That's a very good question, Richard, and I've given a little thought to that, not because I want to write the history book, but just because it's a natural thing to think about. I think Dole will be remembered first as emblematic of World War II, and that he shed credit on those who survived the War and those who then went on to be of service in the country. That's no small achievement and it's something to be remembered for. As I drive by the new World War II Memorial, I thought about that the other day. He'll be remembered not just for these stones and pillars, which were richly deserved, but he'll be remembered as a legatee of that tradition. That's what he'll be remembered for, and that the generation that fought World War II came back and continued their service to the country in a variety of ways, including in the Senate, and Bob Dole is a good example of that.

Smith: Not a bad way to be remembered.

[End of interview. Recording continues briefly on other topics.]

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