

ROBERT J. DOLE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with
SENATOR TRENT LOTT

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Smith: What are the most important ways in which this town and this institution have changed since you first came here?

Lott: Well, I'm not sure it's all good. I think that the generation and the era of Bob Dole and his colleagues both in the House and the Senate was a better time. I'm not a naysayer or pessimist about the future. I'm always hopeful. But I do think that modern technology and 24/7 news and instant communication and airline travel, and now members go home almost every weekend, many of them leave their families back home, it has contributed to a less congenial, less cooperative, less friendly atmosphere. Everything's partisan and "gotcha." That has infected the institution some. The Senate, you know, was designed not to move cleanly and smoothly and quickly. You add that on top, it makes doing things very difficult. But in spite of it, every now and then the American people, including their representatives in Congress, rise to the occasion and do something, as Senator [John] McCain would say, greater than themselves.

Smith: This is a project obviously about Bob Dole but more than Bob Dole. Dole's career in a lot of ways is almost a microcosm for the transformation of the Senate, the Republican Party conservatism, and you, in reading your book [*Herding Cats: A Life in Politics*], you in many ways do represent kind of a shift generationally, geographically, to some degree culturally, ideologically, where the Republican Party has moved over the last thirty years. Did that make for tension?

Lott: Well, perhaps so. I started this saying years ago, way back in the seventies, to my Republican colleagues in New England and the Midwest, "Just hold the line. We're going to build a majority from the South. We're going to begin to pick up House and Senate seats in the South on a regular basis, and that will move us into majority," coupled with what we already had and which grew some even in the West. And that's exactly what happened. So I do think that the base of the party has shifted more Southern and Western. I do think it is probably more conservative than it was in the fifties and sixties, but I have found also over the years that I'm still conservative and still where I was, but a lot of people in America and in my own party have moved beyond me. So times have changed.

But Bob Dole, I think, is a classic representative of a magnificent period of history in America. He's the epitome of the greatest generation. I mean, his age and his high school athleticism, sort of the belt buckle of America out there in Kansas, his service in the military, his injury, the painful recovery he went through, how I think that contributed to his determination and his work ethic to try to do things for his people and for his country, and it led him to become, I think, a magnificent member of the legislature, starting off in the Senate, jocularly known as "the sheriff." He would patrol the back bench, and if somebody unfairly attacked then-President [Richard M.] Nixon, he would jump into the breach and begin a defense.

That led him on to powerful positions in the Senate—chairman of the Finance Committee and Majority Leader, and he was unique in that role too. In a way he sort of created that modern role, but I do think that role now has changed even more. But, you know, I think America owes a debt of gratitude to that generation, our fathers and grandfathers now, and our uncles who served in World War II, a lot of them, and did so much to build and change and improve this country. The question is—and I've always asked this question—are we going to accept the baton from that generation and carry it forward? We are in a way, but not in many ways that we should.

Smith: He clearly evolved. Conservatives hate the word "grow," because they always equate it with moving left.

Lott: That's right.

Smith: He grew in office.

Lott: Yeah, yeah. I've been accused of that myself. See, when you get in a leadership position like Bob did and like I did, you still have your same philosophy, you still have your ideology, but you also have to come to terms with the fact that you're not a dictator. You are the leader and you're charged with the responsibility not only of leading your party in one body of the Congress, but in finding a way to get things done, which means you have to work with moderates and liberals and Democrats and everybody, and conservatives, certainly, to shape a consensus or a way to get to an agreement that is good

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for the country. Bob was good at doing that. If you're going to be a successful leader, you have to learn to do it, and the minute you do, your friends that share your philosophy or from your region will then say, "What happened?" and they'll start attacking you.

Smith: Is "pragmatism" a dirty word in some quarters?

Lott: In some areas. I'm not a total pragmatist. I am—and Bob, too, I think—there is a grain of populism in me, but I also think it's a genetic part of my body to want to get things done. Why would you want to come to Washington, D.C., for heaven sake, and live and serve in the Senate if you're not going to get anything done, when you could be living back home, better life, making more money, more time with your family? You have to really want to be here and want to get something done. If you're in the Senate as a job or just to survive, man, I feel sorry for you.

Smith: That's fascinating, because as the conservative movement has evolved and grown in many ways, there is this libertarian streak [unclear].

Lott: Oh sure, yeah, yeah.

Smith: And I'm wondering about the conflict. There are a lot of Republicans who basically believe that government is the problem, so how do you become the party of government if at the same time you really harbor those profound suspicions about [unclear]?

Lott: Well, it is a conundrum in a way. But I'm not a libertarian. I do think there is a role for the government, and if it's not what it should be, then we ought to do something about it. I do think government is not effective, not efficient, bureaucracy is not good, it's hard to make them function properly, and I think government tries to do way too much. I mean, I still adhere to that same basic philosophy. I still believe that the best government is the least government closest to the people. I still believe that private enterprise will always do a better job than FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management

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Administration. I think agriculture policy that's run out of Washington, D.C., probably doesn't relate a lot of times to the Kansas wheat grower or the Mississippi cotton planter.

So, yes, I have that strain in me, but I also have been reading a book recently I find quite interesting, maybe because of my background, but because of what it says. The title of it is *How the Scots Invented the Modern World* [:*The True Story of How Western Europe's Poorest Nation Created Our World and Everything in It*, by Arthur Herman]. If you go back and study the history of Scots and what they did for the world, one of the things they did, David Hume and others, talked about human nature, passions. You're inclined to have your passions override your good judgment, the bad is a very powerful force, and one of the ways you control that is you begin to have a rule of law. You have a government that says, "No, wait a minute. You can't rape somebody. You can't steal somebody's property. You can't just shoot somebody if you get angry at them." You've got to have some entity that brings order to man and to society.

Now, the problem is when that government wants to become too powerful and starts trying to dictate and take and give too many things. So there's a delicate balance there. But that is the uniqueness of our American form of government. I think about it a lot, that we don't take an oath to the people. We don't take an oath to some particular leader. We take an oath to the Constitution. We take an oath to support and defend a set of principles and ideals unique in the history of mankind, and we should be careful how we do that.

Smith: Both you and the Senator served, of course, apprenticeships, in a sense, in the House—

Lott: Right.

Smith: —before you came to the Senate. What's the difference between the two, and why do so many members of the former want to join the latter?

Lott: I don't think they're associated in any way. Probably are from two different worlds. There's no comparison between the House and the Senate. They're just totally different animals. Now, our forefathers once again exhibited their brilliance, I think, with

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how they set it up and the compromise that led to each state having two senators regardless of population, and the House with the representatives reflecting the population. But the House is just so different. First of all, It's like an ant hill, crawling all over the hill. They're younger, generally more energetic and sometimes more passionate, a lot quicker to fire off on a subject or react to what the people are saying to them. I like the House because I like its youth and vigor, but I also like order. I like the Rules Committee. If you're in the minority, you hate them, but if you're trying to get something done, you've got to have, in that size of a body, you've got to have some control of when things come up and how they're amended and how long you debate them.

The Senate is just the flip side of that—messy, disorganized, rules were made to be broken. Anybody can offer any amendment on any subject any time. It's total chaos, and it is the cooling-off place. It was designed to be, and has become, almost impossible a place to produce a positive result, so the saucer which cools off the cup, the hot cup of coffee, I think has become a wash pan. It's huge. But they are very different. Obviously you can do more if you're in the Senate. You are representing a whole state and in some ways represent the country more than a congressman. Not to diminish the Congress.

Smith: Does that tend to make you more pragmatic as opposed to representing a particular district [unclear]?

Lott: I don't know if I'd want to call it pragmatic, but more realistic. One of the things that I learned, slowly at first and then very quickly, was how much more time you spend on foreign and defense and intelligence and international issues, because of what's in the Constitution. We're the ones that approve treaties. We're the ones that confirm the appointees, and we really do pay particular attention to military appointees, Defense, Secretary of State, and things of that nature, so we are, in effect, forced to spend more time looking at the international ramifications of what we do.

When I became Leader, when I succeeded Bob Dole, even though I had come up through the chairs, had been in two leadership positions in the House, had been in two leadership positions in the Senate before I became his successor as Majority Leader, when I got in that Leader's office, I was stunned by how much more time I had to spend

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on getting intelligence briefings and dealing with international issues and trade issues and every country's leader that would come to town. Who do they want to see? They want to see the president, the Secretary of State, the Speaker, and the Leader of the Senate. At first I said, "I really don't want to do that," you know. But then a couple of times it was very clear that I was causing some international disruptions here. These people felt snubbed that the Majority Leader of the Senate would not meet with them. So you host these meetings and then you begin to get a feel for what's happening in Eastern Europe or in South America or in Asia, and you look at the Andean area, and you didn't even know there was such a thing. So that clearly forces you, I think, to come to terms with the impact of what we do here, not only how it affects our constituents back home, but how it affects the world and our relationship with it. So it is a very different place.

I personally still prefer the House, even though I've been in the Senate a little longer now than I was in the House. I was in the House sixteen years. Sometimes I just get very embarrassed that the Senate slides off into endless futile debate.

Smith: Was that frustrating for Dole?

Lott: Oh, I'm sure it was, but I think he understood it maybe a little better and adjusted to it quite well, but I do think even then it was better than it is now, as tough as it was, by the way, during the Nixon era and all that went on there, and in being Leader in the late eighties and nineties, I do think that was kind of the best era for Republicans, in the eighties with [Ronald] Reagan and the nineties with the majority, and Bob sort of rolled the tide, or maybe he pushed the tide to that point, to the crest, when he became Majority Leader and then ran for president and was our nominee.

Smith: So few people understand how this place works, and I've known Senator Dole for almost thirty years and worked with he and Mrs. [Elizabeth] Dole on their autobiography and still couldn't tell you in a paragraph what exactly he did sort of behind the scenes to make the place work, to make a bill come together, to form a coalition, to diffuse a—I mean, what were his strengths?

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Lott: Well, I think he understood the Senate as an institution probably as well as anybody I've known, and some people say Bob [Robert C.] Byrd is the one that wrote the book on the Senate, but Bob Dole, I think since he was prepared so thoroughly before he became Leader and he learned so much as chairman of the Finance Committee, see, that's where you learn to deal with a Russell Long, who was chairman of Finance when Bob was like, I guess, number two, on the Republican side, and then one day there was an election and Russell was in a minority and Bob Dole was the chairman. So he learned how to work with a guy like Russell Long. Now, there are not many Democrats left like Russell Long now, but he learned the art of the compromise and the beauty of the deal when you do something that is good for the people in terms of tax policy or trade policy or, in the case of Bob, things he felt passionate about, like the Americans with Disabilities Act. So sometimes Bob's background in the defense area or his personal injuries transcended any partisan politics that might have existed.

Smith: Do you think there's a bit of a populist in him too?

Lott: Oh yes, sure. Yes. I think he was just the epitome of a Kansas senator and the people from Kansas. He was it. He defined it. He reflected it. I think that's a great credit for him.

Smith: How difficult was it for him, do you think—I mean, clearly you were part of the, for lack of a better word, kind of firebrands coming out of the House, I mean Newt Gingrich personified all of that. There was a different sort of approach to all of this, and of course it came to a head in some ways. The government shut down during the [William J.] Clinton presidency. How did he handle that?

Lott: He didn't like it, you know. He had some things to say about the—I can't remember what name he called the group. Maybe it would have included me. So he had trouble with these young Turks, the blow-dry-haired guys coming out of the House, you know, even though he worked with Kemp, Jack Kemp, who was one of us, and there was Newt Gingrich and Carroll Campbell and Jim Martin and a whole number of us who came over to the Senate from the House, and we slowly began to change the dynamics

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within the Republican Conference. When I first got here, the Conference was kind of maybe moderate, but the group that came right before me, like Phil Gramm and John McCain and some that came right after me, like Judd Gregg and some that came with me, like Dan Coats of Indiana, we began to change the shape that I think became a lot of the strength of the Republicans in the Senate.

So he did struggle with that, and I think sometime he wasn't sure about me, quite frankly. I mean, I did defeat his friend and the Whip, Alan Simpson, a really great guy, by the way, but that was part of the revolution that was building.

Smith: Tell me about that race. Because I think, again, people outside this institution have no idea what a campaign like that is.

Lott: Well, it's unique to the Senate. It's very personal. Thank God for secret ballots, a one-by-one vote.

Smith: Do people not always tell you the truth?

Lott: We are still human beings, yes, and senators are like everybody else; we change our mind, you know. It's not they didn't tell the truth; it's just that circumstances change. But I was kind of the upstart, and Bob, understandably, he called me and said, "I've got to support Alan. He's been a friend, a loyal Whip, and he doesn't deserve to be removed at this time." And he worked very hard. In fact, I think I had like thirty-two commitments on Thursday, but when the vote occurred, I think I had twenty-seven. So he pulled off five votes from me over the weekend. But I understood that. In fact, I think it would have been out of character and maybe even inappropriate for him not to support his Whip.

So then after that, I think he wasn't sure exactly what I was going to do, but I had experience. I was Whip for eight years during the Reagan years in the House. I knew how to set up a Whip organization, and that's what I did. I just systematically went about my business, set up a Whip organization in the form that I had learned from in the House, and began to do my work. I wouldn't wait for Bob to say, "Go do a Whip check," on this or that. I'd go do it and then I would take my card with the results and give it to him. At

first he'd take it and look at it, "Thank you," stick it in his pocket, and that was about it. But I think I maybe talked about this in my book. I know I've told this story, that the day he left the Senate, he gave a beautiful speech and everybody in the institution obviously loved Bob Dole and wished him well, even though the Democrats didn't want him to be president, but they were very generous. Tom Daschle was very generous in his comments for Bob that day. I walked down the steps of the Capitol, the front of the Capitol there, down to where he was going to get in a limousine and drive off, and just before he got in the car, he said, "Trent, you were a good Whip." He got in the car and left. That was the only time he ever said that.

So Bob wasn't loquacious in terms of expressing emotions or feelings, but at the same time he was very sentimental. I've seen him get tears in his eyes many times. He was really a very complex person.

Smith: Difficult to know?

Lott: In a way. I mean, he's like a lot of us in Washington. We're garrulous and outgoing with crowds and the masses, but sometime it's hard to get inside the shield and really get to know us. I'm a little bit that way. I mean, in my life, if you go back and look at my background, where I was born and what I experienced in my young years, it's understandable. But not many people got inside the fence with me. But I have had a few really close good friends over the years. I don't want to say that. It's not always that I want to know everybody a little and nobody very much. But high school friends, my roommate from college, who's now a federal judge, you know, feel very, very close to him and we've sung together, played together, cried together, prayed together.

And I think Bob is a little bit that way too. There are some people in Bob's life that he probably would die for, but still he's a very private person. In fact, Alan Simpson, again to his great credit, after I won that election, he said, "I want you to come to my office. I want to talk to you."

"Fine. I'd be honored." He was just so magnanimous and just a great guy, and he is till this day, obviously.

We sat down. He said, "Okay. You need to know more about Bob Dole and how you're going to work with him." He said, "You need to understand that he is the Leader,

you're the Whip, and you've got to remember he's an eagle, he's got huge wings, and he will overwhelm and dominate the process. You should be comfortable with that. He won't praise you a lot. He won't ask a lot, but he'll appreciate it every time you stand with him and go to battle with him." So it was a very nice thing for him to do, and it was helpful to me in understanding Bob Dole as the Majority Leader in the Senate.

Smith: Remember the day Senator [Mark] Hatfield apparently actually offered to resign—

Lott: Yes. Oh yes, I was there.

Smith: —a constitutional amendment?

Lott: Yes. I might have talked about that in my book, too, *Herding Cats*, which, by the way, something came from—I think I heard it the first time from Howard [H.] Baker [Jr.], another Majority Leader, but I have made it my own. That's one of the things we do in the Senate; we hear something good, we take it as our own, we give no attribution.

But I had done my Whip work on this constitutional amendment for a balanced budget very carefully, and Bob was—this was a case where he really was working with me, and we were talking about where the Republicans were and what Democrats might we get and what Democrats had been with us but were jumping ship on us this time, and finally it boiled down late one afternoon, maybe even the night, I went to him and said, "Bob, I've worked this thing, worked this thing, worked this thing, you have too, and I'm here to tell you that if we get Mark Hatfield, it passes. If we don't, it won't. I've done all I can. It's up to you."

So he asked Mark to come see him, and he went in the room there. I stayed in the anteroom. They went in there and stayed a good long while. I don't know exactly what was said, but basically Bob put it to him that it was all on his shoulders and that he really wanted his vote. Of course, Mark Hatfield said no, his principles would not allow him to do that, and he would vote no, but he would resign, and his resignation vacating that seat would give us the win. And, of course, Bob Dole turned it down. I think that once again reflected the men of that era. Bob gave it his best shot, persuaded him every way he

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could, tried to. Mark Hatfield, being who he was, said, “No, I’m not going to do it. I don’t think it’s the right thing to do, but I will resign if you are convinced that that’s the right thing for the Party and the country,” and then Bob Dole also correctly said, “Absolutely not. We’ll win it or we’ll lose it, but we’re not going to sacrifice you on this altar.”

And Bob came out and basically told me briefly what had happened, and we went on, we had the vote, sure enough we lost by one vote.

Smith: And no hard feelings?

Lott: No. You know, I developed some philosophy and some anecdotes about how to be Whip during my years in the House, and one of the things that I repeated often, and I perhaps heard it from somebody else, but basically it was that the most important vote is not the last vote, but the next vote, and every day leave your colleagues in such a way, even though you’d fought them that day, that you could come back to them the next day and say, “How about this? You weren’t with us then. That was yesterday. This is today. How about that?”

And I also had a philosophy that a *New York Times* reporter wrote a story about one time, that I called “keeping them together by letting them stray.” When you’re trying to keep this herd of cats together to produce results, as you go along, sometime a congressman, in that case, or a senator has a particular problem in his or her district or his or her state, and they really can’t be with you, but if you work it, you can let them go sometime so that when you do get to the really, really big one, where it really does matter to the country, you can pull them back in and say, “Okay, you strayed, but now we’ve got to all be together.” And it worked well during the eighties and it worked in the Senate quite often.

It’s a lot tougher in the Senate. Senators are a lot more elusive. First of all, senators, a lot of them have the ability to just not give you an answer. They’ll listen, tell you how much they appreciate your thoughts, they’ll think about it, and they won’t give you an answer. The Senate, the Whip position and the Leader position, you have to pay very close attention to body English. You have to learn to read senators. But basically if you do it a while—and Bob Dole had that ability. On any vote he could probably tell you

instantly how fifty of the fifty-three Republicans would vote, and there was usually half a dozen who would kind of swing around back and forth or you couldn't depend on necessarily or you couldn't expect them to just jump right in line, and you develop that instinct. Also you'd begin to watch people, and when they begin to go wobbly on you, you can pick it up. Bob had just a fantastic ability to do that.

Smith: What are your tools, if any? Weapons?

Lott: No, no, that's one of the weaknesses of the position of Majority Leader in the Senate. First of all, it's not a constitutional position. The only power you have is the power of persuasion and respect for the position. You have no sticks, hardly at all, and almost no carrots. There's not a lot you can do to a senator or for a senator. Now, if you really work at it, you develop a little box of tools you can use. You can reason them out a little bit or you can maybe assist them in maneuvering through the committee assignments, or maybe what I used when I was in the House—and remember I was the Whip in the minority in the House, was I realized that the best tool I had, the best carrot I had, was the Administration. I had the Reagan administration. So I became the go-to shop for a local congressman. Maybe he was a second-term congressman from New York and he was having a problem with Agriculture [Committee] over the apple crop. So he would come see me and then I could go to the secretary of Agriculture, Secretary [Earl R.] Butts, and say, "Look here. This congressman's got a problem here. You're not responding. You're not taking care of him. This is not unreasonable." You get a result. That is appreciated. So you can begin to build up a certain amount of currency that you can then use to get return favors or votes.

Smith: Do you think the job has changed significantly, say, since the legendary days of an LJB [Lyndon B. Johnson]?

Lott: Oh yes, it's changed a lot, but there are a lot of similarities too. Lyndon Johnson was bigger than life, very aggressive. If you treated senators today like he treated senators, that would not work. You can't intimidate senators or get up in their face and shout them down.

Smith: Is there less party loyalty today than fifty years ago? I mean, less sense of, I mean, television....

Lott: I do think that in a way there's some degree of less party loyalty. I think probably leadership roles are tougher. I'm convinced the toughest job in this city is Majority Leader of the Senate, whether it's a Republican or a Democrat, because of the weakness of the powers that you have. The Speaker of the House has the Rules Committee and he or she can basically lay down the law. The President of the United States makes a decision, people move. The Majority Leader of the Senate makes a decision, it goes to subcommittee. It is a tough job, but it can be done if you have a—you have to at some point sort of what I describe as get on your horse and ride. You basically say, "Damn the torpedoes, we're going to do this. We're going to do it now. As long as it takes, we're going to get a result."

Smith: Is it easier to be Minority Leader?

Lott: Sure. Piece of cake. Maybe Bob Dole and Howard Baker and Everett Dirksen in their years in the minority built the rules to their benefit, which, by the way, when you become the majority, works against you.

I've got to go.

Smith: Can I ask you one last question?

Lott: All right.

Smith: Very quick question. I have a confession to make. I wrote Bob Dole's speech at the Strom Thurmond event. You write in the book—when I read the book, I thought this is exactly what I thought was going on, that there was a little bit of a competition at play there, that Dole got up, he did his thing, and did all the jokes and everything else, and then you found yourself following Dole. Was that the dynamic of what was going on?

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Lott: Well, in a way, but that's sort of like horses run for the roses. When the competition begins—to be a successful politician, you've got to have a little bit of a ham in you. When one guy gets up and really gets the crowd going and laughing, then you say, "Hey, he was unbelievable. I've got to top that." And then you go over the top.
[laughs]

Smith: Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

[End of interview]

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