



WILLIAM J. CLINTON PRESIDENTIAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES ROBB

October 30, 2009
Charlottesville, Virginia

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TRANSCRIPT

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Robb: All right, let me just go down it real quickly and I can tell you things that would be fruitful and things that might not.

Riley: Okay.

Robb: You just ask questions and I'll take it wherever it leads me.

Riley: The first thing that I need to do is a kind of housekeeping chore, to let you know that the contents of the interview is completely confidential until such time as you've had a chance to review the transcript and to sign off on that. If you're happy with it in the form that it comes to you—we'll edit it a little bit to make it read a little easier—that's great. If there are things that we happen to get into here that you—

Robb: You're implying that I don't just deliver thoughts in pure prose that needs no editing, no punctuation, no corrections?

Riley: If you do, you're the first in the last ten years.

Robb: I was just going to say I know from my own experience in looking at transcripts of interviews that I've done that I do not deliver that. John Casteen can do that about as well as anybody I've ever—

Riley: I never thought about it that way before. But in any event, part of this is to give you an opportunity, if we get into anything that is particularly sensitive and you want to talk about it—because this is a document not for the Miller Center's use but principally for generations of students and scholars twenty, thirty years from now who want to understand this Presidency in a way that you understand it. So feel free to talk candidly. We have an unblemished record of maintaining those confidences, with the understanding that you can place a stipulation to hold on to pieces of this longer if you want to do it. But with that as the basic ground rule, let's go ahead and get started. I've got you for another hour and twenty minutes before they have you scheduled for the next event.

Robb: All right.

Riley: This is the Senator Charles Robb interview as part of the Clinton Presidential History Project, and I'm grateful for your coming to Charlottesville to do this. The first thing that strikes

me as interesting about your relationship with President Clinton is the fact that you both were involved, somewhere or another, with the creation of the Democratic Leadership Council. And I guess I'll start by asking, Do you have any recollections about your first cognizance of this person Bill Clinton? And then, secondly, can you tell me your story about how the DLC came about and how Clinton became an actor in this?

Robb: We could probably take up most of the allotted time just talking about the DLC portion of it, but let me just say that the first time that I recall meeting Bill Clinton was—although I had certainly heard about him, read about him, I don't have any conscious memory of having met him until I walked into the DNC [Democratic National Committee] headquarters in Washington. It was a building that I did not visit often, but at that point, he'd had his first term of Governor and then he was beaten by [Frank D.] White. Boy, the name is escaping me—

Riley: I should know that—

Robb: Anyway, it was a good thing for him to get that setback, as I talked at one point in my own life—the only election that I'd ever lost was for president of my college graduating class, and it's the best thing that ever happened to me. I think dealing with that is a character builder, even if it's not all that important. But in any event, at that point he had a little tiny cubicle. It was less than half the size of this office and it had no decoration of any kind. I don't honestly remember what he was there for—maybe he was making phone calls for the DNC? I don't remember. In any event, this eager young man pops up and says, "I'm Bill Clinton," and we have a conversation. There's not a whole lot to it at that point. But that's my first recollection of having met him.

Even in that brief conversation I recognized that I was talking to someone who had a considerable skill set when it came to the political process. He was able to, first of all, make you believe that you're the most—you've heard this a thousand times, but it's absolutely true and I saw it with any number of audiences in which we were both engaged in one form or another—he could make everybody in whatever group of whatever size that he was talking to believe that he was really talking mainly to them. It's an extraordinary skill, because lots of people can talk and people can understand and whatever, but they're not sure they're the focus of their attention. And Bill could do that in ways that I have not seen anyone since.

In any event, I could recognize a little of that at that particular time. And then I can't remember the next time we met, but I do know—and this probably leads into the DLC, and you'll have to help me with the timeline because I've forgotten. He invited me to come down and be the featured speaker at the Arkansas JJ [Jefferson-Jackson] dinner, and it was during the time that I was Governor. He had to have been elected again. And he would have been elected again when we started the DLC.

Let me give you just a little bit of background on the DLC, in which he had no involvement at all. It really started with a speech I gave to the 1984 Democratic Convention. I was Chairman of the Democratic Governors Association. At the end of the speech, I brought all of the Democratic Governors up on stage, and there were 33 of the 35, whatever we had there, who came on stage. I brought them on at the end.

But I gave a somewhat unorthodox speech for a national convention, in that I tried to differentiate between the kinds of issues and values that I thought that the national party ought to stand for and those that were seen as more self-serving to specific institutional groups within the Democratic Party.

So almost every sentence or every recognition of a group or a cause or whatever had a positive element and a negative element identified with it. And it was interesting; because I was Chairman of the Democratic Governors Association, they gave me a prime-time slot in the evening. I think it was the third evening. I remember waiting in there with Willie Nelson. We were talking and he was about to give the National Anthem. I couldn't hear him, as I recall I was still down just below the podium where they do the final whatever, and so I don't recall whether I was aware then that he managed to forget a line in the National Anthem, but anyway, I remember being associated with that.

And then I went up and gave my speech. There was a nice reaction—conventions usually don't ever pay much attention to the speaker in the afternoon. In the evening they are looking for two or three particular speeches, and this would have been the night that they nominated Gerry [Geraldine] Ferraro, and I don't remember where that was. It was announced probably a day or two before, and eventually they would have the whole process—it may be that there wasn't another speaker who was immediately coming on who would have their reasonably undivided attention. When they turn all the house lights down you get attention in the convention; when they don't, a few people around the podium will listen and maybe the delegation from which the speaker comes may try to be at least reasonably attentive, but that's about it at national conventions.

But this was a good moment to have that, so there was a good reception in the hall, but the people who listened to it carefully knew that there was something different about it. And let me just give you two reactions, one from Sam Nunn and one from a labor leader whose name I never did get. But he was the first to react because on Friday they had the traditional sendoff of the newly nominated ticket and they had all of the leaders of some of what would be called the institutional groups that make up the Democratic Party or that are heavily focused on it, and one of those happened to be labor. There were others, but because I had, in effect, talked about special interests, I didn't call them special interests. I can get a text of my speech, but there were people who actually listened to the speech and almost everybody who was part of the institutional party that I was talking about got a little uneasy.

Riley: Right.

Robb: It wasn't widely commented upon at that time, but two or three editorial writers talked about it and said—and I suspect that they were not traditional “whatever the Democrats say I think is the right thing to say or do.” They were objective enough so that they said they ought to listen to this guy.

Riley: Sure.

Robb: Even when I went down to give the JJ speech—was it Paul Greenberg?

Riley: I think that's right. Yes, the journalist.

Robb: A journalist who said, in effect, “This guy’s got a different message.” He wasn’t entirely complimentary of me, but “He’s got a message that people ought to be listening to.” In any event, there was that. So you had some editorial pickup and acclaim on it.

Riley: Right.

Robb: I think somebody recorded it, at least if you looked at the convention transcript of it, I think they had about ten places where they had “applause” listed in the transcript. And particularly at the end when I named each of the Governors one at a time, so the message may have been lost in part because I brought them all out. I announced each one and brought them out and they came out on stage. So that gets everybody into the mix.

Riley: Of course.

Robb: And whether they liked my speech or not, at that point they were all—

Riley: Lots of applause—

Robb: Lots of applause. And they were more responsive than they normally are at party conventions.

Riley: Right.

Robb: Then I think it was two, maybe three days later, that Sam Nunn contacted me and Sam said, “I really liked your speech,” or something that was very complimentary.

Riley: Right.

Robb: And I was still the Governor and had no intention of running for the Senate at that point. He said, “I’ve got about”—it was either 13 or 14—“other Democratic Senators and we’d like to get together with you.” I said, “Sure, I’d be delighted.” And we talked or corresponded back and forth and it was planned that we were all going to get together—and Lawton Chiles was one of them. Lawton was going to host a retreat down in Florida for this group, and we were all set to go and then somehow Robert C. Byrd found out about it and there was at least a rumor—probably had more than a little truth to it—that Lawton was thinking of challenging Byrd for the majority leadership at that particular point. So once he heard about this he immediately put out the word that anybody who went to that meeting or whatever it was—again I don’t know exactly what he said, but it was very clear that the message got delivered to folks that that would be viewed as a hostile act to challenge—so we had our first meeting at the Capitol.

Either Lawton or Sam would be co-hosting that event for the purpose of interacting with me and some of the things that we said about the future of the Democratic Party—I can go back into the DLC, forgive me for being—

Riley: No, no, no. This is all fascinating stuff.

Robb: I’m flying all over the place, and as a transcript it would be impossible, so you’ll have to heavily edit it.

Riley: I want to ask you if I could two quick follow-up questions. One was you mentioned the labor leader, and just to finish that off—

Robb: I was going to come back, but what was the point I was going to make?

Riley: About organizing the meeting.

Robb: We eventually had it in the Capitol, and I don't remember what room it was in. It was one of the hearing rooms or whatever. What was the point I was going to make before that? Let me go back to the labor leader. Because he was the only one at that time, but there were others, he came up and, now this is supposed to be the big sendoff, everybody is supposed to be pumping up the newly nominated ticket—he came up and thumped me in the chest—

Riley: With his forefinger.

Robb: “Yes,” he said. “I heard what you said.” And I don't remember the words. I've got them written in what will eventually be a memoir or something close to it, but it was very clear that he felt threatened by what I'd said. And I intended to, not threaten, but to give everyone a message that if we were going to succeed and be a national party and not a collection of special interests—and again I'm almost certain that I avoided the word—but clearly everybody who actually listened to the actual words knew what I was talking about.

And he wasn't the only one, because I had a point-counterpoint for each of the things I said about particular groups. But he was the only one at this unity rally He comes up—it wasn't Lane Kirkland or whoever was then head of the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations], although he was there as well—he was probably his sidekick. There was no attempt to go through any of the amenities. Just came up and *thump*. I thought, *By golly, bingo!*

It wasn't my intent to alienate anyone, it was simply to try to suggest that we've got to look at things that have a national interest and divorce them from things that are purely of interest to a particular group and serve their interests but not the national interests. Again, forgive me—I don't remember the details.

Riley: We can clean this up. If I can ask one other question in regard to this. Usually at a convention like this the contents of the speech would be vetted by the presumed nominee in order to make sure that the speech is consistent with the overall message. You're shaking your head.

Robb: I was Chairman of the Democratic Governors Association. I was given the spot because of that, not for some other reason. The answer is nobody tried.

Riley: Nobody tried to vet it.

Robb: And nobody would have succeeded if they had tried. This was consistent with the message that I had been delivering as Governor and continued throughout the rest of my political career. That was always part of the warp and woof of my being, if you will. For people in

Virginia it really wasn't anything new. It was just that I delivered it to a national audience in prime time.

Riley: Right.

Robb: Most people just sort of cheer, and I didn't throw the raw meat at them. I said, "On the one hand, but on the other hand we've got—" I should have reviewed that speech before. Or you can get it—

Riley: We'll make sure—

Robb: It's in the record of the proceedings.

Riley: Of course, and we'll make sure that a copy is appended. The timing of this is fascinating because, typically, when you talk to people about the DLC, the argument is made that it arose as a result of the reaction to the party's terrible performance in the '84 election.

Robb: Let me continue then. Immediately following the '84 election, there was a wide search for a new Chairman of the Democratic Party and there was no clear heir apparent. There were three or four candidates that evolved, but a group of us, and I guess I was probably the most culpable, but Bruce Babbitt was part of it, and two or three others, decided we ought to try instead of letting this party process pick a candidate that's going to continue to send us the wrong way, we ought to see if we can't find a candidate who doesn't have any known association with one of the prospective 1988 candidates for the Democratic nomination, so it wouldn't be viewed as putting someone in there who would control the apparatus to benefit one candidate. We wanted someone who had this kind of national view.

As Chairman of the Democratic Governors Association I had a number of dealings with Paul Kirk. Paul Kirk had been treasurer during the '80 to '84 period, I guess it was. He was certainly one of the stronger candidates, and yet the people around him knowing what unorthodox things I was advocating made an effort to try to dissuade Paul from having anything to do with this rump group.

We approached several possible candidates for the DNC chairmanship. There were about four of us who were trying to short-circuit the normal process so that we would end up with somebody who wasn't disposed to back any particular candidate, but who would be an honest broker in that leadership position so that we could bring about some of the changes that we thought were necessary. The last one we tried was Neil Goldschmidt—I remember going out and visiting with Neil out in Seattle, Washington. It was Bruce and me and I've forgotten who the others were. And Neil said at the end of our pitch, "You know, I appreciate the interest, but I'd kind of like to run for Governor one day myself." And I thought to myself, *Good choice*. And that's when we gave up that quest as a fool's errand.

Because after you've been a party chairman you're just dead meat for elective office in most cases. As I guess Howard Dean is going to probably recognize, and others before him. You don't see many people who have been party chairman—George Herbert Walker Bush was an exception and I had him down here in Charlottesville when he was chairman of the Republican

National Committee—but it was only for a year, so he didn't get permanently tarnished with that role. Anyway, what was your question? I forget.

Riley: It was the timing of the emergence of the DLC.

Robb: So we went through all this search for a party chairman who was not identified with a particular likely 1988 candidate and we finally gave up. We realized that we were just pursuing an unrealistic, idealistic objective, but it wasn't going to work out. So Paul then puts together enough votes to lock up the nomination, but just before he was formally nominated—and elected National Party Chairman—I met with Paul before he went out to accept the nomination, I guess it was. I said, “I just want you to know that we're going to go ahead and form this group of elected officials who have heretofore been burdened by a party apparatus that doesn't seem to understand, going back to Sam Rayburn's comment, “I just wish somebody in that group had stood for sheriff one time.”

The party, the institutional party, and the elected officials who had to stand for election and had to govern were going in divergent directions at that point. It simply couldn't be sustained and it was getting harder and harder as only Sam was in that position when he had to live through—for him, the [George] McGovern debacle and then the [Jimmy] Carter Presidency, even though he was probably closer to Jimmy Carter. Anyhow, there were a whole lot of us who just didn't feel that having the national party as their Good Housekeeping seal of approval was helpful. And it burdened candidates with an agenda that didn't reflect what most elected officials felt was where we ought to be going. We could go into a whole lot of explanation on that, but anyway there was a divergence.

But I told Paul, “We're going to go ahead with this.” It didn't have a name at this point. “We're going to get together a number of elected officials and form a group to try to bring elected officials who are actually responsible for carrying out the promises that are made in their name, to bring them closer to the national party,” and at the same time to bring the national party back closer to the mainstream as well. So that we weren't quite as divergent in our goals as we'd been. We then went and had our meeting shortly thereafter. Somebody's got a note of it someplace. I'm just going to guess it was February of '85. That's a guess, and of the people who were there that I can remember, Sam and Lawton really were the two most energetic, but Lloyd Bentsen and John Glenn and Al Gore came. I'd have to look at the list to see who else came, but we had—

Riley: Clinton was not a member—

Robb: Oh, no. He didn't even know about this. And anyhow, we decided we would form the group and the organizational details. I can remember a lot of that if I started thinking about it, but you may not be interested in that. The bottom line is we ended up deciding to form the organization and we took individual responsibility. The only person we had invited from the House of Representatives was Congressman Gillis Long of Louisiana. He was Chairman of the Democratic Policy Committee up through 1984. He died a couple of years later.

Riley: I can't recall it, but this is an easy enough thing to insert.

Robb: In any event, we thought even in having the meeting to form this organization that we ought to have at least somebody from the House of Representatives there, because it looked too

much like the House of Lords. We were all Governors and Senators, who are viewed, rightly or wrongly, as living in a different section of the stratosphere and not as closely connected to the people and the populace, etc.

Riley: Which is where Al From—

Robb: Al From had been working for Gillis Long, and he eventually—there's an interesting story there I'll give you that Al tells. In fact, when he retired he reiterated it again, because he wasn't at all certain that this group had any potential to last more than a short period of time. And to just digress there for a second, he wouldn't have joined up with us at all if I hadn't guaranteed his first year's salary.

Riley: *[laughter]*

Robb: He now—and it's fine for him to call himself the founder, he never did then. He was the executive assistant for a couple of years, and Sam and I between us really ran the organization. And when we set it up—we needed a small staff and so we brought in Al, Will Marshall, and Melissa Moss. Melissa did all the fundraising for us and she eventually did the same thing for Ron Brown when he took over the DNC. We've maintained a close friendship ever since.

Will Marshall eventually started up the Progressive Policy Institute and Al stayed on as the director, then president of the DLC until [Bruce] Reed took over from him a year ago, or whenever it was—

Riley: Yes, very recently.

Robb: But Al was not involved until a little bit later, and it was only because Gillis had a high regard for him that we asked him to be a part of it, and in order to get him to do it because we were clearly an unknown, untested group—I don't remember whether he asked specifically or how it came about. He could probably tell you that part of it. Have you already interviewed him?

Riley: We have, but it's been a good while, so my memory about these things grows vague over time too.

Robb: Okay. In any event, Bill Clinton was not a part of it at all at this point. But with Gillis there, Gillis said, "I'll recruit House members." I said, "I'll recruit Governors," and Sam said, "I'll recruit Senators." Now he already had a number of Senators. We had no other Governors at that point, and initially we had only Gillis Long from the House. We did recruit a group of additional House members. Bill Gray and Barbara Kennelly and Lindy Boggs and a few other House members that I remember. I have to go through a list of those.

Several Governors, including Bruce Babbitt and others, came along very quickly. Dick Gephardt wasn't as passionate about it, and I don't think he had any desire to head the group. You could ask him if you do, but I thought it was important that we not be seen as the House of Lords, if you will. If it were just Governors and Senators you couldn't get to the types of people that really connected. I said, "It's important that our first leader be a House member, not from one of our groups." And it needed to be someone who was currently an office holder. Now the fact that I became the second chairman I protested, but Sam and Dick and Al—at least those three people,

came individually to the house to say, “You’ve got to take it over.” It really was sort of my baby from the start, and Sam was the principal—supporter isn’t the right word—I mean he knew we were on to something that a lot of people could identify with.

So we start recruiting, and the toughest member to recruit, bar none, was Bill Clinton. Bar none. I mean I didn’t contact all the Governors.

Riley: He’s on your list because he’s a Governor, right?

Robb: Yes. Well, not only because he’s Governor, but I already recognized somebody who had a foot in both camps.

Riley: Okay.

Robb: He could be a part of this. In fact, I insisted it become the Democratic Leadership Council—the others wanted to call it the Council of Democratic Leaders and I said, “That’s way too elitist.” If you put leadership rather than leaders and use the name Democratic Leadership Council as Democratic National Committee, a three-letter—

Riley: Acronym.

Robb: Acronym. I really—

Riley: [*laughter*] It’s Friday afternoon.

Robb: It’s not just Friday afternoon. For the last two or three years, I’ve had myself tested twice at the Mayo Clinic because I think I’ve got early signs of dementia. And they said, no, it’s just terrible memory, but it’s true. I can’t remember where I was going at this point.

Riley: You said Bill Clinton, bar none, was the most difficult person and I want to hear why—

Robb: Bill and I would phone back and forth, and I really don’t remember how many phone conversations we had, but finally Bill called me. And he told me, “Paul Kirk is telling me not to do this, not to be associated with you guys.” I said—although I told Paul Kirk we were not going to be antagonistic at all, we really did want to help, wanted to bring the party into more of a mainstream position and represent again a national entity rather than be perceived as a collection of institutional entities.

One step back: Walter Mondale, a fine human being, but there was a widely based perception that I certainly shared and articulated a little bit that this fine and honorable man went to each of the so-called special interests, hat in hand, and said, in effect, “What can I do for you? Give me all of your requests and I will incorporate them into our party platform.”

That’s an unfair, gross overstatement, but it looked that way and we had to get away from that. Having watched that evolve, when I became the Chairman, I said I’ve got to take this on. It’s the perception that’s killing us, and I think I probably had a reference I’ve forgotten now.

Riley: Sure. Well, how did you eventually convince a reluctant Clinton to do this?

Robb: He convinced himself eventually. Because he said, “I’ve been talking to you.” I remember enough of this conversation.

First of all, I recognized that he was probably the most important Governor we could get. He was still young and whatever. But I recognized communication skills from a southern state with clear credibility with the national party and with the special interests. Again, I’m using that term. Publicly, I don’t use it. The “institutional interests” or “elements of the national party,” because clearly special interests has a ring to it that puts everybody’s hair up on the back of their neck if they think they are being referred to as a special interest. I’m enough of a politician to know that and to stay away from that.

So we went back and forth, and I know a couple of people who were close to Paul who were clearly trying to dissuade him as well from coming on board. We had a very good group, but I really thought it was important to have Bill be a part of it. We could do a lot for him and he could do a lot for us in terms of making people not look at us askance, which was initially the case, notwithstanding Bill Gray and Barbara Kennelly and a few others who were in there, and even Lindy Boggs, it looked like the southern conservative white boys’ caucus, and it was very important to me not to let that be either the perception or the reality.

So, now I’m digressing just for a second, when I finally agreed to accept the chairmanship I said, “I’m going out of office. I can’t succeed myself. I’ll be out of office. I’ll be fully supportive but the next chairman ought to be a current office holder.” But they said, “You’ve got to do it, you’ve got the spirit.” or whatever it is. You’re the spiritual founder.” So In order to accept it I said, “I’m going to go out and recruit a number of additional people.”

Riley: Okay.

Robb: Mayors for the most part. And I personally recruited Harold Washington of Chicago; Tom Bradley of Los Angeles; Henry Cisneros of San Antonio; Barbara Jordan from Texas. I made a point of getting them—because I thought each one of those elected Democrats sends a message, and added a couple of other people who were not from the South and who were not perceived as primarily conservative. But those were the ones that I recruited personally in agreeing to take over the chairmanship, because if you’re written off as not inclusive that way you’re going to be absolutely ineffective. You’re not going to have any impact at all.

Riley: Exactly.

Robb: And then I started to going around giving speeches around the country, and Al From’s got a little book of those he published at the time. I don’t think he puts that out anymore, because it sort of diminishes his role. The truth of the matter, he and Will Marshall did most of the speechwriting. I would give my ideas, they’d write, and then I’d do a lot of editing, but the grunt work was done by those two. Probably a little more Will than Al, but they both did a lot of that and then we chose forums that had invited me to come speak. If you put all of those together, including our college campuses—we had a daughter then who was up at Princeton, and we did the Yale forum and the Kennedy School and I spoke at each of those institutions. Then around the country I’d do the major economic clubs in Chicago and San Francisco and Dallas and others where you’d get a good-size audience of influential people.

Riley: Sure.

Robb: That's probably enough about it at this point. But eventually Bill calls me back and says—and on this particular occasion, although I'd been probably initiating more of the calls earlier on, I think Bill said something about maybe five calls. He said, "Chuck, I've been thinking this over. I've been talking it over. A lot of people have said—but you're right. We ought to be doing this and I'm going to tell Paul Kirk, number one, that I'm going to join, and number two, that we're not going to be antagonistic. We're going to be supportive. We're going to try to bring the people that we believe have to be a part of the party if it's ever going to have any meaning. Because we're the ones who are responsible to the voters." But he'd gone through that process, ultimately on his own after all these conversations, and he called up to say, "I'm going to do it," and I said "Bingo!" Because he was the hardest to recruit.

I didn't go after the people that I knew were so ideologically out of step that there was just no way to bring them aboard so there was no point in wasting your fire. But Bill at that point had real credibility with the national party, with the liberal intelligentsia as well as the good old boys, the Bubbas of the world. There weren't many people who had that. And he already had a lot of admirers in the press. So I figured he'd be good for us. He didn't take much of a role in the first two or three years. I don't remember exactly.

I hung on for two years and then stepped down. Among other things I finally decided I wanted to get back into the public policy arena, so I was going to run for the Senate and I convinced Sam to come in and take it for two years. And then I was touting Sam for President in '88. I met all kinds of editorial boards, because even though he and I differed on a couple of major issues that I didn't know about at the time, in terms of national security and in terms of fiscal responsibility we were coming from the same place.

I was considerably more progressive on the social issues than Sam was. He's coming around now. And in one of those ironies, I ended up being the principal Democratic proponent for the first Gulf War, and Sam had been preempted by George Mitchell to lead the opposition. And so Sam and I were on opposite sides—that kept him from ever realizing his potential national ambitions. Have you talked to Sam?

Riley: No.

Robb: The fact that he was wrong on the first Gulf War ate at him. In fact—now I've got to move back because we're going back to '88 and I'm in the process of acknowledging that I'll run for the Senate. And then the incumbent Senator, Paul Trible, suddenly decided, after he's raised \$2.5 million, that he wasn't going to run for reelection. And I was in a pretty good position, in terms of political capital. I'd started out with a lot of question marks and we'd ended up in very good shape because I was identified with this movement as well as very high favorability ratings in Virginia. I was looked upon as one of the X number of whatever at that particular time.

I never had any intention of doing it, but it gave me a lot of opportunities to do things and to influence actions, and so we participated wholeheartedly. The point I was leading was working with Sam. He would call me and say, "Chuck, I went to bed last night thinking, *I'm going to do it*. I got up this morning and I wasn't so sure." After a couple times like that, I said, "If you don't

go to bed and get up and want to do it with every fiber in your body, it is probably not right. You've got to get yourself in that position." Well, he finally realized—he called up and said, "May Colleen [Nunn] and I come over to your house on Sunday? I'd like to meet with you, and if Lynda's [Johnson Robb] there it would be great." But basically he said, "I've decided not to do it. I'm going to go down to Georgia and tell the folks down there that I'm not going to do it."

Riley: Right.

Robb: And so that was the end of his run in '88. This is just to give you an idea of where I'm coming from. In '84 I endorsed John Glenn, just about the time his ship was sinking. I think I was the only Governor. Paul Tsongas was in the Senate. He may have been the only Senator who endorsed John. But it wasn't because I thought John was going to win. I had all these conversations with him. John is just one of these really almost-too-good-to-be-true human beings. But he has a tin ear for politics and he thought that these huge crowds that came out to see him—he said, "I'm doing great." And I said, "John, they're coming out to look at an astronaut, a national hero. You have to convince them that it's important to take you off that pedestal and make you run, see you as a President." We had some really interesting conversations about this but he would always tell me, "Oh, the crowds were great." I said, "They're there for the wrong reason. You've got to have them want you to be President. Tell the people what you're going to do there." He's as decent a human being as you'll come up with. He's also, like a lot of people, still a little bit of an engineer.

Riley: Exactly.

Robb: And then in '88 this process was pretty far along. As chair of the DLC I didn't endorse anybody. But I turned it over to Sam and then the next day since Sam was already out of it and the process had moved along and Bill Clinton had moved to the top of my list. Then as I was down giving a speech to the National Conference of State Legislators in Little Rock. I got a phone call from Bill and he said, "Hillary [Rodham Clinton] and I are coming in from" wherever it was, California or something, and he said, "I know you are there in Little Rock. Would you mind waiting at the airport until we get in?" And that's when he told me he wasn't going to run.

Riley: This was '88?

Robb: This was '88. And I can't tell you precisely when that was.

Riley: Might have been '87 actually.

Robb: Well, I think you're right.

Riley: But it was about the '88 election—

Robb: It was about the '88 election, yes. Probably was '87, now that you mention it. Okay. So the two people that I would have been most enthusiastic about had both pulled themselves out and I was—let's see at that point, '88, it was [Michael] Dukakis. I liked Mike personally, but I didn't really see him or some of the others as having the kind of sense of direction I thought we needed. And so I endorsed Al Gore. I told Al at the time that basically, "You've got a whole lot to do because at this point the only reason you're a candidate is that you're young and smart and

ambitious, and you've got about 25 rich backers." What was the name of the guy from Maryland who put this group together?

Riley: Was it Nate Landow?

Robb: Nate Landow, yes. Thank you. Yes, a group that he'd put together and they had decided to back him. They gave themselves a name. A great résumé, but I said, "There is no other reason people should have any passion for you for being President." When he got ready to run in '96 he asked me to come over to his office and I gave him a sort of a Dutch uncle talk about a whole lot of things he had to get rid of. This little royal pitty-pat clap and this waving like a royal with the palm inward.

Oh, I'll tell you why specifically I endorsed Al. Now I remember, there is a group called Star*Pac up in Minnesota or someplace in the Midwest that had a very strong anti-war flavor. They were one of these institutional groups that demanded that you take one of these pledges that you'll basically be an anti-war candidate.

Riley: Now this is in '92?

Robb: No, this was in '88.

Riley: Okay. Which war were we talking about in '88?

Robb: It didn't have anything to do with a specific war. It was just—

Riley: Sort of anti-Reagan.

Robb: No, it wasn't even anti—it was the group in the Democratic Party that keeps us forever from being credible on national defense. They weren't exclusively representing the group. But here's someone, I mean—there are two parts of my background that are pretty consistent. I've always been strong for national defense. People call me hawkish or whatever. And I've been very strong for fiscal responsibility. I say fiscally responsible, Lynda says, "He's cheap."

Riley: I heard you didn't buy a drink with lunch today, right?

Robb: Well, that's a different story.

Riley: *[laughter]* Sorry, continue.

Robb: No that's right. I'm proud of it. I like it. In fact, one more digression, my secretary of administration when I was Governor, Wayne Anderson, who'd been around the track a few times, somebody asked him about lunch when I had the Cabinet over for lunch, and it was very modest pickings. There was a cookie for dessert that was in the shape of the Commonwealth of Virginia and he said, "I'm just glad that he wasn't Governor of Rhode Island." That was in the press, but I loved it. It made all of my efforts to cut costs more credible—and a big part of my entire administration as Governor was finding a way to be fiscally responsible. I won't go through all that because that's not directly relevant to Bill Clinton.

Riley: Of course.

Robb: I don't know that Bill was originally half as wedded to fiscal responsibility on his own as he was every time we got together.

Riley: Exactly.

Robb: And if there's any influence I had on him it clearly was in that area. From the time he became a candidate, and I was with him on two or three occasions after the election, and then the first two or three meetings we had when he'd invite us over to the White House, in a couple of different contexts. At least one time he invited us over as part of his former DLC group—every time I hit hard that, "If you buy into the way we're budgeting at this point, you're going to own it and you'll never be able to get out of it." You have an opportunity to change it. Do it now. Do it now. Do it now.

And obviously he's had the only real fiscal progress since Lynda's father, when in his very last year got a \$3 or \$4 million dollar surplus in the budget so that it was the first time they had not projected a deficit. But I spent most of my time, certainly in state office, and the first five, six years in the Senate working on that issue. I finally just gave up. As Dick Cheney said, "People don't care about the deficit." And, much to my regret, he was right—at least politically.

Now you see a couple of the moderates who are holding out on health care because of the impact on the deficit.

Riley: Exactly. All of this is fascinating. I wanted to go back and ask you, because you had endorsed Gore in '88, did you have a preferred candidate in the cycle leading up to '92? Was Clinton somebody that—

Robb: Oh, yes.

Riley: —that you had agreed to support early going into '92?

Robb: I don't know that there was any agreement.

Riley: Before he became the nominee—

Robb: Oh, yes. I think everyone just knew that I was fully and enthusiastically supporting Bill. If in '92 Sam Nunn had changed his mind, I'd have probably still have endorsed him, because he had stronger credentials in national defense, which Bill had not yet been tested on. But at whatever point I knew that he wasn't in it. Bill was definitely my choice from then on.

Riley: Your choice?

Robb: Yes. It was so natural that I don't even remember when I made the first formal announcement.

Riley: Where you ever surprised or in any way bothered by the extent to which Clinton became a driving force within the DLC? I mean, there's a caricature of his taking over the institution at some point.

Robb: This is one of those open doors we wanted him to push on. It was very clear that although the DLC had a foothold we were still just sort of a boutique organization. And if we wanted to really go national. Bill was the perfect choice—I mean Sam and I basically picked him as the chair. Sam and I were really still running it out of our hip pockets. After the first or second meeting we never had another meeting. It was all done between us by phone, but once we had Al From on board, Al would be the intermediary and we'd say, "This is what we want to do," and then he and Will and Melissa, just three of them, did all of the grunt work at that point and did it really well.

Riley: Okay.

Robb: But I mean it was not this great Democratic organization. We just stopped and had lunch at Five Guys. It was two guys trying to bring a party back to what we could feel comfortable being a part of. And that really may be a more revealing statement. We weren't comfortable with where the Democratic Party was headed or perceived to be. We wanted to bring it back where we could feel comfortable.

Riley: Exactly. And Clinton was—

Robb: He was the perfect person to do it because he had credibility with this group that we didn't have much credibility with. We were the southern white boys conservative caucus to them.

Riley: Well, he's southern and white, but he had Oxford and the input in Marian Wright Edelman and others.

Robb: Yes. Absolutely. It was a marriage made in heaven because he would bring credibility to what the DLC was doing. And if it happened to be a vehicle to help him become President, it's a two-fer.

Riley: How much the better. Okay.

Robb: Yes. I mean we were delighted. That solidified the DLC as a legitimate voice within the Democratic Party.

Riley: Right.

Robb: It was the *American Prospect* that Howard Metzenbaum basically formed to take on the DLC? And they have a lot of really good writing. I subscribed to it for a number of years and I lapsed a few years ago I guess. They still have good writing, but almost every other story seemed to include ways to take on the DLC and you could tell that the people who consider themselves the keepers of the crown, the true believers, weren't going to let this DLC group take over the Democratic Party. It's good to have a little creative tension.

In fact I remember Al From, this was later on, when it must have been leading up to '88, he said, "The best thing that ever happened was the fact that you and Jesse Jackson started debating on television." And we had, I think, maybe three debates. One of them was sort of an impromptu debate that everybody covered, and another one was—it was actually set up. It wasn't a traditional debate because I think traditional ones we were in different studios, but we'd go back and forth.

And I never alienated Jesse, although I suspect Jesse, to this day, wonders why I didn't come around like everybody else does and provide a little support for Operation Push, which gave him some cash to get around with, or whatever. I just never yielded that. But at the same time we were very cordial. In any event, Bill Clinton was *exactly* what we needed at exactly the time we needed him. So it would help us enormously, and there was no question that he was going to use us. And we said, "Please use us."

Riley: [laughter]

Robb: That's what we wanted.

Riley: Did you campaign with him in '92? Do you remember campaigning in '92?

Robb: Oh, yes. At this point we were thick as thieves, so I'm trying to think where and when. Yes. Oh, I'll tell you one place. In fact, in '92, where was it, we used to have what they called the Mason District Crab Feast, which was in the northern Virginia area. It was a big fall event. I was the intermediary who got him to come over to the event. I introduced him to the crowd, but he got there early and they were having the preliminary speeches, so he and I went into the house. It had a great big backyard under a bunch of trees that they had a balcony about 15 feet high from which to speak. But in any event we went and had a long chat about the campaign and again I'm hitting on the fiscal responsibility thing. Said, "This is northern Virginia, which is not necessarily viewed as concerned about that." I was practically a Johnny-one-note at that point.

Riley: Did Ross Perot bother you in '92? Were you worried about Perot at all and what he might do?

Robb: No. I remember that—Dale Bumpers and David Pryor were the Arkansas insiders in our Democratic Caucus. We were in one of our Tuesday Democratic caucus luncheons and David was just as worried as could be. At this particular point, George Bush was running first, Ross Perot was running second, Bill Clinton was running third. And David got up and seemed really worried. I mean he was just worried to death because he really likes Bill Clinton. I don't think Dale and Bill got along as well as—I never pursued any of that, but when Dale gave his impeachment defense, I thought there is an irony in this, because I don't think they're half as close, but Dale could give a stem-winder.

In any event, I love David Pryor. He's just a great human being. David gets up at our caucus luncheon and said, "I'm just so worried," and I said, "David, Bill Clinton has got this thing cold." He was running in third place at that point. I think I wrote it down at the time. I remember doing it and I remember he said, "ahhhhhh," as David could get sometimes. And you've obviously worked with him some on this project or will eventually.

Riley: Yes.

Robb: Anyhow, he's just as decent a human being as you'll ever run into, I believe. But he was worried and I gave him my rationale for why this was a perfect match-up and why the whole thing. I've honestly forgotten now. I think I wrote out notes at the time.

But I was perfectly convinced that Bill Clinton was going to win. I really had no doubt—because first of all, Ross would come up with some occasional good ideas. I don't know whether he thought of them himself, but he had no idea what he was talking about or how to carry them out. You could tell it when he got in these debates that he'd throw out these little colloquialisms, "Oh, we got to get under the hood," but what's "under the hood"? He knew how to deliver an appealing line but didn't have fundamental understanding of what was beneath it.

And George Herbert Walker Bush is another. He's a very decent man, but he's no match for Bill Clinton in terms of both the range of intellect and the ability to connect with a crowd.

Riley: Clinton had withstood early in the years concerns about his personal foibles. And did that not bother you at all? You weren't concerned that those issues could come back to haunt him?

Robb: Oh, I just assumed that nobody would run for President if they had anything really damaging in that area. In fact, just to digress for a second, when the one that really did create the groundswell for impeachment came out, the day before all that became public, we were over at the White House and it was maybe the first medal of honor that Bill awarded. A fellow who had been an instructor of mine in basic school was being awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. He'd gotten the Navy Cross, but it had been upgraded for his courageous actions in Korea. And so I was invited to come over, and then after the ceremony, several people were gathered around Bill in the foyer. I was over talking to somebody else altogether and I get this, "Hey, Chuck, come on over here. I want you to say hello to somebody," which was the way he operated. So I did. And it struck me that he was completely zoned out. I didn't have a clue and I came back and said, "Something's funny." Then when the thing broke the next day, you had to believe him, because if not there is just no way I thought he could survive.

Riley: Sure.

Robb: Any event, I took him at his word. He was impossible not to believe because he was so sincere—and could just smother you with warm and fuzzy facts and emotions. He could do anything. He was just a very skilled communicator. So the answer is, no, it really didn't—I thought it was probably somebody taking a cheap shot that wasn't based on fact or whatever it was, so it didn't really bother me then.

Riley: Okay. He gets elected in '92, and for review, were you ever interested or did they ever talk with you about a Cabinet position? Or were you happy in the Senate?

Robb: No. Number one, I wouldn't have been interested in a Cabinet position anyhow. The only person to ever talk to me about a Cabinet position was Dick Cheney after the famous, "We promise to have a Democrat in the Cabinet." I got a call when I was down in Texas; Lynda's mother was still alive and we normally went down there for Christmas. I had just been to a party at Al Gore's house where he'd had this big tent set up and he was in a lather of a sweat because

the election had just been declared over by the Supreme Court and he was clearly emotionally drained.

A couple of days later the President-elect and VP-elect were starting to put together their Cabinet—and Dick said, “We promised to put a Democrat in the Cabinet. Would you talk to us?” I said, “There’s nothing, frankly, that would interest me, except in national defense.” And they said, “Well, that’s what we’re talking about.” “And here’s the problem,” I said, “I don’t know whether you’re familiar with my position on social issues, but I was against ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,’” and had fought it. I was against [Defense of Marriage Act] DOMA, I was the only southern Senator to vote against it. So I’m an icon in the gay community and I was against the flag burning amendment—after I read the Court’s decision declaring it unconstitutional.

Riley: Or the amendment.

Robb: —the constitutional amendment on flag burning. I’ve got a chapter on it in my memoir, if I ever finish it, on guns, gays, and Old Glory—

Riley: Gun control.

Robb: Gun control. I wasn’t for all gun control, but having fought with M-16s or AK-47s, I knew what they were supposed to do and I didn’t feel that you had to have a semi-automatic weapon and that you could have reasonable controls, but that’s one of those organizations where any apostasy and you’re absolutely unacceptable. I mentioned all that to Dick. I said, “There’s no way that your constituency or mine would ever understand me doing it.” And I said, “I appreciate it,” and let it go at that. It didn’t go beyond that.

Riley: Okay.

Robb: But Joe Lieberman and Al Gore both said—after I had lost but their result was still in limbo—that they wanted to talk as soon as it was settled, but of course after that happened it didn’t matter for them. It’s all in my memoir, if and when I ever finish it. I’ve got six hundred and some pages that just need to be refined more and need still more reflection. But I didn’t want to run again in 2000. I tried to get Don Beyer to run. He thought about it for a day. We had him over for dinner. He and his wife Megan and Lynda and I talked about it at length and then the next day he said, “I just can’t take it so soon after the loss to Jim Gilmore.” Because at that point George Allen had already made his move, and a former Governor in Virginia is in very good position to do that, the most recent being in the best position.

So then I approached the only other person I thought could take him on, Jim Webb. But at that point he was so mad at Bill Clinton, he could spit nails. He was enraged because, and this gets too complicated to put in an oral history, but he had just written the movie, *Rules of Engagement*, or whatever it was called. It wasn’t a blockbuster, but it was set in large part in Yemen. And the, not the *Cole*—

Riley: It was the *Cole*.

Robb: The *Cole* incident had taken place, and in Jim’s mind—he’s very bright but he compartmentalizes. He’s very emotional as he compartmentalizes, and he and I had spent a fair

amount of time together because he broke ranks and campaigned for me in '94. In his mind Bill Clinton had singularly sacrificed *his* military and it seemed absolutely clear to Jim because they didn't have enough money to put re-fuelers on that route, and they had to put into port there in Yemen and that's where the *Cole* incident took place. Because he's already agreed—my chief of staff asked him if he could be part of the Veterans for Chuck Robb again once I had finally decided I couldn't find anybody else who would have a chance at winning and I couldn't leave the same way Paul Tribble had left being run away by a big monster coming down the track, so I agreed to do it. But Jim was at least nominally on board to support me in 2000 and then he must have called up George Allen, who probably never approached him, and said, "I'll endorse you," or whatever you want me to do. I don't think it had anything to do with me personally, he was just furious with Bill Clinton.

Riley: So mad at Clinton.

Robb: He was so mad at Clinton. He just could not see straight. But he's an interesting character in that chapter. He'd be interesting, probably, to get a reaction. I don't know.

Riley: We'll get him one of these days.

Robb: I'm not sure how candid he would want to be now about Bill Clinton.

Riley: Right now probably not very.

Robb: He'll need to get through one re-election, then he'll probably fess up on the whole thing.

Riley: We'll think about it. I asked you about the Cabinet. Do you know whether you were ever under consideration as a Vice Presidential nominee in '92 when he went with Al Gore?

Robb: No, but I was already in the Senate. I wouldn't have wanted to be Vice President.

Riley: Well, that answers the question. I didn't know whether they might have approached you about that because—

Robb: Al Gore was the first Vice President who made it look like it was a worthwhile office. And I knew how much Lynda's father had hated it.

Riley: *[laughter]* Well, that answers that question.

Robb: And if you think Al Gore was like Bill Clinton, look at me in terms of continuity of interest.

Riley: Exactly.

Robb: Al, in any event, the answer is no.

Riley: Well, the reason I raise the question is because Gore was a surprise to many of us who—I mean it was an unconventional pick because it wasn't a ticket-balancing pick, and if he's going

to go with someone with Gore's credentials, might he not have thought about a Chuck Robb who would have had some of the same—?

Robb: If he ever thought about it I didn't know about it.

Riley: He didn't come to you. Okay.

Robb: Or at least I don't remember anything. That was not my interest. I had made my peace with not running—it takes a certain passion. And I'd seen too much of it to have it look like it was the mountaintop. I mean, it is, but even when I went to the Senate it was, *Eh, it's another building in Washington*. Everybody else comes there and they're awed, and I loved being Governor. Governor's the best job I ever had. But I'm not the kind of a candidate that can make the kind of promises you need to make to be able to run for President. [Barack] Obama's now starting to pay the price for that.

Riley: Right.

Robb: In any event, once you get that off your plate—you just don't come back that way.

Riley: Of course. All right. We've only got about five more minutes. Let me pose sort of a general question and then I hope maybe at some point if I haven't completely scared you off that I might come see you at a later date and maybe we can get at some of these other things?

Robb: Sure. Be happy to.

Riley: Let me ask the general question. President Clinton had a very hard time with Congress the first year he was there. I mean there were concerns about the state of the Congressional relations shop, but more than that there was a period where this new Democratic President is trying to learn how to operate with a Democratic Congress. Do you have any reflections on that period? Do you think that he missed some opportunities? Or—

Robb: Probably did, but because I was an insider with him I didn't feel any of that. I mean his man really was David Pryor in the Senate, going way back. But I was one of the handful of people that he was already very comfortable with and would invite over for doing other things. I even got to show him places in the White House that he hadn't seen yet.

Riley: No kidding.

Robb: We took and showed him—

Riley: Tell me. You went over with Lynda, I guess? This would have been soon after they got in office?

Robb: Yes, it was whenever they first started having people over. I don't remember when it was. It may have been for a movie, too. Or dinner or whatever, but we were up in the family quarters and—we went to a couple of the rooms just to point out who'd been in them. He'd undoubtedly been through all of the rooms already but didn't yet really know one area. So I showed him in the solarium, then I showed him where Lynda and I got engaged and showed him where in the

Queen's sitting room I'd asked Lynda's father for her hand in marriage. I just talked about some personal things, but he just absorbs all that like a sponge and he remembers it all. So he seemed interested and Hillary seemed interested in it at the time.

You're not doing Hillary, but I have to confess that I didn't see the special qualities that she had—I didn't have anything against her, but Bill and I went on a trade mission together when we were Governors over to Taiwan. Happened to be on Double Ten Day, which was a big day for them. We were the only two Governors over there at the time and we'd go off and do all our government things and let the girls go wherever they might and we'd get together for dinner. I remember Bill could just come pie-eyed and we'd get together for dinner. It was hard to keep up with him. [laughter] I guess that's just the Bubba in him. Either that or he was throwing 'em—

Riley: I don't know, because he doesn't drink much. The impression that I've gotten is that he doesn't drink much.

Robb: Yes, I think that's right now. I'm not sure that that was always the case—

Riley: Not sure it was true then. Interesting.

Robb: Those are small drinks but they will do a lot of harm. I remember that I wanted to quit before he did. But the point I was making is that I had just looked upon her as an attractive, very bright lady but it wasn't until after the nomination was locked down, it may have been the convention. We were going over to an event honoring them and Lynda went into detail about how impressed she was with Hillary. I guess it's just my male prejudice—what's the name of the word I'm searching for?

Riley: Chauvinism?

Robb: Male chauvinism. Yes. Male chauvinism. I didn't have anything against her at all. She was very nice, but I just didn't pay that much attention to her is the truth. And I felt pretty silly after that—and so I started watching her and then when she came over to give her first brief to a number of Senators on health care, it was a tour de force. And I thought to myself, *How did you get so attracted to this Bill Clinton guy that you missed Hillary Rodham Clinton?*

Riley: Interesting.

Robb: So I was a slow learner on that one. I recognized it in him immediately. But she wasn't playing as much of an out-front role then.

Riley: Exactly.

Robb: You know, I'm not a traditional good old boy by any means, but it was just guys getting together, not ignore the ladies, but just guys getting together to talk policy or tell stories. And so I was late in recognizing just how talented she is and how perfect they were in a team too, notwithstanding all the difficulties—any marriage has some difficulties—that he wasn't the only one who had made his bones. Anyhow. I think as Secretary of State she's doing a superb job. I probably shouldn't say anything but I'm not sure Lynda and I voted the same way in the primary. I thought it was so important and I was impressed by Obama in any event, and I suspect that

that's the way we probably broke down. We were both fully supportive either way in this case. I'm not sure that she could have been as successful as President, but she's in the right spot right now and she's just doing a very good job.

Riley: Well, I appreciate your letting us know that there was a development in this, that it didn't start that way.

Robb: It wasn't that I thought that she wasn't worthy of him at all. She was a great conversationalist, but there's a lot of great conversationalists out there and so if your spouse and his spouse go off together and they do all their things together while we're doing the government things, you just don't notice. Or maybe you're just a little slow on the pick-up.

Riley: Maybe so.

Robb: But anyhow, I recognized very unique talents in him before I recognized very unique talents in her.

Riley: Well, I'm going to get in trouble here if I don't bring this to a conclusion, because I've got to get you to another meeting here right now. We got through a little bit of this but if—again, this is fabulous, it's very helpful. If we can't get to the rest of it I will understand, but if you're amenable to me coming to see you at some point—

Robb: Or we can discuss some of this over the phone.

Riley: I don't mind making a visit at some point.