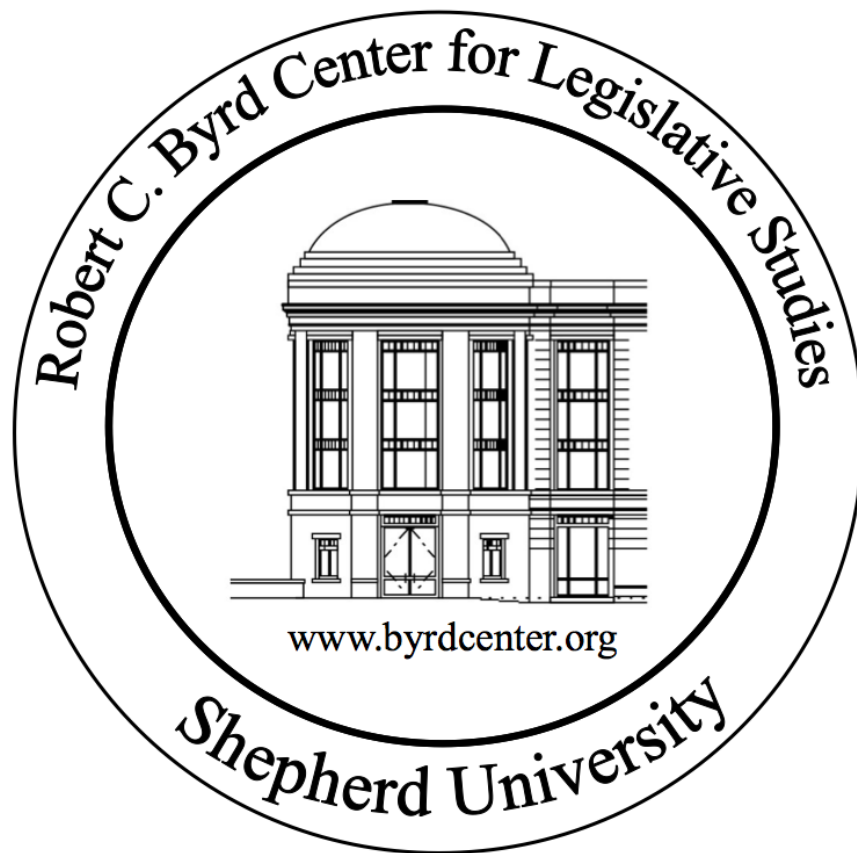


Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project

Oral History Interview

Dr. Ray Smock

September 5, 2012



Preface

By James J. Wyatt

Dr. Ray Smock has served as the Director of the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies since its dedication in 2002. He was Historian for the U.S. House of Representatives from 1983-1995 and has contributed to and consulted on numerous academic and public history projects, including the 4-volume *Encyclopedia of the United States Congress* (1995) and *Landmark Documents on the U. S. Congress* (1999). He was historical consultant to the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. An alumnus of Roosevelt University in Chicago and the University of Maryland, College Park (Ph.D.), he co-edited the 14-volume documentary series *The Booker T. Washington Papers* and wrote a biography *Booker T. Washington: Black Leadership in the Age of Jim Crow* (2009).

In this wide-ranging discussion, Smock retraces the path by which he became a public historian, explains how he came to know Senator Byrd while working on the Constitution's bicentennial celebration, and details the development and construction of the Byrd Center. Smock places Senator Byrd among the most notable and accomplished figures ever to serve in Congress and touches on the Senator's expert knowledge of the Constitution and the Senate's rules and protocols. He remembers a man dedicated to maintaining Congress' position as a co-equal branch of the federal government, detailing Senator Byrd's preference for forging pragmatic, bipartisan agreements and his passion for mentoring new Senators. Smock also comments on Senator Byrd's West Virginia background, core values, work ethic, and his evolving positions on issues ranging from flag burning, war, and racial equality.

About the interviewer: Alan Sturm is a retired educator, former teacher, principal, and assistant superintendent of Upshur County Schools. He also served for two terms on the Jefferson County Board of Education. He has a BA in history from West Virginia Wesleyan and an MA in Public School Administration from West Virginia University. He has made the study of West Virginia political history his lifelong interest, and he has been conducting interviews for the Robert C. Byrd Oral History Project since July 2012. He lives with his wife, Libby, in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Interview # 1, September 5, 2012

Sturm: Today is Wednesday, September 5th, 2012. I'm Alan Sturm. I'm working with the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies on the oral history segment of the Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project. Today, it is my pleasure to be speaking with Dr. Raymond W. Smock, the Director of the Byrd Center. We're in the Conference Room at the Byrd Center for the interview. Dr. Smock is a native of Harvey, Illinois; he earned his PhD in History at the University of Maryland. Prior to his coming to the Byrd Center, Ray served as Historian of the United States House of Representatives [1983-1995], he has served as President of the Association for Centers for the Study of Congress, and he is a Board Member of the West Virginia Humanities Council and a member of the National Publications and Records Commission.

Ray, you hold a unique position in the Robert C. Byrd saga – you're the person who was hand-picked to preserve the Senator's physical legacy – his papers, campaign artifacts, and so forth. While, at the same time you have, you will have a vital role in shaping his final place in history by programs such as the Legacy Project, which you've directed the Center to undertake. Some of my questions will reference your knowledge of Senator Byrd from a personal perspective, while others may ask you to answer as a historian, some will combine the two. Let's begin by talking about you for just a minute. You are a public historian – can you explain the role of a public historian and how it differs from other historians?

Smock: Well, I didn't start out to be a public historian, I started out to be a regular historian with academic training, and I thought I would eventually go someplace and wear corduroy jackets with leather elbow patches and teach and write books, get tenure, and live happily ever after.

But my career didn't turn out that way, although it did start that way. I spent the first fifteen years of my professional career as a documentary editor, working on the papers of Booker T. Washington, and much of that work was done at the Library of Congress, where I spent a good deal of time researching.

Public history is any kind of historical operation that isn't strictly in an academic setting. Although, some public history can be in an academic setting too; but it usually involves work in a government job, in private industry, working for the National Park Service, interpreting historical sites, working in various branches of the government, where they have federal historians. Many agencies have a historical component, from the House of Representatives to the CIA, and I was lucky enough to get selected in 1983 to be the Historian of the U.S. House of Representatives. That began my career as a public historian, because all my work there was to bring the history of the United States Congress to the public's attention, and also, my number one client – clients – were members of Congress themselves, who also needed to know the history of the institution.

Sturm: You sort of lapsed into the second question. As a former historian of the U.S. House of Representatives that certainly should establish your credentials to deal with the Byrd Center. What, specifically, were your duties in your former position, as they would relate to what you do here at the Byrd Center?

Smock: I worked for the House of Representatives and Senator Byrd is a Senator—he did serve a short time in the House of Representatives, but his whole career – his lengthy career, his record setting career, was in the United States Senate. So what brought me together with Senator Byrd was the fact that my office – which was originally called the Office for the Bicentennial of the House of Representatives – was charged with the planning of the two hundredth anniversary of the United States Congress and the two hundredth anniversary of the United States Constitution, back in the 1980s. The Constitution’s anniversary was in 1987, and the Congress that was established under that Constitution had its two hundredth anniversary in 1989. I was hired in 1983 to begin the process of developing a national program that would involve publications, exhibits, events at Congress and other places and to encourage scholarship on the United States Congress.

There was a big push to highlight these anniversaries, and so I ended up getting involved in an awful lot of things that I didn’t even know I was going to get involved in at the time, including working with the Postmaster General’s staff on designs for a commemorative postage stamp, and even inviting the United States Mint to bring flatbed trucks with coin presses to the front of the Capitol so we could have a ceremony where we actually minted commemorative coins right on the grounds of the Capitol.

So I got involved in a lot. My office was part of the Speaker’s office, and as such, I was sort of the liaison with the Senate Committee. The Senate had its own Senate Bicentenary Committee, and that committee was chaired by the Senate’s greatest historian – Robert C. Byrd. And so my early contact with Senator Byrd was in a few meetings where the principals, and I say Byrd being the principal of the Senate and Speaker [Tip] O’Neill, and sometimes Congresswoman Lindy Boggs, who was Speaker O’Neill’s designee to be the Chairwoman of the House Bicentennial Commission. We would get into meetings where those of us who were staff would sit and discuss our plans and get feedback from those who were in charge – mainly the members, and they would give us our marching orders and we’d go off and do it. And so the Senate had its own historical office and I worked very closely with Dick Baker, who was the Senate historian – he recently retired from that position and is now Senate Historian Emeritus – and Dick’s office and his staff and my office and my staff were the chief planners of the entire Congressional [bicentennial] operation, so that did bring me into contact with Senator Byrd on numerous occasions.

Sturm: At what point in Senator Byrd’s career were you selected to become the head of the Byrd Center here in Shepherdstown [West Virginia]?

Smock: That occurred much later. I was Historian until January of 1995, when for the first time in forty years, the Republicans gained control of the House of Representatives and the new Speaker was Newt Gingrich. I think I was the first, or one of the first, persons that Newt Gingrich fired.

And the reason that he could fire me was because I served at the pleasure of the Speaker, and he was the new Speaker he wanted to fire a lot more people, a lot of other people, but he discovered very quickly that he didn't control the whole body. There were people that worked for other members or worked for committees that he might've actually fired or found ways to replace. But my office [by then called the Office of the Historian] was under his direct purview.

Of course, the [outgoing] speaker, [Tom] Foley, who was the speaker until this time [1995], his staff was also obviously let go, but that was not Newt Gingrich's doing. In any event, so this is January 1995 and I'm suddenly out of work and [I] fell back on some earlier business experience that I had and basically started my own consulting firm, called "History House," a very clever play on words. [laughter].

House Historian became History House, [I] had business cards made up to that effect, but that was it—that was my business. I let people know that I was available for historical consulting and for projects. I did a book for *Congressional Quarterly* called *Landmark Documents on the U.S. Congress*, which I did as a for-hire project, and I also got a job working for the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, which was under construction and being planned in the late 1990s. But also at that time, I was approached by the former Secretary of the Senate, who was a very close colleague of Robert C. Byrd, and that was Joe Stewart. Joe Stewart was a long time Secretary of the Senate, he had served starting as a senate page many years ago and was just one of the top Senate staff people, and he was a close ally of Senator Byrd.

Senator Byrd had begun to think about his eventual retirement, or at least the [expression of] his concern that his records be preserved for the future. Back in the 1980s he had made the first overtures toward that by sending about a hundred boxes of his papers including a lot of microfilm to West Virginia University in Morgantown, and there it sat for the longest time – it was basically stored there, it wasn't open, it wasn't processed, it wasn't there for research. And then as he got closer to thinking about where he wanted his papers to be, he started thinking more of a place where congressional research could occur, a place where members of Congress, staff members, others might actually come and speak, and so he picked Shepherd University – Shepherd College then – because it was only sixty-five miles from Washington, D.C. So, it's the closest West Virginia university or institution of higher education in proximity to the nation's capital. And so the plan was to hire someone to begin the process of thinking, what would we do, and how would we establish such a place, and what would it do, what would it look like, how much would it cost? And so Joe approached me, and I started going to Washington as a consultant, paid on a per day basis as a consultant to meet with Joe and a number of other current and former members of Senator Byrd's staff. We would have lunches at the 116 Club, which was a private club, not far from the Senate office buildings in a townhouse that had been converted into a club many years ago, and it's a place where lobbyists and members and top staff people can go for private lunches, not at regular restaurants. The food was good, and you could get business done. Joe was one of the founding members of that club.

At those meetings we would discuss [things like] the location and what we would do and how we would make this happen. And then they gave me the specific assignment, saying, you know, just blue sky this, think of what you would do, work with the Shepherd College officials and decide what we can do on that campus and then come back to us with a report about what you'd like to do. And that was that was my main assignment. So we met and discussed those plans over a period of time. The first plan that I came up with was a little bit too elaborate, although they had said go ahead and blue sky it, the College was willing to give us a nice piece of land where this could go and it would be not too far from the Shepherd's President's residence, the Popidicon here on campus where there were some tennis courts and other things.

But that land [is now] the construction [site] for the second phase of the Center for Contemporary Arts. That was the land we first looked at. I thought of a separate, free-standing building that would have a two-hundred and fifty seat auditorium. It would have an archival facility, classrooms, and meeting rooms and be a place where we could have interactive television broadcasts. I envisioned a satellite [dish] on the roof so that we could do programming and send it anywhere we wanted to. And this project was going to cost in mid-1990 dollars about thirty million to thirty-five million dollars. So, I had an architect draw up some nice drawings, and the way they did it made the building look good [and] even included trees in front of it and everything else. And then I presented that to Senator Byrd and the group that I was working with, and they said wow, this is way too expensive! [laughter]

But I hadn't wasted all that time because a lot of the elements that I needed were there. Part of my work was to go around and look at other Congressional Centers that are around the country. And I also visited several Presidential Libraries to see how they had set things up, although what we were talking about was a much smaller scale than a Presidential Library. Eventually the thing that made this project work was when I looked at Shepherd College's Library, at that time, it was [a] totally inadequate facility for what was needed for a growing college, soon to become a university. There were hardly any spaces for computers. It was an old-fashioned library that had been just filled with books to every nook and cranny. Student study space was minimal and as I say, computer facilities were woefully inadequate.

So the plan became that we would modernize the library, expand the library by more than a hundred thousand square feet, and that part of the library would be designated as space for Senator Byrd's archive and a smaller auditorium, fewer classrooms, a suite of offices for a staff would become part of that library complex. And so that became the plan, and we went back to the architects with a new concept and we also involved Shepherd's people [who] got involved in it, the librarian and the other officials from the President on down were involved in discussions about that project. We came up with a good plan and a good design.

Sturm: At this point you were still a consultant though, you weren't . . .

Smock: I am still a consultant . . .

Sturm: You hadn't been hired yet as director . . .

Smock: I'm working on a consultant fee basis and by now, by this time, it's the late '90s, probably about 1998, 1999 and nothing has really happened yet other than the plans had been formed. And then the issue became how to raise the money. Of course, that's been in consideration all along and it was obvious with Senator Byrd as the Chairman of the Appropriations Committee and all the things that he was able to do and bring to West Virginia in terms of support for higher education, infrastructure, everything down the line. As you know, beginning in 1989 Senator Byrd became Chairman of the Appropriations Committee and gave up his leadership position. He said that he wanted to become West Virginia's billion dollar industry.

Sturm: I remember that.

Smock: And of course it turned out to be more than a billion before he finally passed away, but we knew we were probably going to receive some federal money for the project, we also wanted state money involved and I made several trips with Joe Stewart to visit with three different governors of West Virginia before this project was put together, and the last [governor] being [Gaston] Caperton. The state agreed to put three million dollars into the project. The total cost for everything was going to be about eighteen million dollars. So, the rest of the money came in HUD grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, for the improvement – they had a regular program for this – for the improvement of facilities, you know the public facilities like a campus library, which is also a public facility. And so that's where the money came from. And then the construction started about 2000 and the building was dedicated in August of 2002.

Sturm: Now at that point, were you director or were you still a consultant at that point?

Smock: Well, I'm *almost* director. I was involved in everything from the very beginning – working with the facilities people here on the campus, and as I say other officials of the campus and as we sat in meetings and went over plans and decided where the restrooms were going to be on the blueprints and how big this would be and what kind of fixtures we'd have there – there was a tremendous amount of work on that, and it was a great deal of fun to actually be on the ground floor of building something like that. But, I was still basically a consultant. My pay as a consultant was taken from the funds of the architectural firm hired to design the buildings, Shepley Bulfinch, a Boston firm.

As the building started to go up, I would still come to regular meetings, we'd put on a hard hat, we'd come into the construction site, we'd go around with the crews, we would inspect what they were doing, there were a number of times when, you know, no construction job is completely full-proof, when there'd be major decisions about how to deal with something we hadn't foreseen and so I was basically the ramrod for the project all the way through – even during the construction.

While that was going on I was also spending time in Philadelphia because that great edifice – a hundred and seventy-five million dollar museum on the historic Independence Mall, was going forward. I told those folks early on that they needed to have a historical crew, or historical

consultants working on that project. They had done everything to plan for the building and to plan for the exhibits, and they hired one of the top exhibit design firms – Ralph Appelbaum Associates, who did the Holocaust Museum in Washington – but they didn’t have any historians on the ground – right there on hand to actually sit down and start writing these exhibits, so eventually they did form a national consulting body of distinguished historians, but then I became the guy that was right there on the ground, working with them – talk about public history that’s another example of it. Here’s a major public museum where millions of people go through it every year.

Sturm: So you were essentially being clerk of the works of two jobs at the same time here?

Smock: I had nothing to do with the construction in Philadelphia, although I was . . .

Sturm: I mean the planning.

Smock: The planning.

Sturm: The planning and exhibit design thing, yeah.

Smock: Well, there was the construction of the building as well as what we were going to do once the building was built. In Philadelphia, I did wear a hard hat up there too. [I’d] go around the site and went down into the holes when they were digging it and met with the archaeologists, who were trying to figure out what was in that part of Philadelphia before they built the building.

Sturm: Let’s digress here just a minute while you’re talking about the Constitution Center. I think there’s a story about you and Ben Franklin that we need to get on the record.

Smock: Well, I can tell you that in a minute.

Sturm: Ok that’s fine. [I] want to make sure we get that on tape.

Smock: I guess that’s what I’m really famous for. [laughter] The planners had this idea. They had this big exhibit hall planned, and they knew what they were going to do with it pretty much, but nobody was writing the copy – no one was saying well, this is how the museum is going to lay out, this is the way the exhibits are going to look in here, and this is what the concept is – you have to have that before you can turn it over to the designers and then they know what to do with it. And one of the things that was planned was “Signers’ Hall” – this was to be a big room that had life-sized bronze statues of the forty-two people who were in the room the day the Constitution was signed – let me get that straight – there weren’t forty-two signers, there were only thirty-nine, but there were three guys there who dissented and it was important to show that there was dissension in the Federal Convention, so these were the people who were in the room.

They knew they were going to do that and they actually had a studio hired to create these bronze statues, but they didn’t know what the founders looked like, they didn’t have any guidance that they could provide to the sculptors and to the foundry that was going to do these things, so that was one of my main assignments, in addition to writing a draft of the script for the entire exhibit hall. I became the guy that did the research to see what the Signers looked like, what kind of clothes they wore, what kind of hairdo they were probably going to have, and how, as much as we could

determine their size, their weight, their height – nobody had a driver’s license that told you all those things in those days.[laughter]

Some of them you could learn about from looking at the diary entries and other things that people left behind. We knew that George Washington was tall, but you know, no one knew his exact height until he was actually measured for his coffin. And so in the course of working on all these details and coming up with the proper appearance of these gentlemen, I did research on Benjamin Franklin, that included going to the Smithsonian, where they had a suit of his clothes, that dates back to 1783, just four years before the Constitutional Convention, so it’s a pretty good indication of what size Franklin was. [We] measured that suit and it turned out to be the same size as my suit, same kind of big waist. These statues are made using the lost wax process. They actually create a – they use a real person for the model and you’re covered from head to foot in plaster. So I became the body that was used for the Benjamin Franklin statue. I went to the studio, it was Studio EIS – three letters, capital letters – Studio EIS, which was in Brooklyn and right under the Brooklyn Bridge as a matter of fact, on the Brooklyn side. And in that studio, I was stripped down – they actually provided me with a special pair of underwear, just a pair of underwear so that mine wouldn’t get ruined, and then I was covered from head to toe in Vaseline. . .

Sturn: Oh gee.

Smock: And then [I was] plastered from head to toe, actually the head is done by a different process – they put this green goop over your head – it seeps into your ears, goes up into your nostrils, they leave you one nostril hole so you can breathe and then they do that on your head until it dries and they peel it off, hoping they can get it off, and it becomes an inside model of your head – it really just gives you everything, and it’s a very amazing process. But when you’re in it, you feel like you’re in some diving bell – you can hardly hear, you have no real contact, sometimes people get disoriented when they are doing this process, so they have people there that are constantly asking how do you feel – they’re touching you and they’re pounding on you and saying “Can you feel that?” and all this sort of thing. So, that was a fun process too – I really enjoyed that because I was able to see how these statues are made from stem to stern – follow it through the whole process, from the research I did, through modeling the statue, and then ended up going to the studio and working with an absolutely fine sculptor, his name’s Stuart Williamson, [a] British gentleman, who was the final sculptor. Now, obviously my face doesn’t look like Benjamin Franklin, but the sculptor was going to create the Ben Franklin look, but they had to have dimensions that would fit the body, and so that’s why they did my head. And after [the statues] were created and I approved [the models] and went to the foundry in upstate New York [Tallix Art Foundry] where each one of these statues was made – I approved [all of them] before [they were] shipped back to Philadelphia for installation. I had to create [an arrangement] where these individuals were going to go to tell the story of what was going on in that room at the time – that was another whole process. So that was what was going on while I was up there in Philadelphia. At the same time here, back at the Byrd Center, we were getting ready to break ground and start this building.

Sturn: At what point during the construction or afterward, was it that you were actually named director?

Smock: The building was built pretty much built, the Constitution Center was just about to open – this was all in 2002 – the Constitution Center opened in July of 2003, and [at] the Byrd Center, we cut the ribbon in August of 2002. As both of these projects were coming to a close, it was early in 2002, I had two job offers: I was offered a Vice Presidency at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, to continue my work. They apparently liked what I had done with the exhibits, and they needed historians on staff anyhow, so I was offered that job, and then I was also offered the directorship here at the Byrd Center. And, even though the job in Philadelphia paid more and was a much larger operation overall, I liked the idea, at that point in my career, of being at this place – I'd grown fond of this area, I liked the idea of being able to keep my hand in Congressional studies and Congressional history and keeping my contacts with Congress. And the idea of being able to work with Senator Byrd's papers was particularly intriguing and challenging because he was, you know, such an important member of the Senate for such a long time. So my decision was really pretty easy. And I really liked the idea of doing this job, where I could be the director of a center that I helped create and to continue the research in Congress that I had loved so much when I was working there.

Sturm: At that point, did the Center have a Board of Directors or did Senator Byrd make the decision about who was going to be in charge here?

Smock: Well, obviously, Senator Byrd approved me for the job but [that] probably came as a recommendation from the working group, and the working group included his Chief of Staff, Barbara Videnieks, Joe Stewart, who I've mentioned, Pat Griffin, who was a long-time Hill staffer and who, during President Clinton's administration, was Bill Clinton's liaison to Congress, so Pat Griffin was among that group. Dionne Davies, who was a long-time friend of Senator Byrd and is a lobbyist for the American Banking Association. These were some of the people that were regularly at these meetings, and this is the group that recommended to Senator Byrd that I be the director.

Sturm: And of course your contacts with the Senator, when you were historian and working on the Bicentennial Celebration, had to of helped in the final selection.

Smock: Oh, I think so, I mean, he knew I was a Congressional scholar, and of course I got to know him back in the 1980s – we had a twenty-year history, he knew who I was. We weren't close. I was never on his staff. I was never someone who was involved in any way with Senator Byrd's office or the politics of his campaigns, that was not my connection. It was strictly as a historical consultant or in my role as Historian of the House and during the time I worked on the Byrd Center here, on all the plans. We had a lot of meetings with Senator Byrd where we would be showing him – he'd go over the blueprints, he'd look at the Center, he liked this, he didn't like that, one thing or another, and so he was a player in the decision-making, and my job was to be the staff guy, even though I was no longer working for Congress. I learned the culture of the Hill when I was there – you know who you are, you know you're staff and that Senator Byrd is the principal, and you can make recommendations to the Senator, but he makes the final decision.

Sturm: Well, you mentioned that you had known him for about twenty years and that your first contact really was when you were historian – had you had any contact prior to becoming Historian for the House of Representatives, with the Senator, either personally or politically?

Smock: No, but I certainly knew who Senator Byrd was. And going way back twenty years before that to the 1960s, when I was an activist in the civil rights movement, I didn't like Senator Byrd that much. [laughter] He was the enemy in many ways, at least from those of us on the outside looking in at Congress, which in the 1960s was dominated by southern segregationists, and I saw Byrd was one of those. He lobbied against, and filibustered against the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and he was no friend of Martin Luther King [Jr.], he saw Martin Luther King as a potential radical and a troublemaker. He changed his mind on all these subjects over the course of his career, and I changed my mind about him too. [laughter] I came to see him as someone who amazingly could throw off his segregationist past and go from someone who filibustered the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to someone who helped get funding for the Martin Luther King Memorial and was a champion of the Martin Luther King [Jr.] holiday.

Sturm: Well that sort of leads to where I wanted to go with this, some people who knew Senator Byrd contend that over of the course of his life, and particularly his political career, there were at least two and some people say even three, different Robert C. Byrd's; others contend that he remained basically the same person with the same core values and core beliefs and just modified his attitudes on certain social issues. As a man who had the opportunity to know and observe him on a number of different levels, which description do you think best fits Senator Byrd?

Smock: Well . . . I think his core values remained remarkably consistent, but how those core values were manifested changed as he learned new things, as he expanded his own experience base, and as he continued his formal education. He was largely self-taught, but after he was in [Congress] he went back to school. So, his fundamental core values are basically [the same]. I wouldn't call him a fundamentalist in religion, but there is a fundamental base there, you know, he was a God-fearing person, he described his step-parents as God-fearing plain Christians. They didn't go around bragging about it all the time. He was certainly no radical when it came to religion, or fundamentalist, as we've come to see fundamentalism expressed in our time. But he believed the Bible, he believed his upbringing, he was a Sunday school teacher for many years, in fact, his Sunday school classes got so big – people flocked to them.

Sturm: Was this before he entered public office?

Smock: Yes. Yes. So, his Christianity and his base of values he got in the West Virginia hills never changed.

Sturm: You know it's interesting, you mention his church attendance and that sort of thing and I've followed Senator Byrd's career ever since he was in Congress and I don't believe that I have ever heard anyone discuss, either during a campaign or just talking about it, his church attendance. Do you know, did he and his wife and family, were they regular attenders of a church, and if so, what church did they attend?

Smock: I don't know how regularly he attended and I've never seen facts or figures about how much he attended. Of course when he was in West Virginia and when he was growing up, yes they did.

Sturm: I'm talking about later on in his career . . .

Smock: Oh yeah, there, the little church where his funeral was held, [Memorial Baptist Church, Arlington, VA] he spent most of his Senate career living in McLean, Virginia. Which is, you know, twenty minutes from the Capitol, and there was a little church there and I can't remember the name of it, cute little church, and he attended that fairly regularly. And I don't know if it was every Sunday. Yes, he did have a church and he did believe in going to church and he was not afraid of giving a hell, fire, and brimstone sermon on the floor of the Senate either. I just don't think he ever thought that there was any conflict between his religious beliefs and his duties as a member of Congress. And at the same time, he didn't push his religion on anybody else.

Sturm: But certainly, as far as I'm aware, it never was an issue in any political campaign.

Smock: No, no, I mean everybody understood where he was coming from, and boy, there's nobody that could cite the Bible better than he could – memorized – chapter and verse. We've got his Bible, several of his Bibles, here [at the Byrd Center for Legislative Studies], and they are underlined from front to back. From Old Testament to New, and in different Bibles, he would underline different passages, but I swear he's underlined the whole thing. And you know, he and Mrs. Byrd did read from the Bible regularly. He was studying it all the time, and he used it, he used it to inform his political opinions.

Sturm: That's something that I think is very important for people to realize about him. You knew him for a good period of time, would you care to, and you've already done this a little bit, but compare and contrast Senator Byrd, as you first knew him in the mid-'80s and with the Senator that he became in the last ten or fifteen years of his life.

Smock: I didn't see him much, when I first got to know him; he was already at the height of his power.

Sturm: I know, but you talked about the fact that the twenty years before that you were protesting him, so, you know, take it back as far as you want to compare and contrast what you first remember about him with what he became and the man you knew when you became director of the Center here and became involved here.

Smock: Again, my impressions of him, before I even began to even think of studying Congress, before I was involved with it when I was back in my undergraduate days in at Roosevelt University in Chicago, during the height of the civil rights movement, Senator Byrd to me was an abstraction. He was somebody I read about in the newspaper. I had no idea [what he was really like]. I had never met [a Congressman] other than my own Congressmen. I had never met my own Senators [from Illinois]. I had never met a member of Congress, so I had no real idea. I think most people [know their Congress members] from the newspapers, from the magazines, to some extent on television. But television, of course, was not [covering] Congress on a day-to-day basis until C-SPAN took that on in the late '70s with the House and then in the early '80s with the U.S. Senate, and people who follow that sort of thing now can get to know the faces and positions on a lot of these people. So Senator Byrd was more or less an abstraction to me, simply as one of those southern Senators, conservative senators. I was a Democrat then, [worked] my first campaign as a campaign worker with Lyndon Johnson's 1964 campaign and so . . .

Sturm: This is in Chicago?

Smock: This is in Chicago, and I was a deputy precinct captain [in Harvey, Illinois].

Sturm: Under Mayor Daley?

Smock: Yeah, in Cook County on the south side, which was a great experience in itself [which I'll save] for another time. So I was a Democrat, but I didn't like a lot of these southern Democrats who were against civil rights. Lyndon Johnson, of course, broke that mold, and he was one of those southern Democrats, but he was not a segregationist, and what he did in moving that legislation forward, once he got into the White House, was remarkable, but it also cost the Democratic Party the South. It's solid Republican now because of the civil rights issue and in any event, I wasn't a follower, and like most people, Congress is kind of an abstraction itself, except for the people that you know from your own state or your region. And, you know, you sort of follow presidents, because, and this is one of the things that's been difficult with our system – we don't understand Congress as well as we think we understand the Presidency, so I really had no inklings of Senator Byrd other than as an opponent of civil rights in the '60s.

I did begin following Congress very closely once I came to graduate school in the Washington, D.C. area at the University of Maryland in 1966, and I was going to the Library of Congress almost every day. There's the Capitol. I suddenly find myself reading *The Washington Post* and following D.C. issues now that I'm in this area and not in Chicago, and so I began to learn a lot more about the institution. I mean, it was right there. In those days . . . I would drive my car, I'm a graduate student at the University of Maryland – I would get in my car, I would drive from the University down to the Capitol and then start looking for a place to park so that I could go to the Library of Congress. And there were many, many times that I would pull up on the east front of the Capitol, and I would say to the police officer there, and of course they weren't armed to the teeth with assault rifles and bullet-proof vests – they were cops, and I'd say I'm going to go over to the Library to do some research, is there a place I can park over here? And they would point to a spot and say you can park over there. Now, there were days when I came up and they said get out of here because we got some event, but on a daily run in those days, the security was completely different and the east front of the Capitol, the parking spots that were there were available to first-come first-serve basis, unless you had your car reserved in some place.

Sturm: I do remember those days.

Smock: Yeah, and it was great. So the Capitol to me was always a great symbol. I love that building. I still get excited every time I see it. There's something about it, and it's just the center of our democratic experience, and I love it. And so I was sort of picking up Congress and Congress vibrations almost by osmosis while I was a graduate student working right across the street in the great Library of Congress. I was obviously following politics to the extent that I knew who the leaders were. There were certain people that I followed, such as Ted Kennedy and mainly because one of my first real introductions [to politics] was with Jack Kennedy and following his career and being very excited, because I was a young person, being very excited by his presidency and then

being absolutely blown away by his assassination. It was, if you look back on your life, and you see some of the big national events that have impacted your own psyche, my God that's one of them.

Sturm: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Smock: So following the actions of the Kennedy family became a touchstone for me in politics. And so Senator Byrd comes back on my radar screen in a big way in 1971 when he beats Ted Kennedy for a position on the leadership ladder as whip, and suddenly Byrd is one of the Senate leaders. Anybody that follows Congress tend[s] to follow the leaders, as well as the few people that you might have an actual chance to vote for, and so he came back on my radar screen about then. And I would pay attention to him and his career in the newspapers, and I would see him as he moved up the ladder, and as he became Majority Leader.

Sturm: About at what point in his career did his segregationist views change, and I'm asking that one as a historian, not personally.

Smock: Well, you know, I think Byrd's segregation views are very complicated and I don't have all the answers and I'm not sure how much of it we're going to find in his papers – we might find it from oral histories that we do with people, we might find it from other sources, I'm not sure how much we're going to find in the record.

We know of course about his background as a member of the Klan in the late '30s or early '40s, and that I think has not been adequately explored, because I'm not sure how many good records there are of that. So, I can't speak as a historian, because as a historian I have to see some records or I have to talk to people who I can trust or I have to do oral histories, and I have not gotten good satisfactory answers from anyone or seen any records that give me a good satisfactory answer to exactly how long he was in the Klan [or] what he did. We know he was an organizer, he was actually an official that really got a unit started in southern West Virginia – he was an organizer. He talks about that in his autobiography, which is not really an autobiography, but in his book, *A Child of the Appalachian Coalfields*, and the irony is that he discovered then that people liked him, that he had a good people skills, that he was a good organizer, and so the very qualities that he would later use to become one of the most effective senators in American history were strangely enough discovered when he was a member of the Klan – doing the actual organizing, which was a form of political organizing. As far as I'm concerned, the jury is still out on that. We do know, of course . . . that when I say the jury is out, the jury is out on all the details – we don't, I just don't know yet. I hope we find out more, it is an interesting chapter.

As he moved up the leadership ladder and as he became a national leader he started shedding that past, and I think if you can say maybe that was born of his desire to really become accepted in the Senate, completely accepted. [That] required him to leave some of that old stuff behind. I think it was more than that. I think he self-educated himself out of it, by his constant reading and his explorations of history, and so when I say that it was complicated, there were a number of factors that began to change him.

He was one of the first persons on Capitol Hill to actually have black people on staff, and that wasn't something he did for show, it was just something that he did. And so I just don't have

all the pieces put together on his racial attitudes. Certainly by the time he was in the leadership ladder, by the mid-1970s, he was a different guy in practical applications – outward applications and manifestations of his leadership. He began apologizing about then – even before then for his earlier indiscretions in the Klan, and I think at some point he referred to them as “youthful indiscretions.” He was hardly a youth – he was an adult when that happened. But certainly by the late ’70s and early ’80s he’s a different guy.

Sturm: So we [see] evidence here of a man who has actually grown, who has matured and developed as he served the public.

Smock: I think his transition is more visible because of his longevity in office. Most elected officials are not in public office for half a century where you can see that transition.

Sturm: Well yeah that’s true.

Smock: But in his case we can see it.

Sturm: But unfortunately some people seem never to grow, never to develop.[laughter]

Smock: No, no, I mean, I think that’s true, I think, he was perfectly willing to change his mind, he was perfectly willing to learn new evidence, he was a great supporter of the war in Vietnam and was a real hawk on the Vietnam War. . .

Sturm: I remember that well. . .

Smock: And yet he got a new world-wide following in his later years, as an old man, because of his principled stand against the war in Iraq. And so, this is what makes any political figure fascinating, and I think, what I’ve learned in my fifty years as a public historian or as a historian, as someone who’s thought and studied history, you got to accept the ambiguity that is in all human life. And there’s a tendency in all of us to put labels on people, to try to figure out what motivated them, and what they stood for, and I think with Senator Byrd, we can look at certain chapters in his career and see certain motivational forces and certain things he stood for, but then if you compare them with later, they’re different.

Sturm: They’re different.

Smock: And even though, as I said earlier, fundamentally, he hasn’t changed his religion, he hasn’t changed his basic outlook; he’s a law and order guy throughout his entire career – that doesn’t change. How he determines what law and order means does change. He changed his mind on things like the flag burning amendment and saw that as something that wasn’t necessary. He, early on, I think, in his Senate career understood the significance of the U.S. Constitution and the importance of separation of powers. That is something that’s continuous through his Senate career – he masters the Senate rules early, he understands the power of the Senate, and he, more than perhaps most members of the Senate, appreciates the one distinction that Congress has and that’s the power of the purse. That’s the only bulwark that they have against unlimited presidential power, and Byrd, you know, in his book *Losing America* that he wrote about the Bush administration, which I think is a really fine piece of work, he was incredibly frustrated by the failure, not only of George Bush, it’s not a Bush bashing book as much as it is how disappointed he was in the where George

Bush took the country after 9/11 and how incredibly disappointed he was in the Senate for going along with that because Bush was given such extraordinary powers to wage war, like no president in American history had ever been given. And Byrd lamented that.

So all these things that Byrd stood for, all the things that he was, defy simple classification; he was at one time many things – he was a segregationist, later he wasn't. There's a consistency also in where he [came from]. I learned from my first boss, Speaker Tip O'Neill, one of the highest compliments that Tip O'Neill could pay someone was that they never forgot where they came from. And Byrd never forgot where he came from. And he drew strength from that background, even though he also had to overcome a lot. I think that part of trying to understand him is trying to understand his psyche. He was a guy with hardly any formal education who came out of the coalfields of West Virginia and suddenly he's thrust into the national spotlight. He is up against people who graduated from Harvard and Yale [and] come from some of the most distinguished families that American history has ever produced – Rockefellers and Kennedys and people like that. And here he is, you know, a former grocery store owner from the coalfields, and he could not [help] but have an inferiority complex to some degree. I think that the way he went about overcoming that was simply to be the best damn senator that he could be – to master the rules of the Senate, which a lot of those Harvard and Yale guys were not going to do because they were there because of their rank and privilege and their name. And he was just going to out-work them, and he was going to outsmart them, and he built his power on that – on working hard and knowing what he was talking about and knowing the Constitution. And those were the weapons that he armed himself with when he got to Congress, and that's what made him effective.

Sturm: I think you've answered that. I've always felt that you can tell something about the character of an individual by the way those work with him and for him feel about him. You had an opportunity to work closely with his staff, both as director and when you closed his offices after his death, without mentioning any specific individuals, generally how did his staff members regard him?

Smock: Oh, they loved him. I think that that's fair to say. I think some of them may have been scared of him, I mean, I think he had a reputation that changed, again somewhat over time, but he was a stickler for a work ethic, and he expected his staff to get things done on time, he didn't suffer fools easily, and he could be pretty darn sharp in his criticism – you didn't want to get on the wrong side of him, and I'm talking again here about staff. But overall, by all indications that I've seen, not only from my own personal experience, but the experience of listening to others talk, and we recently did an oral history interview here, actually Dick Baker, former Senate historian did it for us, he's now on our board of directors, and Dick interviewed Louis Fisher, who was a long-time top scholar of Congress who worked for the Congressional Research Service, one of the leading experts on Congressional-Presidential relations. We wanted to talk to Lou for a lot of reasons, but one of them being that Lou Fisher's most recent book on Congressional matters, *Defending Congress and the Constitution*, he dedicated to Senator Byrd.

So in the course of that oral history interview, Lou says that he always had the impression that Senator Byrd's staff was one of the finest staffs on the Hill. And that he always had good dealings with them. When you talk about staff, every senator has levels of staff of people, and Senator Byrd was Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, either chairman or ranking member, depending on whether the Democrats were in control of the Senate or the Republicans, and of course, and that's an incredibly central, important committee, and you have staff on that committee. Then you also have your leadership staff when you're a leader, and you have your regular staff that runs your Senate office and deals with all the people who are coming to see the Senator. Whether they are from West Virginia or whether they're lobbyists from Lockheed-Martin or whatever, or foreign heads of state.

If you're in leadership, they go to see you in your leadership offices usually, but Senator Byrd had his leadership office in the Capitol, he had the appropriations office with a beautiful ornate office with a great big desk and angels and other figures painted by Constantino Brumidi himself – the great painter of the Capitol back in the 1860s. So you're sitting at a table underneath those kinds of paintings and frescoes, and then you have his office in the Hart Building, where he had his personal mementos and where he spent a good deal of time when he wasn't in leadership offices. He would meet people there, where his office walls were covered from floor to ceiling with awards and documents and photographs of famous people who signed them – he loved to put things up on the wall, so it was a very comfortable office to go into. And so, in all these places, his staff was always efficient, always mindful and, you know, he had rules about mail, if someone wrote to the Senator and it came in on a Monday, they had till Friday to get it out – a reply. If it came in on Friday they still had to get it out in Friday. [laughter]

Sturm: That's probably a pretty good policy.

Smock: And he was a stickler for how these letters looked, their punctuation, their spelling, he often told staff that this may be the only letter that this individual ever gets from a member of the Congress, or from a Senator, House member, whatever, and I want it to look good, and I want it to reflect well on this office and also on the Senate and that kind of business sense about how the office was run. He could be dictatorial about that, and the staff understood that, and they performed, I think, very well to meet his demands.

Sturm: Was he prone to fire people who didn't meet his standards?

Smock: I do not know that, that's something we might find out as we do interviews with other staffers, I think he probably, like most Senators, anybody that's been in the Senate for fifty years, I'm sure he fired people. But I don't know the number, and I don't know the details.

Sturm: I meant not necessarily the number, but did he . . . he did not apparently establish a pattern of firing people, he fired them . . .

Smock: He had the . . .

Sturm: for a good cause, because I know a lot of the staff members were there forever.

Smock: There's a loyalty and an affection that Senator Byrd's former staff have for him, and when he died, some of those staff persons had been there for ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty years working for him. As he got older and as he got more feeble, he depended more and more on those on staff that had been closest to him, and they rose to the occasion. And he was pretty weak towards the end, but, you know, even almost up to the end, he could still think.

Sturm: Even though . . .

Smock: Even though he had a hard time delivering his speech, and this palsy that he had, which was a benign palsy, but the shakes that he had in his hands grew continually worse and gave him the appearance that he perhaps was more doddering than the actual truth, but his strength did wane towards the end, as you might expect.

Sturm: You mentioned his death, and I know certainly that the staff it must not have come as a surprise, because all America watched him become more and more feeble and self-deteriorate, but given that, what was the reaction when he died and when you went in to close the offices?

Smock: Well, that last time he went into the hospital, we knew he was sick, he'd been in and out of the hospital a number of times, and he was failing. He was getting weak, but he went into the hospital and just never came out. So it was a shock even though he was an old man who was ill. The actual event was a shock to everybody, and I don't think anybody in the office was prepared for it, even though you could see it coming.

The first thing we had to deal with was the Senate rules which required that when a member dies in office, you have sixty days to clear out the office. And Senator Byrd had been there for more than half a century. He had store rooms the attic of one of the office buildings, and if you're a leader, you might get another storeroom. I think Senator Byrd had about four of them. [laughter]

In addition to his leadership office and his office in the Hart Building, we had to [pack up] his district offices in Charleston and Martinsburg, and his home. We had a lot to deal with. We had sixty days to get out of there, to make this transition, and luckily, of course, the Byrd Center was up and running, and we were ready for this from our end of it, but the [Senator's] staff wasn't ready yet. We didn't really [get started] until long after the funeral, it was probably three weeks after the Senator's funeral that we started going down [to the Capitol], and we'd had a few conversations about it earlier. In fact we had those immediately, but to actually go down there and start thinking about what's going to get moved and what we're going to save and what's going to go out of there, that really took a little longer. So, we really had only about five weeks of hard work to deal with the Capitol. The home and other things could take longer. The staff was still in shock of course, and here I come as the curator of the collection, and I bring a few of my staff people in there and we are the people who are dismantling every symbolic thing that's in that office.

I think the staff held up under that beautifully. But there were some times when we had to be very careful that we didn't unintentionally offend someone by being a little too business-like and cavalier about the things were taking off the wall and things that we were doing because, at that point, his staff was still in charge of things. But it's a transition period, and the Byrd Center is becoming the curator and the place where this goes, and we're under the directions of the [Byrd]

family at that point and not his staff. And so that was a negotiation, and I think anybody that has ever gone through this understands that's a negotiation, and if you do it in a professional manner, and everybody did, then you get through it, because I was in shock too.

Sturm: Oh I'm sure.

Smock: Although not to the extent that those who spent their entire lives working with and close to him, and certainly not like the family. But we got through that all. But there were times when [Byrd's] staff would come in and they would see me and my staff sitting in Byrd's office taking things out of picture frames. . .

Sturm: Oh.

Smock: And they'd say why are you taking that out of that frame? That's one of his favorite pictures. And I'd say we're taking it out of this frame because we want to preserve it for a longer period of time than it's going to last if it stays in this frame, because as you can see it's fading away, it's been hanging on the wall too long – we're going to save this picture. And so they had to understand that we were in the preservation business, not in the display business.

Sturm: You had a rough job, had to be, let's change directions just a little bit. Over the years Senator Byrd established very close relationships with some very powerful Republicans – John Warner, Bob Dole, Ted Stevens come to mind; was it his style generally to reach across the aisle to try to solve partisan problems on a bipartisan level?

Smock: I'm going to be interviewing some of those gentlemen. I hope to ask them that directly as part of our oral history program. From what I've heard, what I've read, [from] what some of the other senators have said, and what I did experience while I was there, was that Senator Byrd did reach across the aisle. He was interested in working with anybody that he could in order to make something happen. He was a pragmatic politician, he was not an ideologue. He came into the Senate and became part of and loved the institution of the Senate. He loved its congeniality, and the Senate, in order for it to work, must work on consensus.

You've got a hundred men and women who are in that body, and they collectively have to make things happen. In the House you have much more direct party control, where the House runs by numbers, you can only speak for so long a time. But the Senate has unlimited debate, and it also has a style about it of working through consensus. Byrd mastered that – he learned from people like Lyndon Johnson, he learned from Richard Russell, great Senate leaders and who were his role models on how to get along and how to convince someone and also, as he moved up the leadership ladder, he did favors for people – lots of favors. He would go out of his way to help people and to be friendly and to reach across the aisle – it wasn't much of a reach, it was not a reach, these are people, the Senate is a small body, and they know each other, and they're in constant [contact]. It's like a very special club, and Byrd was proud to be a member. So it wasn't really a question [earlier in his career]. We ask that question now in 2012 because there's such damn partisanship, it seems so extreme that one party won't even talk to another. The public's sort of that way too. I don't think Byrd ever operated that way from day one till the end.

Sturm: Staying with the Senate, over the past several years, several members of the Senate, Hillary Clinton and Barbara Mikulski, just to name two, had praised him for efforts to assist them when they were newly elected senators. From what you've seen and what you know about him was this his standard method of operation for all new senators, or did he pick and choose those that he felt might have some more of a, I don't know, more value than others that would over the long-haul be in his best interest to work closely with?

Smock: As he became the senior senator in so many ways and the master of the Senate rules, members of the Senate from both parties would tell their new members, you got to go see Senator Byrd, you really need to go listen to him, you really need to go learn from him, and Byrd really relished the role of introducing new senators, Republicans or Democrats, to the Senate. He liked playing that the role of the keeper of the Senate's [history]. Well some would call him the Soul of the Senate, keeper of the Senate's flame, protector of the prerogatives of the Senate, he took those roles seriously, and senators did take the time to come and see him. Bob Dole has spoken about this openly on a number of occasions, when he was in the leadership. When Dole was the Majority Leader and Byrd was the Minority Leader and Dole was trying to figure out how to get something done in the Senate, he would come to Byrd and present him with the problem. How do I get this done? And Byrd would tell him. It was a matter of [making] the Senate work that was the issue. I know that Hillary Clinton did pay her respects to Senator Byrd. I think Barack Obama did when he came in and because they understood they were paying respect to this man who knew the Senate better than anybody and knew the rules and what they got from him I don't know, in all cases you'd have to ask – I hope someday we can talk to Barack Obama, we can talk to other people about this.

[In the case of] Hillary Clinton, when Mrs. Byrd died there was a wake for Mrs. Byrd. Now she was not a famous person other than the fact that she was Senator Byrd's spouse, she was not the Senator, so, it was friends and it was family and few other people who were coming in, but there were some senators that came in and one of the first ones that came in to console Senator Byrd was Senator Clinton. And she sat there with him for the longest time at that wake and then talked to everybody else in the room before she left – was very gracious and it was just great to see her there. Ted Stevens and Senator Byrd had a special relationship because they were both on the top of the Appropriations Committee and often times changed jobs from majority to minority, they worked together and both of them saw fit to see that Alaska and West Virginia got their share of the appropriations, but when Ted Stevens wife, his first wife, died, Senator Byrd went to her funeral, he was the only senator to go, and Ted Stevens never forgot that. They were friends.

Sturm: Senator Byrd was very conscious of history in general and the history of the Senate in particular, now I want you to speak as a historian who has studied Senator Byrd and you know the history of the Senate, where do you think Senator Byrd will end up in the Pantheon of the giants in the Senate?

Smock: Well, I think he's going to end up among the giants. It's a tougher call in the Senate because you have so few senators, but then again, you have so few that are in leadership positions and so few that really make their mark on the institution and on the times the way Senator Byrd has. It wasn't just his longevity [or] the fact that he held all the records for the longest service, the

number of leadership offices held, the greatest number of votes cast, all these are the baseball statistics, and he loved those. But when you get beyond that and start looking at what he meant to the institution, and what he meant to the running of the Senate, and what he did on so many levels in relationship to the eleven presidents that he served *with*, not *under*, as he often reminded people, and his constant protection of the prerogatives of the Senate, he becomes a double threat for a top position. He's a double threat in the sense that he he's an insiders insider, he's a senator's senator, he did so much for the institution on the inside and so much for the its operation and then he played a major role on the outside in so many big issues, such as his fight against the line-item veto, more recently and his stand on the war in Iraq, which will keep him in the history books.

But if you're talking about a textbook, how many senators get mentioned in a textbook of American history or a general history of American history? So, you have to expand your view of history to include Congress and include government and include his relationship with presidents and working with presidents, I think his relationship with Ted Kennedy would make a terrific book because once Senator Byrd defeated Kennedy on the leadership ladder; it did something for both of them. First of all it put Byrd on the leadership ladder. And Kennedy had a wake-up call. He sort of assumed that he would get it because he was a Kennedy, and when he lost by a few votes on that fateful day of January 21st, 1971, that did something for both men. Kennedy became a better legislator after that. He saw himself in the Senate. Of course, later he would run for President, but he became a creature of the Senate too and became a very effective public advocate for a lot of causes and a very productive legislator. Well, if you're going to be a productive legislator, who's going to help you get your legislation on the floor and get it passed, but the leader of your own party.

So, I'm not suggesting that Senator Byrd is responsible for Kennedy's success as a legislator, I'm suggesting very strongly that there's a powerful relationship there [and] that no senator gets his or her way in the institution without the cooperation and the consensus of the leadership and of their fellow members, which they have to convince enough to get the votes they need. So Byrd plays a key role in that relationship.

Here at the [Byrd] Center [and other] Congressional Centers around the country, [there is] a lot of focus on leadership, leaders in the Senate going back to Everett Dirksen the great Republican Senator from Illinois, and there's Richard Russell's papers and Everett Dirksen's papers and Howard Baker's papers and a lot of these individuals played key roles in the Senate history. These collections and these centers around the country form the closest thing we have to getting at Congress as an institution outside of its official records. And, there's nothing comparable to the presidential library system we have, where we have these great museums and these fantastic archives, it's all administered by the National Archives, it's all maintained by federal money. To study Congress means you have to go to these centers, like ours.

We gathered all these centers together here at the Byrd Center in 2003 and we formed an organization called the Association of Centers for the Study of Congress and there's a lot of overlapping in some of the collections, so that, you know, if you look at Bob Dole's papers you're going to find stuff about Senator Byrd that's going to be different than what we see in Senator

Byrd's papers vis-a-vis Bob Dole. And you start adding all that up, and then we begin to see a picture emerge of what went on behind closed doors. We also begin to see how they impacted one another, and we think this is an important story to tell because Congress, as Senator Byrd so aptly put so many times, is a coequal branch of government, and if it quits acting like a coequal branch of government, it undermines the Constitution of the United States. If you undermine the Constitution of the United States, you get back to Ben Franklin who said "This is a republic if we can keep it." And Senator Byrd had that in mind his entire career in the Senate, that this was a struggle, that the Constitution, as solid as it seems and as solid as this country seems, it's a fragile enterprise that depends on the will of the people who are empowered at any given time – that's the bottom line. And he understood that, and his will was pretty darn good in terms of making sure that the Constitution kept working.

Sturm: Let's go to some personal aspects of the Senator's life for just a minute, because I know that you had a chance to observe the relationship between Senator Byrd and Erma, his wife. What was their relationship like, both prior to her illness and after she became ill and was pretty much confined to her home?

Smock: I really can't speak to that very well because every time that I saw Senator Byrd and Erma together it was in a formal situation.

Sturm: Ok.

Smock: I was not someone who went to their house and visited them and sat in their backyard. There were people who did that, and I certainly have heard plenty of stories from Senator Byrd's staff and from others about the close relationship that they had, and there was no question in my dealings with Senator Byrd that Erma was never far from his thoughts. She'd pack him a lunch every day, and he'd eat a bologna sandwich and drink skim milk out of a Ball jar. They were plain folks in so many ways. I heard him tell a story about one time how she was the one person that kept him from getting too big a head and he would get onto some high horse topic or something like that and she'd simply say "Oh, Robert." [laughter] And when he heard that it sort of straightened him out. Their relationship and their marriage of sixty-three years is a fantastic story in itself. But I was not an observer of their family relationship, and so whatever I know is mostly anecdotal. Other people are going to have to be asked about this aspect.

Sturm: Were you able to observe what affect her illness had on him at functioning at public events and . . .

Smock: Oh, yes. She was in decline for a number of years, and he was wearing himself out going back and forth because he wanted to be with her all the time, and there were a number of times when they thought she was going to die and she didn't. And the strain on him was terrific. I think it did affect his performance in the Senate. I think when he was in the Senate he was focused on Senate business, but he was easily distracted by any news of Erma. Sometimes he left the Hill on more than one occasion during the day to attend to her. And nobody had a better track record of working harder and longer in the Senate or not missing votes. Once she became ill, it did affect him,

and when she died, a good part of the life went out of him. And that's often the case with a couple that've been together that long – it's rare that a couple is together that long.

Sturm: That's true.

Smock: And of course, they were both in their 90s at that time, and so it was a terrible strain on him to watch her go and then to not be able to completely recover from it. The Senate was always the part of his life. It became even more so after her death.

Sturm: Everybody who knew the Senator has a favorite story, what's yours?

Smock: Oh gosh. I've heard a lot of them.

Sturm: A personal story, something that happened between you and him.

Smock: Well, this isn't the most remarkable kind of story, but it sort of gets into a window on his personality. When we were working on the plans for the Byrd Center, he asked me to tell him a little bit about the history of Shepherd College, and so I started reciting when the College was founded in 1872, and it started out as a normal school, and the building it was in used to be the courthouse. [I was] just going through some of the basic facts of the founding of Shepherd College. We're sitting in his office in the Hart Building at the time, sitting around a coffee table because we had the plans of the Byrd Center spread out, he was looking at them, and so he gets up while I'm talking and walks away and goes behind his desk to a bookshelf and picks the West Virginia Blue Book off the shelf, and he comes back over, and he sits down at the coffee table, and he starts thumbing through it, all the time I'm still talking about the history of Shepherdstown and Shepherd College, and so I pause and I said to him as he's thumbing through the book, "Senator are you double-checking my facts as I'm giving my little speech here?" And he just looked up at me and said: "Yes, sir I am." [laughter] And he went to the [West Virginia] Blue Book [where] West Virginia institutions [are listed] and the West Virginia Blue Book has these little capsules of information. He used the Blue Book all the time, and he was a stickler for facts, and he wanted to make sure he was getting the right information from me. And luckily, luckily, I think I had read the same Blue Book entry the day before and he seemed pleased that I got the facts right.

Sturm: That you read the Blue Book.

Smock: That I read the Blue Book; and that's a small incident, but I think its characteristic of how he approached things.

Sturm: After the last box has been opened, and I know that's a long way down the road and the papers have been filed and cataloged properly, what direction do you think the Center will move in?

Smock: This Center?

Sturm: This Center.

Smock: The Center is already moving in all the directions that it will continue to move in. This is something that is here for the ages, we hope—Byrd's legacy and studying Congress and the Constitution. We will come to a point where we have the bulk of his large collection under our control, we still haven't gotten there yet because we're processing it and there's a professional staff

of archivists who are working through that and all of these things take time. We are virtually through all of his legislative files covering his entire Congressional career. When we say we're through that [it means] we have processed the collection – we have taken it out of the rough folders, we've taken it out of the loose boxes and other things they were in, we put them in acid-free folders so that the paper is preserved longer, we put them in nice boxes, we've labeled the boxes, we've created a computer program that tells us what's in each box – not to the individual letter, but to the folder, the topic matter of the folder, the folder that's in each, and there might be fifteen or twenty folders in a box, depending on how many letters are in each folder. That's the way it is with any archival collection, unless it's a small collection where you can go down and say each letter is indexed, you really can't do it that way in a large collection like Byrd's.

We see the future of all these collections as being online research. Some scholars will come to the Byrd Center because they'll want to see the [actual] papers, they'll want to go through a lot of files, but we will take this history to the online world through the Internet and make more and more of the collection available to the public, but there are certain kinds of items where the privacy of the people who wrote to Senator Byrd needs to be protected. And we can't just put that up on the Internet. We do think there is historical value in this material, but we want to protect the privacy of those who wrote about their particular problem and so any scholar that comes to use those kinds of papers will have to use them in the aggregate, not to get any particular information about an individual. So, there's that part of the collection, and that's a big part – lots of letters there from West Virginians.

Sturm: I'm sure.

Smock: And that [part of the collection] will remain private—except for people who want to see it directly. [Letters written to Byrd from West Virginians] won't go on the Internet. [But they will be used for research purposes]. We have hundreds of thousands of emails that have to be properly presented, worked out, and that takes massaging. These things were created over a long period of time, and the systems under which email is created, just think of your own home computer, and maybe you're on your fourth or fifth computer, and the files that were on your first computer are long gone, you can't even remember them, or they're on some big floppy disk or some other kind of a disk that you don't even have a reader for anymore. So, we face those same kinds of problems with electronic records. Then the oral history program that we're conducting will continue to bring in more and more people who knew Senator Byrd to fill out this record, to create the kind of personal level and insights that oral history can do, that other records can't. And so, that'll go on forever, our public programs will go on forever, and our the staff here will change, and I'll fade away at some point and there will be other people that take over, but the mission will always be to explore representative democracy, to explore Senator Byrd's career, to understand the U.S. Senate, and to offer public programs related to these things. This kind of an enterprise should last as long as the Constitution I would think.

Sturm: I would hope. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Smock: I think that's probably a good way to conclude it . . . with the United States Constitution.

Sturn: Thank you very much for that and thank you for your time this afternoon.

Smock: Well, I appreciate the opportunity, thank you.

END INTERVIEW