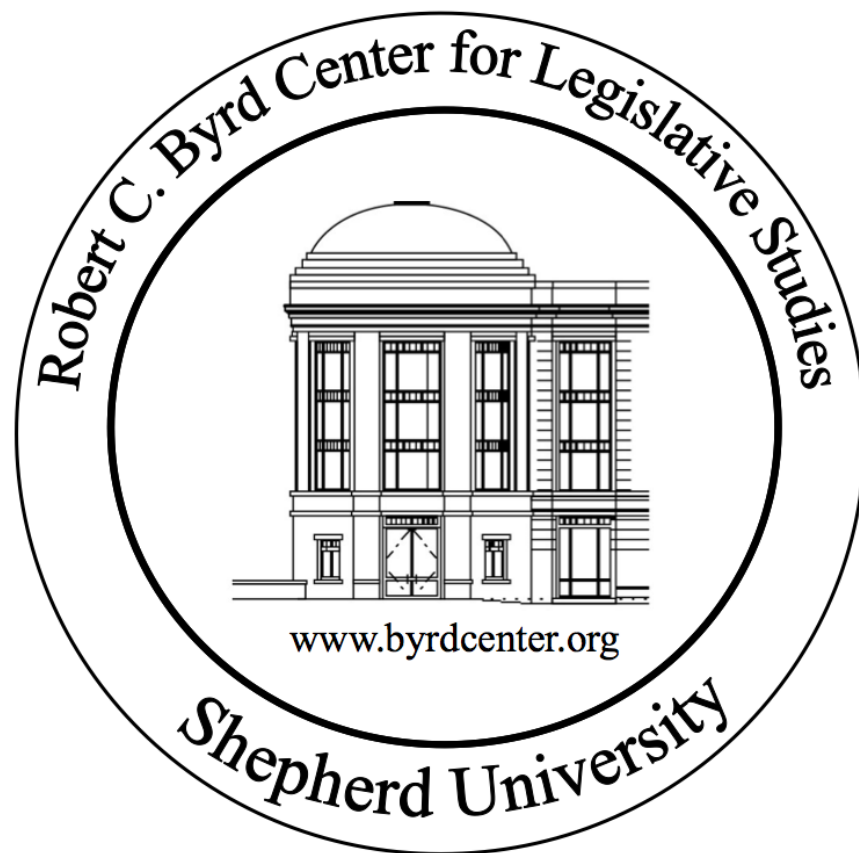


Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project
Oral History Interview
Governor W. Gaston Caperton III
June 20, 2013



Preface

By James J. Wyatt

From 1989-1997, William Gaston Caperton III served as the 31st governor of West Virginia. His initial forays into West Virginia politics came while working as an executive at McDonough-Caperton-Shepherd, the insurance company his father helped found during the 1930s. Caperton worked on several campaigns for Senators Robert C. Byrd and Jay Rockefeller during the 1970s and 1980s before defeating Arch A. Moore Jr. for the governorship. During his two terms in office, the governor worked closely with the state legislature on education reform and community and economic development, served on the National Governor's Association executive committee, and chaired the Democratic Governors' Association in 1996. Following his departure from office, Caperton taught at the John F. Kennedy Institute of Politics at Harvard University and at Columbia University. From 1999-2012, he was the president of the College Board, the organization that administers the SAT exams.

Governor Caperton begins by discussing how he came to know Senator Byrd while volunteering at political functions in West Virginia. The governor explains how Senator Byrd rose from a political unknown to a nationally known and respected political figure with a political constituency that included Democrats and Republicans. He describes the senator as a "fantastic campaigner," a "brilliant" and "tireless" worker, and a "suburb politician," who frequently spent holidays calling friends and constituents offering well wishes and warm regards. The governor also recalls the seriousness with which Senator Byrd took his responsibilities as a public servant, noting that he was a "traditionalist" who understood and respected his duties as a U.S. Senator as well as those of the presidents and congressman that he worked with on a daily basis. In addition, Caperton sheds light on the ways in which he and the senator worked together during his term as governor to improve and expand West Virginia's highway network.

Touching on the senator's personal life, Caperton charts the growth of his relationship with Senator Byrd from the early 1970s, characterizing him as a "straightforward," "honest," and "respectful" person, a "private man" who valued family, and a "good friend." He comments on the senator's strong religious faith and his deep regret at having involved himself with the Ku Klux Klan prior to entering politics. Caperton concludes by commenting on Senator Byrd's legacy, situating him in the pantheon of "great" American senators and as the "greatest" of West Virginia's senators.

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 hobby, and he has been working to collect interviews for the Robert C. Byrd Oral History Project since July 2012. He lives with his wife, Libby, in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Interview #1
Thursday June 20, 2013

STURM: Today is West Virginia Day, Thursday, June 20, 2013. 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 extreme pleasure to be speaking with former Governor of West Virginia, Gaston Caperton. Governor Caperton served as West Virginia's thirty-first governor from 1989 to 1997. After leaving the governorship, he taught both at Harvard and Columbia Universities. In 1999, he became the CEO of the College Board, which administers the nationally recognized SAT test. He retired in 2012 and has returned to Charleston, where we are conducting this interview at his home.

Governor, I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview for the Byrd Center. As you know, it's being recorded. Is that all right with you?

CAPERTON: Yes, sir.

STURM: I'm going to ask you two types of questions about Senator Byrd today. Some will be based on your personal observation of Senator Byrd during your tenure as governor and your life as a West Virginian. Others may be more speculative and based on a combination of your knowledge of the senator and your knowledge of West Virginia politics.

Let's begin, first, though, by having you tell us a little bit more about yourself, your background, and your accomplishments.

CAPERTON: Yes, sir. My mother was born in Japan. She was the daughter of missionaries. My father was born in Slab Fork, West Virginia, close to where Senator Byrd was born and where he grew up. My father always had great respect for Senator Byrd, and so for generations we've had that respect for him. My father knew him from a young man moving forward, so he was one of his great admirers for Senator Byrd's hard work, for his integrity, for his devotion to West Virginia.

So, I inherited that kind of respect for the senator. I then had the opportunity to observe those qualities, first as a person who worked in his campaigns, and as a person who was a citizen of the state. I always was very well received by the senator when I was working community projects. I also worked for him in most of the campaigns that he ran, in a very minor and unimportant job. It was important to me to be a part of Senator Byrd and his legacy.

I was educated at Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia, a high school where my mother's family, both her father and her uncle had gone to school. It was a very important thing for my mother that I went there because of its Episcopalian tradition and because of her father's being an Episcopal minister and her brother having followed his father in those footsteps. So, it was important for my mother that I went to this school. It's a wonderful school, and it gave me a wonderful education.

I then went to the University of North Carolina. When I finished the University of North Carolina, I came back to Charleston and went to work for a firm that was called McDonough-Caperton-Shepherd and Goldsmith, which was my father's [William Gaston Caperton, Jr.]. Banks Shepherd, who grew up with my father in Slab Fork, his father had been the doctor at the coal camp of Slab Fork. And Mr. Goldsmith was a gentleman that had lived in Charleston for many years. Mr. Shepherd, his father, as I said, was a doctor at Slab Fork, and Mr. McDonough was married to my father's sister. And they started that business here.

STURM: What kind of business was it?

CAPERTON: Insurance business, and they started that business in about 1936.

My father went to Virginia Tech, was a mining engineer and decided he didn't want to do that. He went to the University of Pennsylvania business school and then went to New York, where he worked and met my mother, who had spent one year at Hollins College. My mother, whose father was an Episcopal mission priest, became a nurse. And, substituting for one of her friends in New York, she met my father, and they were married fairly soon after that. My father and mother lived in New York during the Depression. Then, he came back here, and they started this insurance business.

I was very fortunate to have a wonderful mother and father. I have an older sister [Cary Caperton Owen] that's five years older than me, who's a distinguished educator and community leader in Asheville, North Carolina.

I came back from North Carolina and started in a very humble job selling insurance door-to-door, which was the hardest job I ever had. I was real glad when I graduated from that job.

STURM: Did you have those big books that the agents used to carry?

CAPERTON: No, we didn't have those books, but it was hard work. I learned an awful lot in that job, and I worked insurance until I ran for governor in 1989. I was also in banking, owned a bank, and I was in the mortgage business. I was entrepreneurial and ran these businesses, but I always had a great sense of public life and the importance of public life. I worked in most of Senator Byrd's campaigns in unimportant jobs, but it was important to me to be a part of what he was doing.

STURM: What did you do in those campaigns?

CAPERTON: I helped raise a little bit of money. In those days, you didn't have to raise a lot of money, and I just did what a starter in the political game does, which is kind of doin' what anybody asks you to do.

STURM: I understand.

CAPERTON: I was chairman of two of his campaigns, so that's when I really began to know Senator Byrd. I remember one thing that was very interesting. On one of his campaigns,

and I don't remember which one, one of his later campaigns, when he was Majority Leader. I picked him up at Judge [Kenneth K.] Hall's home, where he used to stay most of the time when he came to Charleston. He and Judge Hall were very good friends. I have great respect for Judge Hall, and my father was a good friend of Judge Hall. I remember, he got in the car. He said, "I'm very angry." Or maybe the better word is he was very upset. He'd had a meeting with the president, Reagan, and with a few leaders of Congress, his secretary of defense, and his secretary of state. He felt that President Reagan was very charming and said nice things for a few minutes, and then he turned the whole thing over to his two lieutenants. Senator Byrd didn't feel that a president, when he had the top people in Congress in his office, should have turned it over to his assistants or his cabinet members. That, when he was speaking to the top leaders in the House and the Senate, President Reagan should have had the conversation, which is, I think, pretty typical of Senator Byrd, in the fact that he was so much a part of the work that he did.

STURM: And I know he was a strong believer that the president wasn't his superior, but was a co-equal in the governmental process.

CAPERTON: He never said that to me.

STURM: He's said several times, though, that he never served *under* any president; he served *with* them.

CAPERTON: I've never heard him say that, but I always assumed it.

STURM: I understand, yes. [laughs]

CAPERTON: You know, Senator Byrd was a traditionalist, and he respected the power of people in office. It was very clear to him what the responsibilities were of the president, the members of the House, and the members of the Senate, how people would work together, and the whole process. He was not a casual man about that. He was a serious man, as you know, about how government ran, the history of American politics and American government. He was one of the most amazing people, maybe the most amazing person I've ever known.

So, the thing that I think of the most about Senator Byrd is—I've read a lot about him beyond just knowing him as a personality and as a person I worked with. Working with him as governor, I thought, was one of the most privileged parts of my political life. He was always prepared. He always knew the subject. He had strong views, well substantiated. He was respectful of the responsibility that each person had, whether he was the President of the United States or a local legislator.

He understood the ins and outs of government. As you know, he wrote that a three-volume history of the Senate. He was the hardest-working person I have known. He was not a person that spent his time in Washington socializing. He worked all the time.

I remember, he asked me when I was governor—there was a group of the English Parliament that met with the members of the Senate every year. One year they went to England and one year they came to the United States. One of the years I was governor, he was chairman

of that. He was unable to meet with the group on one day, and he asked me if I would have them for lunch at the Governor's Mansion. Obviously, I was proud to do that. So, I remember asking the leader of the English Parliament that was there, "What was your impression of Senator Byrd?"

He said Senator Byrd stood up and gave the names and dates of all the English royalty from its beginning, and he said, "If we'd put all this group together, we wouldn't have known half of what he knew."

STURM: That's amazing.

CAPERTON: That's the kind of preparation that he did, and he also had a remarkably retentive mind. I asked him one day, I said, "Senator, where did you learn all this, the poetry that you quote in your speeches?"

He said, "When I was in Congress I went home every weekend, and it's a long drive in those days, when there were no interstates."

STURM: It certainly was.

CAPERTON: From Washington to Sophia, and his congressional district at that time. And he said, "So I used that time to memorize poetry and other things that I then would use in speeches." As you know, he had a magnificent memory and a great ability to recall amazing facts and figures and dates. So, he was a man of great intellect.

STURM: Was your relationship with him totally political and professional, or did it have a personal aspect?

CAPERTON: Senator Byrd was a serious man who took his work very seriously. If you took your work seriously and he felt like you were doing a good job, he was also very pleasant to be with. As I got to know him over the years, I had some very wonderful conversations with him. Just the two of us sitting and talking about various subjects, anywhere from the building of roads to his opinion of world leaders, his opinion of people that served with him in Congress, presidents, particularly the State of West Virginia and what work needed to be done, and people he admired and respected and worked with in the state.

He was not a trivial person. He was not a person that slapped you on the back and told you a joke. He was serious about his work, serious about his life. I always liked working with him. He was straightforward. He was smart. He was honest. He was always thoughtful, and he always seemed to have time to spend with you on important matters. He never wasted your time, and he didn't want you to waste his time.

STURM: Now, you've mentioned a couple of different early contacts with him. What was really your first contact with Senator Byrd? How did you meet him to begin with?

CAPERTON: Well, I was just a young person that was interested in politics, not as a candidate, but just as a citizen. So, I would work on things like the Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner. I got to know him that way, and I helped him in his campaigns in a modest way. And, because of the closeness of where he grew up and my father grew up, he knew my family, and so I think that created an interest and a friendship.

I worked very hard, and the one campaign he was really worried about was when this— what was the name of that group? Two years before he ran, there was an upset of a lot of United States senators. NCPAC [National Conservative Political Action Committee]. He was concerned about that election because some of his friends and colleagues of real stature had lost. So I remember working really hard in that campaign for him.

You know, Senator Byrd was such a powerful person in his own right that he didn't need much help. I mean, he appreciated the support and help you gave him, and was very thoughtful. You know, on Christmas, he would call. He'd have long lists of his friends that he'd call, and he remembered people's birthdays. I mean, he was very attentive, very attentive to the politics of individual relationships.

STURM: Let me ask a question about that, because one thing that some people contend about Senator Byrd is that he really wasn't a party person, that he was not always in sync with the state Democratic Party, the he, more or less, had his own machine set up across the state and he ran on his own without necessarily coordinating what he was doing with the Democratic Party. Do you think that's an accurate—

CAPERTON: Well, certainly when he first ran, he had no organized support from—he was just a nobody, and he just outworked everybody. So I think, from the very beginning, when he was not getting support from traditionally political people, he learned to build his own constituency. At the same time, he never was a person that fought the Democratic Party. Lyndon Johnson, who gave him his real break in life, wouldn't have put him in those important positions that made him so powerful and important if he hadn't been a good Democrat. So he knew how to be a good Democrat.

STURM: I didn't mean that in the sense that he wasn't a good Democrat, but that he didn't necessarily, during election time, his campaign didn't necessarily synchronize with the state campaign.

CAPERTON: Yes. I think he had very much his own friends. He built relationships and friendships. He was just a superb politician.

STURM: As you look at him, you said he was worried and I know he made the statement, just sort of to paraphrase it, "Either you run unopposed or you run scared," to that effect. But do you think that he ever really had a serious challenge in his nine elections to the U.S. Senate?

CAPERTON: Oh, sure. I don't know that history as deeply as I would like to, but I think that the reason that people think he had easy elections was because he ran all the time. I

mean, on Christmas Day, he would spend all day calling friends across the state, wishing them and their family a merry Christmas. Now, he was sincere in that, but he was also smart about that. Because, when he would spend that day or he'd spend a lot of time calling up people, he was smart to know that, as important a person as he was, that that person he called and said hello to, he wasn't just calling the most important people in the state; he was calling people in the little white houses, you see. He had friends that were bankers, but he had more friends that were coal miners and worked in all sorts of places. He knew those people, he respected them, he liked them. So when he would make those Christmas calls, it was a wide variety of people that he didn't count on any machine to get him elected. He always accepted and wanted the help of people who politics was sort of their interest or their hobbies or whatever. People get involved in politics in a lot of different ways, and he knew those people and respected those people, but he had his own team.

STURM: Obviously, in his nine elections, if you look at some of the margins—I think one time he carried fifty-four counties—he had to have a broad appeal, not only to Democrats, but to the Republicans. How did he appeal to the Republican vote in West Virginia?

CAPERTON: Well, first of all, I think people really respected him for his hard work and his effectiveness. People were proud that Robert C. Byrd was their United States senator. So, first of all, he was a great United States senator. Second of all, he was a good communicator and a good politician, and he worked it very hard. He was a tireless worker, and brilliant. He could get so much done every day. The reason that he became so powerful was because he was doing the work in the Senate. When there was a bill that needed to be written or a bill that needed to be taken through, Lyndon Johnson wanted Robert Byrd to be there to do the work. He's a worker. I don't know how he got so much done. I mean, he was just tireless.

STURM: I've also thought Caro's book about Johnson, *Master of the Senate*, I always thought that was misnamed. I always thought that should have been about Byrd. [laughs]

CAPERTON: One of the things that you would say about that book is that one of the reasons Lyndon Johnson was so successful is he picked a good team. I suspect—I don't know this, I've read a lot of history about it, but when Kennedy was running against him for the—what was it? Was it the Majority leader? What was it?

STURM: It was the Whip.

CAPERTON: The Whip. When people thought that this Robert C. Byrd was running against Kennedy, what does that mean? He just whipped him really good, and I think the reason he did was because people realized that this guy was there to do the work and would make their jobs better. You know, when you're in a strong position, you want your lieutenants to be great, and I think Lyndon Johnson recognized that Robert C. Byrd would be loyal to him and was very capable, would do a lot of hard work. I suspect there were a lot of people that liked Kennedy and respected him and appreciated him, but when it came down to getting the work done, they thought Robert C. Byrd would—and I suspect that Robert C. Byrd did favors for all of them.

STURM: I'm sure he had, yes.

CAPERTON: When they needed the work to be done, they went to him and said, “Can you help me on this?”

STURM: Well, you brought up another interesting point there about the fact that Lyndon Johnson had strong lieutenants. Senator Byrd’s staff, he had one or two people who were there for a long, long time, but it changed like senatorial staffs do by their nature. Did he have strong lieutenants that you’re aware of that he depended on, or did he do most of the work himself?

CAPERTON: Certainly he had good people working for him, but I think that he was the hardest working United States senator. I think that he had good people that worked for him, but I think that he was not a person who accomplished what he did because he had a great staff. I think he accomplished what he did because he was who he was, and he had a very professional staff that worked with him and helped him do it. I mean, everybody needs a good staff. But there are some people who sort of rely on people to do a lot of the—he just did the work and he had good people that helped him. But, I think if you interview all these people, I doubt that many of them can name the members of his staff.

STURM: You and I were having trouble with one name before we started the interview.
[laughs]

CAPERTON: I always felt like, when I was governor or before, when I’d work with him in campaigns, that he had a very professional staff. But, he was a strong leader, and he relied on himself tremendously.

STURM: You mentioned you worked with him in campaigns. Did you actually do day-to-day campaigning with him during any of the elections?

CAPERTON: When I say I campaigned with him, I drove him around for a day or I would be the chairman of the Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner, and so I did tasks for him. I was never a part of his political strategy, and I don’t think anybody really was. I think he sort of had his own way of campaigning.

STURM: What kind of a campaigner was he?

CAPERTON: Fantastic, because he did it every day. He was terrific with constituent services. I think he called people on their birthday with sincerity. Christmas, he spent all Christmas calling people, wishing them a merry Christmas. He was a man of the people. A coal miner was very comfortable with Senator Byrd, and he also demanded the respect of the President of the United States and his fellow people in the Senate. He was tough, you know. When you went to talk to him, you prepared before you went to talk to him, because he knew what was going on.

I remember one time, I was in his office when he was no longer—the Republicans were in power, and he had moved into a small office in the Capitol. Do you remember that?

STURM: Yes, he was Minority Leader then rather than Majority Leader.

CAPERTON: I was sitting there, and it was a very small office, not much bigger than this room. His staff was all around him, had no privacy. It was just a very small room. Pinned up on his desk was a list of the people in the Senate. It was, as I remember, sort of in a prominent place. And I said, “Senator, may I ask you what that is?”

He said, “Yes. One of the bills I worked the hardest for was for coal miners and the coal industry. I lost that vote, and that’s how people voted. So in my job now, people come in to ask me for support and help. I very deliberately go to that piece of paper and look at their name and see how they voted on that. Don’t have to say anything else.”

So that was probably Byrd at his best political inside leadership, and that’s the reason he had followership, because he was serious about what he was doing. He didn’t come in and joke about that. He had a winning smile, but he wasn’t a jokester. He wasn’t somebody who’d said, “Let me tell you about the joke I heard last week,” or, “Let me tell you something that’s funny.” He was all business. Now, he would always ask me about my—say, “How’s your father?” But that was a serious question. He didn’t tell you the latest joke. He didn’t want to talk about sports. I think he went to one football game at West Virginia University and he stayed for a half. So he didn’t waste his time with that kind of stuff. He was all business.

STURM: Did you ever have a chance to observe him and the relationship between him and his wife firsthand?

CAPERTON: I did, and I really liked the way he treated his wife.

STURM: I know you mentioned that she did the cooking and he did the housecleaning.

CAPERTON: I really—you can feel my emotions when I say this, because he treated her with great respect, and he would say she was a coal miner’s daughter. He married a coal miner’s daughter. Mrs. Byrd did not have an education, I think no more than a high school education. When he would go on trips to Europe to meet with the kings or to meet with important people, he didn’t do a lot of that, but when he did, Mrs. Byrd always went with him. She would come to important political events, like the Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner. She often came with him. He always was very careful that she had somebody that was with her, took care of her—not take care of her, but with her.

STURM: Just to watch out for her.

CAPERTON: Watch out for her, because he was shaking hands. I think he had deep—and I was with him later in life when she was sick, and it was a big loss to him when she died.

STURM: Yes, she died before he ran for his last term, because I wondered if he would run after he lost her.

CAPERTON: But he had real respect and treated her with real respect, and that's one of the things I really admired about him. He didn't waste time doing things that most of us do. I like to go to a football game, and, you know, I've always been a very hard worker, but not like him.

STURM: On the one hand, sometimes he seemed like a real gregarious and outgoing person, when he had his fiddle and he'd sing and dance and that sort of thing, but then other times, he seemed almost introverted. How do you explain the difference there?

CAPERTON: Well, I think that he was, first of all, a public servant, and he was an ambitious politician. I don't think he ever really took seriously being president of the United States, but he took very seriously his job as a public servant and a member of the Congress and a member of the Senate.

He told me when he went up to Washington for the first time when he was a congressman, that he went to Georgetown and asked them, could he go to law school? They said, "Where did you graduate from college?" He hadn't graduated, and they wouldn't accept him. And then he went to Georgetown—I think it's George Washington—you'll have to check that out which one it was—they said they would take him as long as he didn't—he told me this story—as long as he didn't make anything lower than a B. They would take him in, and he could get his degree there, his law degree. He said, "I never worried about me getting less than a B."

STURM: If that's where it was, then that was American University. That's where he actually got his law degree.

CAPERTON: So, it was American University. I'm sorry. It was Georgetown that they turned him down, but American University took him. He could express himself with great confidence and great power, without being arrogant and without being showy about it. He was a marvelous, a marvelous politician. His ability to remember names was quite amazing.

STURM: I've seen that, yes.

CAPERTON: I remember he and I dedicated—or it's better for me to say he dedicated something in one of the national state forests where he'd gotten some money for developing part of the park. I don't remember exactly the details of that. I went with him. We had to walk like a mile down into the woods where they had this stage set up. There probably weren't more than fifty people there. I believe that he probably knew those fifty people, all of them by name. He used to, when he'd give a speech, he's always use people's names during the speech.

STURM: I've heard him do that many times.

CAPERTON: This was a small event, but he never took anything as a small event. He gave his best. He was like a great athlete that always played at the highest level.

STURM: What did he do for relaxation, or did he do anything for relaxation? Was politics his relaxation?

CAPERTON: I think his relaxation was really being in his home with his family.

STURM: A very private man.

CAPERTON: Yes. He would say, “Gaston, when I go home on the weekends, I clean and Mrs. Byrd cooks.” And, I think that was kind of the time that he relaxed. He wasn’t playing golf. He wasn’t going out with the boys. He was about being a good husband, a good father, a good friend, a friend of anybody in West Virginia, and he wasn’t going to waste his time watching a football game. He was just all business.

STURM: You mentioned the friend thing. Did he have close personal friends, or were most of his friends political?

CAPERTON: I think he had close personal friends. Most of those were people who he’d known in politics.

STURM: One led to the other?

CAPERTON: Yes. I was speaking about the judge earlier. He was a man that, I think, Senator Byrd had known when they were young, and when he came to Charleston, he always stayed at his home. So, I think he had old friends. He was never a person who forgot his old friends. But, he was all business.

STURM: When you were governor and he was in the U.S. Senate, what sorts of issues brought you two together, to work together?

CAPERTON: Well, he was always generous about that. We built a lot of highways while I was governor, and he used to always say, “I get ’em paid for, and Gaston builds ’em.” He’d never say “Gaston.” He said, “The governor builds ’em, and I pays for ’em.” That’s what he’d say.

I was always extremely, and for all the right reasons, very respectful of him. He was my elder. He was in the highest political position of anybody in the country as it related to anything we wanted to do in West Virginia. So, I always had great respect for him, and he’d known my family because they’d grown up in the community right next to it. He always treated me with—you know, he was a good friend. I mean, he had a smile on his face. He always made you feel like he was glad to see you. I considered him a dear friend, and we worked together in a really respectful—I mean, I knew who the captain of the ship was, but he never acted like he was captain of the ship with me.

STURM: How did things come about? Did you go to him and tell him that the state needed things, or did he call you and say, “Governor, I’ve got a chance to appropriate some money for highways. Can you use it?” How did these things—what were the nuts and bolts?

CAPERTON: Well, first of all, he certainly, by far, took the leadership on those things because he was the one who was able to get the money to do those things, but he was never a showboat. He was never somebody that tried to take the stage away from you. He earned the stage. There's some people that I've worked with in government that are trying to always take the stage. He had the stage because he earned the stage. I always had total confidence with him. I never felt like he was trying to put me on the back row or to take credit for things that I'd done. He was very fair to work with.

STURM: Well, did you all sit down together and talk about things that he could do for the state?

CAPERTON: Fred Van Kirk was my road commissioner, and Senator Byrd really liked Fred Van Kirk, and that's when he was getting a lot of money for the roads in West Virginia. I called him up and I said, "Senator Byrd, Fred Van Kirk is your road commissioner as well as he's my road commissioner. And when you want to talk about roads and stuff like that, you don't need to call me and ask me to have Fred Van Kirk call you or to come see you. He's your road commissioner, and you call him anytime you want to, and you work with him any way you want to."

He would have never asked me to do that, but I had total confidence that he was a person who would get the money. I knew that he would never do anything that would harm me, and when we would dedicate roads—we built a lot of roads while I was governor.

STURM: I remember that. Yes, you did.

CAPERTON: When we'd get up there, he used to say, "Now, I pays for 'em and the governor builds 'em." But, he was the leader on that. I was very fortunate when I was governor because he was able to get resources to do that. But, I had no problem telling him, "Fred Van Kirk is your road commissioner too. You don't have to call me."

Fred would go up and sit down with Senator Byrd, and they'd look at all the maps and figure out kind of where they wanted to do. Fred would usually come back and say, "This is what Senator Byrd thinks we should be doing, what we're working on." I mean, he was the one who was getting the money. He knew what needed to be done in West Virginia certainly as well as anybody else, and I had total confidence and trust in him. He didn't stand on the stage with me and say, "I'm the one that brought all these roads here and I've done all this." He would always say, "The Governor and I are partners in this." He used to say, "I pays for 'em and he builds 'em."

He was just a great public servant, and he had great instincts about how to get things done. He had great instincts about serving the people of this state. He was just an amazing man.

STURM: You've talked about roads. There are so many other facilities that he appropriated money for: hospitals, National Guard facilities, libraries. How did these come about? Did he contact you?

CAPERTON: No. There were a lot of things that he shouldn't have contacted me about. I mean, he did a lot of things that I was not at all a part of. He would always invite me to come. For instance, he got a lot of money for things like the Veterans Hospitals. I had no responsibility for those things. I had nothing to do with them, but he would always invite me to come to those dedications, which I always did. I was there to support him and to thank him for doing it, but he was the one that got all the credit for that. The roads and some of the things he did, it was sort of a partnership that we were doing, then he would treat me as a partner. When he did it, I would come just to support him. It was a very honest and easy—I never had an argument with him.

STURM: I was going to ask you, then, were there ever times that you disagreed with him?

CAPERTON: Only one time that I ever had a disagreement with him, and that was when [President Bill] Clinton came into office. The new secretary of education [Richard Riley] was a good friend of mine, and he called me and said, would I introduce Senator Byrd to him, because that was important for him to do that. I said I'd be happy to.

So, I called Senator Byrd, and it's the only time Senator Byrd was a little bit tough on me. He said, "Governor, the new secretary of education can call me anytime, and I'll meet with him. He doesn't have to ask you to call me."

And I said, "Yes, sir."

So, I called him back and told the secretary that. He called Byrd, and Byrd saw him.

I remember three or four months later—I felt a little bit embarrassed by that. I was surprised when he said that to me, that I'd kind of maybe overstepped his way of seeing it. Basically, I had total respect for it because that was not the way he did politics. He was very formal about that. If a person was a member of the cabinet, Senator Byrd would see them, and he needed nobody to run interference for him.

And, I said to him, "Senator, you taught me a pretty good lesson there." I didn't do it for about two, three months. "I called the secretary of education, and you told me to have the secretary call you. I learned a real good lesson there." And he laughed, but he didn't say anything in return. I didn't say anything. But that's just the way he was. He was very straightforward about what he—

STURM: Well, you mentioned his list that he had in his office there about people who voted against him on a particular coal bill. Now he got a little miffed at you because you maybe overstepped your bounds or not following what he thought was proper protocol. Was he at all vindictive or did he—this list he kept, was that an "I gotcha" list to get even with people? How did he use those things?

CAPERTON: It was never about him. He was a good leader and he would do those things as a means of exerting his position and getting things done the way he thought they should be done.

STURM: It wasn't a personal kind of a thing, though?

CAPERTON: I don't think so. I don't think so. I think that he kept that list because his job was to get things done in the Senate, and when people didn't support him on something that was important to him, he had to let people know that they had to support him if he wanted their support. I mean, it was a fair bargain.

STURM: Sure. That's politics.

CAPERTON: That's politics.

STURM: Did you all ever, not necessarily disagree, but were you ever on different sides of an issue?

CAPERTON: Not really. Closest I ever had of not getting along with him was that time when he told me the secretary should call him. Otherwise, we had a very straightforward, very honest, very good partnership, and I think it was ideal. I certainly showed the respect that he was due in the position that he was in, and he certainly respected me for knowing what a governor's responsibilities were, and trying to support and help me do what I could do for the people of West Virginia. So, I think we always put the people of West Virginia first. It wasn't a gamey thing. We kind of just understood what needed to be done.

STURM: Do you feel that his leadership from Washington made you a better governor?

CAPERTON: Oh, my goodness, absolutely. I mean, he was able to bring a lot of resources to us. Absolutely. He certainly made the Democratic Party a stronger party. When you ran, you liked to have Senator Byrd supporting you. I had an ideal relationship with him.

STURM: It sounds like you did. I think that's fantastic. In your relationship with him over the years, did he ever talk with you about his early days in politics when he was in the West Virginia legislature, why he decided to enter politics, those sorts of things?

CAPERTON: He did tell me this one story which I thought was quite interesting. He said that he was working in Sophia at the company store, and a preacher came in from Ohio to have a drive for membership in the Ku Klux Klan. He said he got more members in that drive than anybody else. And, he said this preacher came up to him and said, "Robert, you should someday be a congressman."

And Senator Byrd said, "Yes, and I always thought that I wanted to either be a teacher—I was very good in mathematics—or an engineer." And he said, "That man is the person who made me think about politics. That's when I ran for the House of Delegates, because what that man said to me." He said, "That's something that has embarrassed me for being a member of the

Ku Klux Klan and about helping get people to join the Ku Klux Klan.” He said, “It’s a black mark on me, but it’s interesting that that’s how I got into politics.”

STURM: He even said in his book that it’s the worst mistake he ever made. But did he elaborate on what actually made him join the Klan, how he got involved in it to begin with?

CAPERTON: Well, not really, except I think he was working in the grocery store or the company store, and this guy came in, and I’m sure this guy—I don’t think he even thought about it in a very deep way. I mean, the guy asked him, “Will you help me?” and he just jumped in. I think it just showed his leadership and his ability to work hard and get things done.

STURM: Do you think it had anything to do about race at that time with him?

CAPERTON: Well, I think that the conditions about race were so different then than they are today, so I don’t think you can judge him based upon today’s—I mean, he never in his political career I ever saw him do anything that was of that nature. I think he was a victim, kind of, of the times, and, you know, certainly that’s not something he was proud of, and he knew that he’d made a mistake. But, I think part of it was the times and part of it was, he would say, he made a mistake to do that. Obviously, I think he made a mistake, but it was not as big a mistake as it would be today.

STURM: It would be fatal today, absolutely.

CAPERTON: And, he had to live that down all his life. He said it was one of the worst mistakes he made. But also, I think it was wrong. I wouldn’t have wanted to have made that decision myself, but I can’t think of Senator Byrd making that mistake. I think he was probably eighteen, nineteen years old, maybe twenty years old, a guy that had done well in high school, had no money to go to college or anything like that. He got a job in the store, which was the best job in the community which he came in, and somebody came along and said, “We need your leadership.”

You know, in those days, the Ku Klux Klan was also fairly well connected to the churches, and as you know, Senator Byrd was a religious man and always played a big role. I remember, he ran a Sunday School class that had a hundred people come to it, I think. I don’t know if you can get that down, but he had a very famous Sunday School class. So, you know, there’s things that all of us have done when we were eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old that we don’t want put in a book.

STURM: I think that’s true.

CAPERTON: But, I think for him to have had as long a career as he had, and that is certainly a big mistake he had made, but I don’t know many others that he made.

CAPERTON: When he first came to the Senate in the late fifties, a lot of people associated him with the Dixiecrats, you know, with Richard Russell and Strom Thurmond and

John Stennis and James Eastland and that hardcore bloc of southern, I guess, segregationist senators. Do you think that's a fair appraisal of him at that time?

CAPERTON: I think it had more to do with him wanting to be part of the power structure and seeing where the power structure was.

STURM: Of course, Lyndon Johnson was—

CAPERTON: Part of that too.

STURM: —was part of that group too.

CAPERTON: So I think it was more a sample of his ambition, and he saw who the leaders were, and many of those men were fantastic members of the United States Senate—that was something that was wrong. They came from a part of the country where people didn't think of it as being wrong at that time. I think that the beliefs that they had were wrong, but I think there were also some very great men and great leaders, and Byrd saw them that way. I think it was his trying to better serve his state in a powerful position and his own ambition that made him do that. What they believed in those days and what was going on in the part of the world they came from is very different than it is today. There's an anachronism there that you have to take into consideration.

STURM: A lot of people say that, over the years, there were many different Senator Byrds, two or three different men, because of the fact that he was identified as a conservative southern senator, and I guess at the time of his death, he was a liberal by the standards we use today. Then, other people say that he pretty much was the same person who just changed attitude on some issues as society changed, and he maintained his basic core beliefs. Which do you think describes him?

CAPERTON: I think the second is correct. I think anybody that was in public life as long as he was that didn't change his opinion on things and points of view would be—you know, the world is a very different world today than it was when he first started. As a West Virginian, I'm glad that he was in a position of power, and I think that he was looking out for his position in power. He used that power not for his own personal gain, but for the gain of the citizens of West Virginia.

STURM: Let's go back to his campaigning a little bit. Did he actively endorse other Democratic candidates when he was in office, or was he more aloof?

CAPERTON: I think he was always a strong Democrat, but I think he didn't get involved in local politics. And, I think he was smart not to do that. He looked after his own politics. He wasn't a person that spent a lot of time looking after the political part of the state. And, I think that's pretty true. What I see in most places is the party tends to serve the politician rather than the politician serving the party.

STURM: Was that pretty much true of his whole attitude while you were governor, that he was a senator, and he could help you with funding, but you were the governor and you were running the state?

CAPERTON: He was very careful about that. He was very careful about that. He knew what his job was, and he knew what my job was. He never once interfered with what I had to do, and I certainly never tried to interfere with him in anything he did. That one phone call I told you I made, I learned my lesson very quickly.

STURM: I always thought you were a quick learner, Governor. [laughs]

CAPERTON: I learned that lesson very quickly.

STURM: I know obviously you and he had an outstanding relationship, but can you talk anything about his relationship with, for example, the other members of the congressional delegation or Senator Rockefeller?

CAPERTON: I never had a conversation with him about other members of the congressional delegation, and he wasn't a person that would have those kinds of conversations. I don't think—he had those conversations with other members of the congressional delegations about me, and I certainly never had that.

STURM: I'm sure there were many meetings where you had members of the delegation besides Senator Byrd there. How did he treat them?

CAPERTON: I never had any serious meetings, that I recall, where the congressional delegation all got together. We would have a dinner, a Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner, where we would all be there together, but there was never—I mean, we never sort of met together about any particular strategy. We certainly, in a presidential election, would be supporting the Democratic candidate, and we worked kind of our own way.

I know the other members of the delegation had great respect for Senator Byrd, but Senator Byrd was also respectful of everybody else's role. I never felt like it was a power structure that tried to go out and do things as a power structure. I think we agreed on many, many things and worked for the goals of those, but it was never sort of a coalition of—he never called us all in a room, said, "Now this is what I want to do, and I want your help." I never saw him do that.

STURM: Now, you consider yourself, I think, a personal friend of Senator Byrd.

CAPERTON: I do.

STURM: Was he different in private with just Gaston Caperton and Robert C. Byrd than he was in public, or was he the same man, basically?

CAPERTON: As I worked with him over the years—this is not a very modest statement, but I think he really respected me as a governor and thought I did a really good job, and he treated me that way. And, that meant a lot to me. We never talked about other politicians. Occasionally, you could tell from a conversation that he might not agree with somebody or that kind of stuff, but there was never any sort of—he was a very independent person. I was an independent person. We never said, “Well, what do we want to do about this particular candidate?” or someone. I’ve never had a conversation about that.

I knew that as time went on, that he had great respect for me, as I had great respect for him, and I think we were a great team together. He was never a person that tried to take credit for things he didn’t do. He was always willing to give me credit for things he thought I deserved the credit for. It was a very unselfish relationship. It was unselfish on his part. It was respectful on my part.

STURM: One thing that I’ve heard criticism of is the fact that there’s so many things in the state named The Robert C. Byrd this or The Robert C. Byrd that. In fact, when you were in Shepherdstown, did you ever have a chance to go to the *Old Time Radio Hour* thing that they do locally there?

CAPERTON: Yes, I think so.

STURM: Well, they did a thing the last one they had about how to get to Shepherdstown, and you go up the Robert C. Byrd Interstate and you turn on the Robert C. Byrd Highway, and you go past the Robert C. Byrd Hospital, and that sort of thing. So why do you think that his name is attached to all those things? Was this his doing or was this done in his honor?

CAPERTON: Well, I think it was done in respect for what he—they would have never been if it hadn’t been for him. His legacy was important to him, and I think he always worked on his legacy. I think he wanted to be respected as a great United States senator. When he was able to get this money, that was pretty important to him to get the credit for that. I never criticized him a bit about it. I wish there was a lot more highways we could have built with his name on them.

STURM: Going along with that, a lot of people, not just in West Virginia, but particularly at the national level, called him the “King of Pork.” I remember one point sometime back in the eighties they were talking about him maybe becoming commissioner of major league baseball, and somebody else said, “Well, that’ll never work, because all the teams will be in West Virginia if that happens.” How do you react to him being called that?

CAPERTON: Well, I think, first of all, a United States senator and a United States congressman represents the people of the state, so his job is to do as much as he can for the state that’s honest and straightforward. You admire people that are efficient at getting resources for the state. He worked hard to get in that position of power where he could do that. There’s some people that get in positions of power that don’t really—I mean, he was careful to get in positions of power where he could help our state. He didn’t get the power to be the head of Foreign

Relations. I think he thought more about what our state needed and where he could help. So I never once resented—

STURM: Well, I think about the time you assumed the governorship is the time he stepped down as Majority Leader to become chair of Appropriations, and he said he wanted to become the billion-dollar senator.

CAPERTON: Yes.

STURM: So, I think he was perfectly clear in his goal when he made that move.

CAPERTON: Very clear, and I think unselfish.

STURM: Talk a little bit about his fiddle-playing, if you would.

CAPERTON: If you read his early history, he was a nobody. Nobody knew who he was. He came from that little store. So, he was a fiddle player, and that's how he drew audiences. He got crowds around him, and people remembered him because of that. It was a very clever thing to do. I've never known any other politician to do that. So, that's how he got sort of well known. I think he's always been a good speaker, but I think the fact that he played the fiddle, people began to recognize who he was, and it was within his culture, that kind of music. I think it was ingenious.

I remember when I was working, it would have been probably in the 1970s, I remember they asked him to be on the *Grand Ole Opry* and other places because he was kind of unique for a United States senator, to be a musician like that.

STURM: He was on *Hee Haw* too.

CAPERTON: Yes, and I think he really enjoyed that. I think that was fun for him. So, it was a side of Senator Byrd that was—I liked that side of him because you never saw that side very often. You usually saw him as a very serious person, very focused on his work, and that showed a lighter side of Senator Byrd, and I always liked that part of him.

STURM: Was he as focused on his fiddle-playing as he was everything else that he seems to have done?

CAPERTON: I think it was just something that he had done early in his political life. And, I think he loved the music. And, I think it was kind of a fun part of his life. I think he knew it was smart politically to do that; it helped him in his early days. So, I think it was very smart, how he did that.

STURM: Do you know if he actually practiced the fiddle?

CAPERTON: You know, anybody that's a good musician practices.

STURM: So he was a good musician in your view too?

CAPERTON: Yes, he was good.

STURM: I'm going to talk to Bobby Taylor tomorrow. Bobby works down at the Cultural Center, and he played fiddle with him. So I'll get a little more detail about that.

CAPERTON: Well, I'm not one to judge how good somebody is as a fiddle player.
[laughter]

STURM: Well, I'm not either, for heaven's sakes.

CAPERTON: But people certainly listened to him, and it was always kind of a fun part of—I thought it lightened Senator Byrd up.

STURM: You talked about his beginnings. You know he was poorer than poor, worked as a meat-cutter, very little formal education.

CAPERTON: And a fairly informal family.

STURM: Right. And adopted. Just really all of the negative things that you can think of seemed to have happened to him. But here, probably at one point, he may have been the second most powerful man in the United States. How did he achieve all this power, do you think?

CAPERTON: Well, first of all, I think it's a great credit to this country, a great credit to this country, that a man can start from a humble beginning, as he did, and as Abraham Lincoln did, and many other people, from a humble position and can climb to the top. It's as much about the tradition of democracy and what democracy means in America as it is a compliment to him. I mean, to me, his fiddle-playing and his style of politics was just good politics, but it's also wonderful that a man of his humble beginning could become one of the most powerful men in the United States. And he did it because the good lord gave him a wonderful brain, and he worked very hard, and he was very focused on doing good for the country.

STURM: He was elected to the U.S. Senate nine times. Nobody probably will ever achieve that record. The way the state and the country have changed since his first run for office as a senator in '58, how do you account for the fact that he was able to stay in this office for nine terms?

CAPERTON: Well, I think, first of all, he was able to do it because he was so good at it, that he worked at it so hard, and he was so effective. I don't think there's any secret to intelligence and hard work. His politics was doing a great job. That's why he was a good politician. He had all those other capabilities. But he was an amazing man. I mean, he was an Abraham Lincoln, right? Amazing man. And, I suspect that the history books will always show him as an amazing man.

STURM: What will his legacy be, do you think?

CAPERTON: I think he will go down in history as one of the great United States senators, and certainly the greatest United States senator from West Virginia. I think his hard work, his whole values system is to be admired. He was a spiritual man. He was an intelligent man, self-taught. He worked very hard. He was an unselfish leader, and he served his nation and his state in a remarkable way.

STURM: I know you've mentioned a couple times, once that he was a religious man, and again here that he was a spiritual man. Can you elaborate on that just a little bit?

CAPERTON: I mean, the fact that he had a Sunday School class in a little community where over a hundred people came to his class says something about him being a pretty good—understanding the Good Book. So, I think he was a spiritual man and a religious man, and I think it was a sincere part of who he was, and of his character, and what he did, and why he did it. It was a fundamental part of who he was. I think people who have that kind of inner strength and that kind of belief makes them a strong person. I never felt like he used that in an insincere or a—I think it was a reflection of his heart and his soul. I don't think it was just about politics.

STURM: Everybody that knew him has a favorite story to tell. Do you have one?

CAPERTON: I will tell this—it's not my favorite story. I wouldn't want it to be said as a favorite story, but I think it says a lot about him. I was in his office with Blane Michael—Judge Michael—Judy Margolin and myself, and we were working on his upcoming campaign. And, Strom Thurmond walked in his office, and he treated Strom Thurmond with respect. There were a lot of things that they didn't agree on, but he treated him with great respect. Strom Thurmond was a very powerful and charming man. I don't agree with a lot of what he stood for, but it was interesting to see the two of them communicate.

And when he walked out, Senator Byrd said, "He was one of the eight senators that came to my grandson's funeral." His grandson, as you know, was killed in a car accident. And, I remember that because it said a lot about Senator Byrd. It said, one, that this grandson meant a lot to him, and his death was a tragedy. It said a lot that Strom Thurmond made the effort, as only a few United States senators did, to come to his funeral. It said a lot about Strom Thurmond as a politician and a man who could respect that. It also said something about Senator Byrd and the fact that family meant a lot to him, in a quiet way, and this was a big loss to him. For Strom Thurmond to take the time to do that, he kind of had a special place for Senator Byrd, though they disagreed on many things politically. I think it showed you could be—I think unfair to say it was all about politics. I think you could say it was a lot about the heart.

STURM: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

CAPERTON: I can't think of much.

STURM: Well, I appreciate your time this morning, and I want to thank you very much for it. Are we going to see your name on a ballot anytime in the future? [laughs]

CAPERTON: No sir. If after you've interviewed other people, if you'd like to come back and sit down and talk to me, I'm more than happy to.

STURM: Well, I certainly appreciate that, because as other things come to light, we may want you to elaborate on some things and clarify some things.

CAPERTON: I'd be very happy to do that. I hope this has been helpful to you.

STURM: It certainly has, absolutely, and we just can't tell you how much we appreciate your taking the time to do this.

CAPERTON: I'm honored to talk about him. He's a very big part of my life, and I feel extremely fortunate that I had the opportunity to work with a person that was not only an amazing political leader, but was a man that I respected a lot for who he was, and what he stood for, and for what he did for our state.

STURM: Again, thank you very much, sir.

[End of interview]