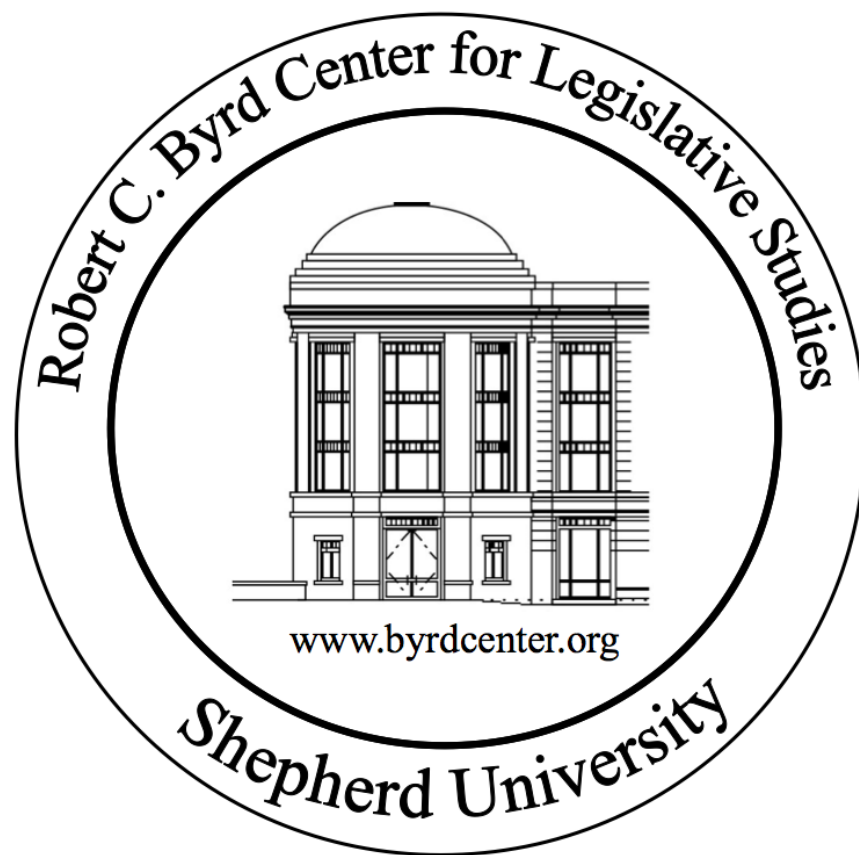


# **Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project**

**Oral History Interview**

**Judge Robert C. Chambers**

**June 20, 2013**



## Preface

By James J. Wyatt

The Honorable Robert C. “Chuck” Chambers is the Chief Federal Judge for the Southern District of West Virginia. He was confirmed in October, 1997 after being nominated by President Clinton. Prior to his appointment to the bench, Chambers served in the West Virginia House of Delegates from 1978-1986. From 1986-1996 he acted as the Speaker of that body. Chambers also briefly co-chaired the West Virginia Democratic Party and practiced law in Charleston, WV following his departure from the state legislature.

Judge Chambers begins by discussing one of his earliest political experiences, handing out voting literature at the polls as a young boy, and following Senator Byrd’s career. Focusing primarily on his professional relationship with the senator, Judge Chambers explains how Senator Byrd worked with him to improve West Virginia’s economy and infrastructure during the 1980s and 90s through a variety of projects. He highlights Senator’s Byrd’s unprecedented willingness to address a joint assembly of the state delegates on several occasions to detail important national issues impacting West Virginia. In the process, Judge Chambers insightfully describes Byrd’s 1989 decision to leave his leadership post in the Senate to become the chair of Appropriations Committee as driven by a desire to best aid in reviving West Virginia’s flagging economy. The judge then explains the process by which Senator Byrd and Senator Jay Rockefeller recommended him to President Clinton for the federal judgeship.

Throughout, Judge Chambers emphasizes Senator Byrd’s preparedness, professionalism, and respect for the “separation of powers” between branches of the federal government and between the federal and state governments. He explains how these qualities enabled Senator Byrd to maintain strong working relationships with governors, representatives, and senators from both parties. The judge also speculates that those qualities would have helped make Senator Byrd “brilliant” Supreme Court justice. In speaking to Senator Byrd’s legacy, Chambers labels him a “statesman” of the highest order who put country and state ahead of all else.

**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 Thursday, June 20, 2013, West Virginia Day. 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 is it my pleasure to be talking with The Honorable Robert C. "Chuck" Chambers, Chief Federal Judge for the Southern District of West Virginia. We are in his chambers in the Sidney L. Christie Federal Building in Huntington, West Virginia.

He was nominated in June 1997 by President Clinton, and confirmed by the Senate in October of the same year. Prior to his appointment to the federal bench, Judge Chambers was a member of the West Virginia House of Delegates and served as Speaker of that body from 1986 to 1996. He also briefly served as co-chair of the West Virginia Democratic Party prior to his appointment to the federal bench.

Welcome, Your Honor. I want to thank you for taking time to talk with me.

**Chambers:** Well, it's my honor.

**Sturm:** Now, as you know, this session is being recorded. Is that agreeable with you?

**Chambers:** It is.

**Sturm:** I'm going to ask you two types of questions today. Some will be about your observations of Senator Byrd as a politician and a man, and some may require a little bit of speculation from you based on your knowledge of him and your expertise in West Virginia politics. Anytime we're talking, I want you to feel free, if any thoughts or stories come to you, please interject them. We want anything that you want to tell us or feel comfortable telling us about Senator Byrd.

**Chambers:** Okay.

**Sturm:** Let's begin by having you tell us just a little bit about yourself.

**Chambers:** Well, all right. My parents were from Matewan, West Virginia, so I was born in the southern coal fields. My dad became a lawyer when I was quite young. We moved from Matewan to Huntington, so I lived in Matewan only for two or three years. Then we moved to Huntington, and I've lived in the Huntington area ever since.

I went to Marshall University and then went to law school at West Virginia University. Soon as I got out of law school, I went to work here in Huntington as a lawyer in my dad's small firm. The same year that I graduated from law school, I ran for the House of Delegates and got

elected, and subsequently served in the West Virginia legislature for almost twenty years. The last ten of those years in my service, I was the Speaker of the House of West Virginia.

**Sturm:** I believe you were the youngest Speaker, is that correct?

**Chambers:** I think I actually was tied with someone else who might have been from the late 1800s, [laughter] but one of the youngest. I think I was the second Speaker ever elected from Campbell County, which was important to me at the time. I served a total of eighteen years in the legislature, and was obviously deeply involved in West Virginia politics all through that era.

Since then, I left politics in 1996. I decided that it was time to just focus on practicing law. So I did that for about two years, practiced with a firm in Charleston with a lawyer by the name of Guy Bucci. Then this opportunity for a federal judgeship opened up. Thanks to Senator Byrd and Senator Rockefeller, I was nominated by President Clinton as a federal judge, and then confirmed by the Senate. And I've been a federal judge here in West Virginia since 1997. This past December, I became Chief Judge of the Southern District just by virtue of my years of experience in being under age seventy, which is the mandatory retirement from chief judge for active federal judges. Judge Goodwin reached the mandatory age to step down as chief judge, although he remains an active judge, of course, and I took over and became chief judge at that point.

**Sturm:** I was going to ask you how that worked, because when I interviewed him, he was chief judge. That would have been probably late November [2012].

**Chambers:** Well, he was in the last month of his service. While it certainly is an honor to be chief judge, it's not something that we long to do. It's head administrative responsibilities, so it's sort of like being the chief executive officer of the District Court operation. Fortunately, we have a great clerk of courts, Terry Depner. He's been around for many years, very experienced, and so my job's pretty easy from that perspective. Instead of just being able to focus as being a judge and deciding cases, I also have this additional role as chief judge, as being the sort of chief administrative officer.

**Sturm:** Well, after balancing the legislature around for ten years, that should seem like child's play to you. [laughs]

**Chambers:** Well actually, my experience as Speaker, in addition, obviously, to being political leader for the House of Delegates, I also was the chief administrative officer for the House of Delegates as an employer. So it is that experience that caused me to have some anxiety about becoming chief judge, because I was kind of glad not to have to do those things anymore. Dealing with personnel, administrative supervision, things like that, was difficult as a Speaker. It's not nearly as difficult as a chief judge, but there's enough similarity that this was not something I looked forward to doing. So I tried to get Judge Goodwin to claim that his birth date was wrong and that he actually had at least one or two more years to serve before he had to step down. [laughter]

**Sturm:** Do you have plans to remain in this position?

**Chambers:** I'm sixty years old. When I reach age sixty-five, I will be eligible to take what's called senior status, which, in federal judge-speak, is that you basically take a reduced role but continue being an active judge. It's sort of the equivalent of not full retirement, but being like the senior member of the law firm who gets to take a big step back, but still draws a paycheck, and still has an office, and still has work to do. So I expect I may do it at that point, and if I decide to take that step, then someone else will have to assume the responsibilities and the honor of being chief judge.

**Sturm:** Let's move on to Senator Byrd, Your Honor. When and how did you first become acquainted with Senator Byrd?

**Chambers:** Well, I guess my earliest memories of Senator Byrd, I'm not sure what year I would put on it, but I guess it would have been the early sixties. West Virginia had gone through a redistricting fight where we had to reduce the number of congressmen, and at that time there was a very experienced congressman, Ken Hechler, who was running. Then there was a challenge to him, or actually, he, I guess, ran in a year when another congressman, James Kee, from West Virginia, they had their districts combined, basically.

I remember as a young man, as a boy, I went down to the local grade school. I grew up outside of Huntington and went to Cox's Landing Elementary School. Because my dad was a lawyer, he knew local people involved in politics. And because of this congressional race, where Congressman Hechler and Congressman Kee, if I'm getting this right, were having to run against each other—

**Sturm:** That sounds right to me.

**Chambers:** —something like that happened, and as a result, I was asked to go work at the precinct, at the voting precinct, passing out literature to voters as they went in. Back in those days, if you went to a voting precinct in West Virginia, there was a line of people that were handing out pamphlets—

**Sturm:** I remember those days.

**Chambers:** —emery boards and matches and all those things. So I got to go do that.

It so happened that while we were there that day, Senator Byrd's staff came through there. I don't even recall whether he was up for election that year, but I remember that his staff—and it was probably just some local Campbell County part of Senator Byrd's vast statewide staff, but they came, and I remember that they talked to us. I think that's my earliest awareness of what a United States senator was and who Senator Byrd was. I probably had heard the name because of my family, but I didn't ever make any connection about this being a real person. But I did then. So, I must have been—I was in grade school, so that was many years ago.

I sort of started following politics more then, and I certainly followed, to some extent as a boy and a teenager, Senator Byrd's career. I remember being extremely proud, as I think most West Virginians were, when he became Majority Leader of the Senate. That seemed like an amazing accomplishment for someone from West Virginia. But this was still all at a distance. I had never actually met Senator Byrd that I recall, so in my mind, it was this sort of legendary figure of this great West Virginia politician who'd now risen, after years and years of experience, up to these important positions and [who] was [now] literally one of the leaders of the country.

Well, as it so happened, after I got out of law school, I went into politics. I think after my first election, when I ran for reelection, a two-year term, I was obviously out actively campaigning here in Campbell County, and the Democratic Women's Club of Campbell County sponsored a meet-and-greet for all the candidates. Senator Byrd was invited, and was, in fact, going to be the keynote speaker. And to have a sitting senator actually come and participate in this sort of grassroots politicking in the Democratic Party in Campbell County was a pretty big event, so we had a whole lot of people there.

My wife and I, we took our kids. They were quite young. He gave a great speech, and I remember vividly that he did—as he was famous for—just in the course of his talk he'd call out the names of all sorts of people. And we were all just sort of amazed that here's a man that was in Washington, working with the most important people in the country, and he could come back to Campbell County, and in the audience, during a speech, he could just remember the names of a number of the people he [had] met. It was very impressive.

But then here's what got me the most. So after he finished and the meeting was over, he took time and was very patient, standing, shaking hands, sort of a receiving line. I had two young children. I had a son who was probably four or five years old, and a daughter who was no more than two, and we wanted to get a picture of those kids with Senator Byrd. So we stood over beside him, and he said, "Here, let me hold her." This was speaking about my two-year-old daughter. Her name's Lenna Chambers. She's a successful lawyer in Bowles Rice law firm in Charleston now. So this was many years ago. But Senator Byrd gathered her up in his arms and held her, and my wife stood back and started to take pictures. As soon as she did, she realized that the camera was out of film. And we thought, "Oh, my gosh. We can't get this."

So about the time that she's getting ready to take this picture and finding out that there's no film, Senator Byrd's, standing there, holding my daughter, and we look up, and my daughter has her tiny right hand grasped on Senator Byrd's ear, and is holding onto it for dear life.

I remember thinking, "Oh, my gosh, I can't have Senator Byrd stand there holding this kid who's squeezing his ear while we try to take a picture." So I said, "Oh, here, let me have her." And he said, "No, no, no." He said, "We'll get a picture." So he called one of his staff people over. And this didn't happen at the snap of fingers. There were a lot of people circulating and talking to him, and so it took a couple of minutes for the staff person to come over and get their camera and take this picture. Through that whole time, I can see his ear turning red and then blue, but he's standing there, utterly patient. And my daughter wasn't distressed. It wasn't like she was crying in his arms. She's content as she could be, but she had hold of his ear and twisted it. So I thought, "I can't believe this man, any man, but this man, a

man of his importance, is going to stand there and tolerate this.” But he did, and he was wonderful. He was just so gracious in the way he dealt with us and everybody else, and I just remember so vividly thinking, “You know, that’s a special person. That’s more than a politician.”

An average politician might say, “Well, yeah, I’ll kiss the baby. I got to move on. I’m not going to stand—.”

**Sturm:** Especially if he’s got his ear—

**Chambers:** Especially if he’s in pain. But it was the opposite, and I’ll never forget that.

I remember probably at least ten years after that, after I was Speaker, at another occasion, he happened to be in my private office before he addressed the legislature, and I reminded him of that. Of course, he had no recollection. He remembered being there, and he remembered coming to the Women’s Club. He had no recollection of the picture of a little girl holding his ear, which made it even better, because that just told me he really didn’t mind what he was doing. It didn’t mar his memory of the event or anything like that. It was sincere. He was willing to do it. So, getting to see somebody on a personal level like that and just that tiny experience—

**Sturm:** Was this actually the first time, then, that you ever actually—

**Chambers:** First time I ever met him in person. Absolutely. Yes, and I was just a candidate for reelection to the House of Delegates at that point. I wasn’t somebody particularly established or anything, just one of the local politicians who showed up at the same meeting.

**Sturm:** When he came to the meeting to make the speech, did he endorse anybody or was this just a political speech?

**Chambers:** This was just a political speech. He was running, I’m pretty sure, that year. So I think he came in and fired up the Democratic troops, as he often did. But he was always very careful not to get involved in anybody else’s race, especially in a Democratic primary. He would make sure that no one used his name or his reputation or his position to help against other Democrats, and we always thought that was good because the mere drop of a word by somebody in his position could have made the difference for a candidate. But he was pretty careful to say [that] Democrats ought to decide for themselves who to vote for and then support the ticket and the party, and he would do that.

**Sturm:** How did your relationship with him develop from that point?

**Chambers:** Well, over the course of those next number of years, as I went from being judiciary chairman in the House of Delegates and becoming Speaker and then serving there for ten years, I had a lot of interaction with Senator Byrd’s staff and a fair amount with Senator Byrd himself. He was extremely interested in trying to help anytime legislative people contacted him, whether it be for advice or guidance, or getting support for projects, or anything like that. One of

his trademarks was to set a very high standard of public service, not just for himself, but for his staff. Those people were invariably extremely polite, always willing to try to help. You never felt like they were too busy for you or thought that what was going on in West Virginia or something was unimportant because they're dealing with all these big issues in Washington. I really learned over time, working more directly with him, that that came from him. That's the way he felt about these things, and I think he imparted those views to his staff.

In particular, I worked with him on what I deemed to be one of the most serious of special occasions for our West Virginia legislature when I was there. We had some difficult times in the eighties. The economy in West Virginia was falling through the bottom.

**Sturm:** I remember those well.

**Chambers:** There was a great deal of political struggle. Governor Moore, a Republican, was very difficult for the Democratic legislature to work with. Democrats had a lot of division in the party, and, frankly, the whole state was in, I think, a fair amount of malaise because of the economy. That's when we were experiencing some of the worst in the change from heavy industry and lots of coal mining jobs to [the] loss of manufacturing [and the] loss of coal industry jobs to mechanization and so forth.

So those were tough times, and we often called upon Senator Byrd to help us by getting federal money to support West Virginia projects to keep our infrastructure spending going. Everybody agrees and is aware that Senator Byrd recognized that spending money on infrastructure, roads, bridges, water treatment plants, sewer systems, all those sorts of things are just critical to a state like West Virginia, and so we would often work with him to get projects. Through that process, he and I started sort of a practice—I think we did it at least two or three times—where during a legislative session he would actually come and address a joint assembly of the legislature. That's extremely rare. Other than the required joint assemblies that we do when a governor's elected and has a state address or something like that, a joint assembly is a pretty rare event.

So we did some research and felt that it was appropriate, and we had Senator Byrd come in on two or three occasions to address issues that were really kind of national in scope, but had direct impact on West Virginia, and chief among those, we're talking about the economy and about what West Virginia could do to try to spur growth and development. Those joint assemblies, I think, were really beneficial. It was a chance for Senator Byrd to have a forum to talk about why it's important to West Virginia, the things he was trying to accomplish in Washington. And it really invigorated the legislature and people in the executive branch to find out and be reminded that we've got a United States senator who's got a lot of power, a lot of influence, and [who] knows how to use it, and he's constantly working for things that we see on the ground [that] would really help us.

So we had several of these special joint assemblies where he came and addressed these topics. It just helped make people feel like, well, there's hope, and we can keep working, and we can keep doing things, and the benefits will be there. They were instrumental in doing that. I



really think they helped us get through some of the most difficult legislative sessions in years in West Virginia that our state governments experienced.

**Sturm:** Well, that brings to mind two questions. The first one's about him, and the second one's about how he worked with you. The first one—and I hadn't thought about this before till you mentioned this. This is the period in the, I guess, mid-eighties, '86, when he made the decision to no longer be the Majority Leader, to assume the chair of the Appropriations Committee and become West Virginia's "billion-dollar senator."

**Chambers:** That's exactly right.

**Sturm:** Did the economic conditions in West Virginia, do you think, influence him to make that decision?

**Chambers:** There's no doubt about it. It absolutely did. And that's, I think, the genesis of what led to our decision of trying to bring him down and have him speak at a joint assembly, and to be even more directly and publically involved with state government and trying to help. And obviously, he did. I mean, you look around, there's so many things named after him.

**Sturm:** That's one of the criticisms that some people have. How do you feel about that?

**Chambers:** Well, it's unfair to criticize Senator Byrd for that. I worked with him on a lot of projects. There's not once where he would have said to anybody, "You know, I'd like my name put on that." He was *never* like that. Now, he certainly wanted credit for his work and his involvement and his assistance in getting things done, but he wasn't the type of person who needed his name put on anything. And the fact that that was done so often in this state is not a reflection on Senator Byrd; it's a reflection on everyone else who benefited by what he did and the judgment of many other people that that's a fitting tribute to him. So if anyone thinks there's too many Robert C. Byrd this or that out there, they can't blame Senator Byrd for that. That's not what he was about. That's not what he tried to do. That's the effort on the part of many people in key positions in West Virginia to pay tribute and honor him and thank him for what he did.

**Sturm:** Well, as I get into this more and more, I think that people who have that criticism are people who really don't have any understanding of Senator Byrd the man and how he operated and what he did for the state.

**Chambers:** Clearly, that's the case. If you worked with him, got to know him, there's no way you could think that he was doing any of this to stoke his ego. This is a man that loved West Virginia and loved the people of West Virginia even more. Because of the way he came up, because of what he had to overcome in his own life, his childhood and his formative years, and in his effort to be a worker and all that, he knew what was going on in West Virginia, and he knew what we needed, and he knew what was holding us back. He went at it with a vengeance to try to help correct it. I've got nothing but thanks and admiration for him. Where would we be? I mean, if you want to take his name off of those things, then imagine removing that project. Take that bridge away. Take that building away. Take that program away.

**Sturm:** That interstate.

**Chambers:** Yes. Where would we be without it?

**Sturm:** When all this began in the eighties and he began to work with the legislature and state government, what were the mechanics of that? Did he contact you or the governor and say, “You know, we’ve got a pot full of money up here,” or did he come in and sit down with you and the leaders and try to determine what the needs were and how he could -----

**Chambers:** I think it’s just sort of an “all of the above” strategy on his part. There were certainly times when people went to him with ideas, projects, requests. I did that a couple of times on matters important just literally to the Huntington community. He liked it when people brought grassroots ideas to him. He was always very careful to say, “I can’t promise anything, but I thank you for presenting this. We will keep this information, and I’ll keep my eye out, and if I see an opportunity to do something, we will.” And there were certainly many instances where that’s exactly how it happened.

There were other times, I think, that as a key senator and especially as Appropriations chair, where he saw federal money being used in different ways in different states and thought, “There’s no reason West Virginia can’t be part of this.” So he would initiate contact, usually with the governors, if not with the governor, with the legislative branch, or, frankly, even people down at the county or local level. Senator Byrd was a grassroots politician. He didn’t feel like he had to go through the Governor’s Office to contact somebody in a public service district. If he knew the people at that public service district, he or his staff would call them directly and say, “Here’s a program. Are you interested? Can you qualify?”

It was one of the best things about him, that he didn’t just sit up there and cherry-pick things that he liked. He tried to be responsive to what people brought to him and the requests that people made and their programs and ideas. He certainly didn’t mind giving other people credit. He would often say, “Yes, I got the money, but the idea came from this person.” And at these public ceremonies or in public press releases, he would acknowledge that this is here because this person, this community, this agency had a good idea, “And I’m glad that I could help, and I’m glad I’m in a position where I could help get the funding for it.”

**Sturm:** I interviewed Governor Caperton about this, and he said basically what you’re saying. He also added, though, that many of the things that Senator Byrd funded were things that he had absolutely no involvement in as governor, as you talk about water systems at the local level or something like that. Governor Caperton said, “It wasn’t anything I even needed to know about.” It was just something that Senator Byrd felt needed to be done.

**Chambers:** Absolutely, and he was really careful about these things. Every time we worked with him on anything, we really had to dot our i’s and cross our t’s. We would need complete information and, frankly, most of that was documenting that there was a real need, a genuine need for this or that project, whether it’s a building or a bridge or whatever, and that if he could help meet that need, it would help solve or reduce a problem. So he insisted that

projects or funding requests generally be well thought out, well documented, well considered, vetted to all the right people that would be affected by it. And then he wanted to be certain that, if we do this, it's going to solve or reduce a specific problem somewhere, not just that this is what a bunch of people want to do; it's going to help in a material and identifiable way. Those are pretty high standards.

**Sturm:** As he was bringing this funding into the state to help improve the economy, we still see the effects of it today and will for generations, but did he ever make attempts to get involved in the nuts and bolts of the political structure in West Virginia?

**Chambers:** No, I don't think so. One of the characteristics I've admired most about him—and I guess this comes from my own legislative service—was that this was a man who understood and loved our three separate branches and our form of government. He had utter respect for the difference between being an executive, like a governor, and being in the legislature. He also had great respect for the difference between being a United States representative, senator, congressman, whatever, versus being a state legislator. He was a state legislator himself. It was always pretty clear to me that although he had immense power and influence, he would never try to use that to impose a political judgment on anybody other than the United States Senate, where he worked. He, I think, had great respect for the separation of powers, the separation of state versus federal government, and it shone through all the time.

**Sturm:** Did the politics of the sitting governor seem to have any effect on what he did for the State of West Virginia? Arch Moore was there forever, and Cecil Underwood [served] during his term.

**Chambers:** I guess I have to answer this maybe with two answers. First, there was never any visible difference in the way he worked for West Virginia, whether there was a Republican or a Democrat in the Governor's Office. Whether he was less effective or able to do less, maybe so, but if it was, it wasn't because he wasn't trying. It was perhaps because he just didn't have the working relationship with someone else.

Arch Moore was governor back in the sixties, before I was in politics, and then he got elected again in the eighties when I was there in the state legislature. We always heard that he and Senator Byrd had a pretty good relationship, that Senator Byrd and he had worked some together when Governor Moore was a congressman, that they got along, and that they sort of came from the same generation. I don't know whether that was true or not. I don't recall any instance when Governor Moore was there where Governor Moore or anybody in the Republican administration ever claimed that Senator Byrd was treating them differently or doing less because of politics. I'm not sure that they were able to or attempted to work with him as much as we did, as Democrats did, but if that is the case, I think it would be his fault. I can't say that there was anything that he did after Arch Moore left office and we had a Democrat in that he wouldn't have done when Arch Moore was governor. I never saw any difference in his efforts or the way he approached these things.

**Sturm:** I know he and Cecil Underwood were close friends. Can you comment on that, the relationship between them?

**Chambers:** Well, I didn't know Cecil Underwood very well until those last years. He lived in Huntington before he got elected again as governor, so I got to know him then. I know that, again, I think Cecil Underwood and Senator Byrd were sort of the same generation and had a history of having worked together some. They were both in office when Underwood was governor originally. I knew that they were friends. I knew that they got along well. I think that probably helped things a little bit, but I don't think that—I guess my firm belief is that it probably just didn't matter what politics the governor of West Virginia was. I'm absolutely certain that Senator Byrd loved the state and the people such that he would not have let a political difference keep him from doing everything that he would otherwise do for this state. There's just no way that would happen.

**Sturm:** To the best of your knowledge, did he have a positive relationship with the rest of the congressional delegation and with, first, Senator Randolph, and then Senator Rockefeller?

**Chambers:** Well, it certainly seems like it. I remember when Senator Randolph was around. They seemed like quite a team. Of course, that was before I was actively in politics. I know that when I first got elected to the legislature, then-Governor Rockefeller was very close to Senator Byrd, and then after Senator Rockefeller became senator, it was obvious that they had an extremely good relationship. I guess some of the best evidence of that's me sitting in this chair today, because when this judgeship became open, Senator Byrd and Senator Rockefeller talked about it. The then-sitting judge in the Beckley Division of the federal court was Betty Hallanan, who'd been appointed many years before, and she decided she was going to take senior status, she was going to retire or semi-retire.

**Sturm:** She was a Republican?

**Chambers:** She was a Republican, but we had a Democratic president, so Senator Byrd and Senator Rockefeller decided they should talk about it, and between them, they decided that the recommendation to President Clinton to fill this judgeship that had then been open was kind of Senator Byrd's turn. I think it says a lot that two United States senators could sort of agree informally that, "We'll sort of take turns with these, but nobody's going to get nominated by us that isn't acceptable to both of us."

So, I had a good relationship with Jay Rockefeller. We were friendly, and I'd worked with him, but it was Senator Byrd's call, and that became clear. I'm sitting here today because Senator Byrd, with Senator Rockefeller's approval and assistance, nominated me to President Clinton.

I think Senator Byrd and his staff were always, from everything I've heard from former Congressman Wise, former Congressman Mollohan, certainly from current Congressman Nick Rahall, Senator Byrd's always been like the big brother to the congressional delegation, and I have every reason to believe that that continued even after those people left office, and as Republicans served representing West Virginia as well. I think he always felt like, "These people are elected and the voters of West Virginia chose them and I should respect and treat them accordingly."

**Sturm:** Was your relationship with him totally political or did you have a personal relationship with him?

**Chambers:** I guess it certainly was totally political in the sense that it was always our political roles that brought us together, but, you know, he was just the type of person that once you got to know him, worked with him some, he was just a generally good person. I know that, for instance, for my nomination as a judge—I'll tell you a short story about how that happened. I decided I had to retire from the legislature, because, frankly, I just couldn't practice law, make a good living, and be involved in part-time politics. So I was very happy with my service, glad to step out of politics. I served as the co-chair of the state Democratic Party that year, but decided that it was time to retire from legislative service.

So, I'd been out for a while, practicing law in a very good law practice, really content with what I was doing and hadn't really been involved in anything much with politics other than Democratic Party chair. I was literally out in Salt Lake City, at a hotel, getting ready to go take a deposition of an expert in a case, and I called my office and they said, "Well, Senator Byrd called. [He] said it's urgent that you call him back."

I have to say, that the first thought I had was, "I wonder if he's forgotten that I've left the legislature," because I just couldn't imagine why he would urgently need me. He wasn't running for election that year, so I knew it wasn't about that.

Obviously, I dropped everything I was doing and I called him. I really thought I was going to call and talk to some staff person about something and that would be the end of it. Soon as I told them who was calling, they said, "Oh, hold on. We'll put you right through." So Senator Byrd came onto the phone and proceeded to tell me that Judge Hallanan had just announced that the day before—this is early in the morning—the day before she'd announced that she was taking senior status, and so that was going to create a vacancy. And he said, "I want you to have it. I want to nominate you. So I am giving you that opportunity. I've already talked to Senator Rockefeller. We're both in agreement on this. I just have to ask you to make a decision pretty quickly, because if you're going to take it, then I'm very happy and confident, and I can start telling everybody, 'Don't ask. It's already decided.'" And I literally said, "Oh, this is great news. I'm pretty sure I do, but I'd like to talk to my wife and my mother." He said, "I understand. You call me back tomorrow after you've talked to those ladies."

Of course, I did, and the rest is history. I became judge.

I had lots of talks with him early in that process where he would constantly keep me advised about how things were going. That was at a time when there had been a lot of public discussion about the breakdown between the president and the Senate when it came to these judicial appointments, for the last three presidents, really. That was at a point where, in President Clinton's second term, that things were really difficult, and the Republicans were in control of the Senate. Orrin Hatch was chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and that's where confirmations were held. There had been very contentious hearings where judicial nominees had really been grilled about their position on lots of issues. There were horror stories of people who

had been nominated by the president and had been waiting for two or three years just to even have a hearing, much less to get approved or disapproved. Senator Byrd was really good and understanding about just directly contacting me to keep me updated, to keep my spirits up and to tell me what was going on, not just to have some staff person call and say this or that. He did it personally, and I greatly appreciated that.

After I left the legislature, I guess in my last year, after I announced I wasn't going to run again, he was at the Capitol for some other event, and to my great surprise, he said, "I want to come by your office. I know you're going to be stepping out of the speakership before too long."

I said, "Well, come by and visit." So he did, and when he came, he had a present. And the present was one of his own paintings, where he'd painted an old mill on a West Virginia stream. I have it hanging out there.

**Sturm:** Your secretary showed that to me, yes.

**Chambers:** So I thought, "Oh, my gosh, and here I'm leaving politics, for all he knows," and he's bringing me one of his paintings. He told me that he painted that, the original—I think this was a print, but I think there were very few of them. And he'd actually painted this when he was working in the shipyards in Norfolk, many years before he was a successful West Virginia politician. So, I was so touched by that. It was a wonderful thing, and that's why I have it hanging out there. It's the first picture you see coming down the hall.

**Sturm:** It's the house, and it's got a greenish appearance.

**Chambers:** Absolutely, yes.

**Sturm:** Yes, I saw that. Until fairly recently, I didn't know that the man ever painted.

**Chambers:** Yes, I had no idea either.

**Sturm:** It just sometimes seems so unfair that some people have all the talent and some of us have none. [laughs]

**Chambers:** No kiddin'.

**Sturm:** Did he ever have occasion, I mean maybe at a time like that, to talk to you about the early days, about why he decided to go into politics or why he decided to leave the legislature and go into Congress?

**Chambers:** Well, I think he had a similar conversation with lots of people, because I've heard, from other people that are much closer to him than me, some of the same stories. But I think he was also very open in public about all that too. He wouldn't hesitate, and probably had said this in a joint assembly to the legislature how life was different growing up in Sophia and what it meant for people to work in the coal mines, what it meant for people that he saw that didn't have jobs and didn't have educational opportunities, and how our state had struggled and

been held back. I think the more of a view of the rest of the country he got, the more he realized that West Virginia had huge and compelling needs, and he was given a unique opportunity to help change that. I think he felt absolutely committed to doing his best to see that change take place, and I think he did.

**Sturm:** Well, you know, fairly or unfairly—and history will have to be the judge of this—but many people say that when he first came to the Senate in '58, I guess, that they viewed him at that time as just another southern segregationist Dixiecrat, with John Stennis and Richard Russell and Eastland and some of those fellows. How do you feel about that?

**Chambers:** Well, I think that was a tough time for Senator Byrd. He freely admitted, and I was proud of him when he did so, that he made some mistakes about his affiliations and organizations and then about some of his early voting record. I think it's great when a man of his stature and importance, after he's already reached those levels and really doesn't need to apologize to anybody for anything, doesn't need anybody's approval at that point, he's got all he needs, that he recognized that he'd been wrong about some of these things, and that he was man enough to stand up and admit it, even though it wasn't really going to help him or benefit him to do so.

I come from Mingo County originally, have a lot of relatives still down there. And so that certainly doesn't excuse some of the viewpoints that many people, especially in southern West Virginia, had during those decades and then those generations, but they were common, and, unfortunately, a lot of the country was like that too. So it's pretty easy to look back now and be tempted to judge people today by today's standards for beliefs they had twenty or thirty years ago, but it isn't really fair to do that.

I didn't like some of the positions he had taken on some of these issues. I didn't like hearing about some of the things he did when he was a younger man, his background. But you have to put them in context, and the context is that he was very much a part of his local community and very much reflected the views and beliefs, for better or for worse, of his local community, places where he grew up and lived as a young man. It's not an excuse, but it certainly is an explanation. And when someone can achieve as much as he did and then look back and say, "I was wrong on these occasions," what more can you ask?

**Sturm:** What do you think prompted the change in his attitude? It wasn't just civil rights. I mean, he changed his mind on—he went from being a hawk on Vietnam to, really, a dove on the Iraq War.

**Chambers:** Two words: life experience. This is a man who lived life as an average person does. I mean, he had hardships growing up. He came from families that had great challenges, meager resources. I think as he grew older, his life experience led to a wisdom that few people ever get, and certainly, most people don't get until they've lived a while and gone out and seen things and experienced things and lived life some. I think as he did that, to his great credit, he grew as a person tremendously, and some of the positions he took in his last few years are the positions I'm most proud of.

As both a great, admittedly partisan Democrat, but also as a patriot, when he refuted the Gringrich element in their New American Deal and pulled out his Constitution and said, “Here’s my contract with America,” that was powerful. That was a powerful thing. It was more than just some sort of nice responsive partisan slogan; it was a great reminder that, yes, this is a country founded on a Constitution, and this Constitution includes a structure of government and a Bill of Rights, and if we follow those things, that’s what our elected leaders should accept as their contract. I thought it was a great moment to help tamp down some of the partisanship at the time and give reasonable people the right thing to focus on.

The position he took on the wars, on Iraq and Afghanistan, the same thing. At the time, these were sort of popular decisions, and Congress got swept up into supporting them, and he asked the right questions. If you go back and look at the questions he raised, especially before we invaded Iraq, boy, he had it nailed on the head, not only the inadequate rationale for the war, but the probable consequences if we did it. To look at what he said would happen, and then to read the history of what happened, it’s amazing. He was right on target.

**Sturm:** Absolutely. I’m going to ask you to put your judicial robe on now for just a minute and speculate a little bit. In 1971, he was on Richard Nixon’s short list for an appointment to the Supreme Court. That’s a lifetime appointment, and historically many men have changed, or seemingly changed, after having been appointed. What kind of a justice do you think he would have made had that played out?

**Chambers:** I think he would have been a brilliant justice, and I will predict that, at this point, he would have been viewed as one of the intelligent liberal judges on the United States Supreme Court. I believe his life experiences would have continued to guide his philosophy and his decision-making. I think he’d be what a judge should be and adhere to the rule of law and observe precedent. But on those many occasions when the Supreme Court has to apply the Constitution and interpret the Constitution in a way that has great impact on the policies of our country, I think he would have stepped up and done the right things, whether it’s on civil rights and equal rights, or a whole host of other issues.

His life experiences that really guided his decision-making as a senator would have been the same life experiences that, I believe, would have guided him as a justice, and it wasn’t what was going on in the Beltway. It wasn’t what was happening up in the halls of power. It’s what’s happening in real America, and I think that he would have seen things very similarly. I think he would have realized that this is a country that needs tolerance and equal treatment and equal rights, and I think those things would have been paramount to him as a justice.

**Sturm:** You mentioned his law-and-order stance. Over his nine elections to the U.S. Senate, obviously he had to have broad appeal to both political parties in the state. What about him do you think caused Republicans to support him?

**Chambers:** Well, first, I think he had a very strong common sense view of most things, and I believe he really worked hard to stay away from that sort of pandering to your political base that leads people to take extreme positions and be stuck with them. Some of that, I think, came from his confidence as a political leader. He never took a reelection for granted. He



realized that if he did his work and accomplished his goals, that there was every reason to believe that he'd continue to have political support. So, I don't think it troubled him to risk some of his political capital if he thought it was necessary to do the right thing, and I think folks on both sides of the party liked that.

The vast majority of Americans, whether they're Democrats or Republicans, and I think this is certainly true, maybe more so in West Virginia even than in the rest of the country, most of us are within a fairly broad range of similar views, whether we're Democrats or Republicans. We've got extremes on both sides on polar ends, and I think he was always careful not to let those sort of divisions dictate his policies.

There were certainly times when Democrats might not have been happy with him, but nobody ever questioned that he thought he was doing the right thing, and [that] he wasn't just doing it for political reasons. I think Republicans responded the same way. I think, even today, as divided, as polarized as we seem to be in America and in politics today, the same basic principle applies. I think about 70 percent of Americans would agree on most common sense things to move this country forward, and it doesn't matter whether you're a Republican or a Democrat. The key is to be able to do what Senator Byrd did, which is to lead based upon an articulate vision of what needs to be done and why, and not worry about the politics of it.

**Sturm:** Let's talk about the Democrat side now. There are those who contend that even though he was a Democrat—and you can speak to this both as an observer and a former co-chair of the state party—that sometimes Senator Byrd's goals and his personal party machinery didn't mesh with the state party machinery, that he had sort of established, maybe, a cult personality based on Robert C. Byrd and didn't always go along with the party line. Do you think that's true? I asked that awkwardly, but—

**Chambers:** No, I understand. That's something that's come up over the years. There have been plenty of people at the state level or the local level who've criticized Senator Byrd or Senator Rockefeller or whomever for not doing more to support the rest of the ticket. I think that's an unfair criticism, and here's why. Senator Byrd was a Democrat. Senator Byrd did lots of things to help advance the Democratic Party in this state. He stayed out of Democrat races so he didn't put himself in the position of being the kingmaker for who the Democrats might nominate, and I think that was a good decision and the right decision.

**Sturm:** Do you think that's part of the reason for the criticism?

**Chambers:** Well, I think it is. I think especially if you lose an election, even as a Democratic nominee or person who wants to be a nominee, you want to have somebody to blame, and I think that there were people who got upset that Senator Byrd didn't play a more active role sometimes. And there were times, I'm sure, that he did. Undoubtedly, he knew people, had relationships with some people that were just different. But generally speaking, he stayed out of local politics. And he supported the party, he always supported the basic principle that if you're a Democrat, for the most part, you ought to be voting for Democrats.

So, I don't think it's fair to say that he was sort of a party unto himself. He did a lot of things to support the party and to keep the party strong, and he benefitted from it. But he also realized that he's running statewide, and he's got his own election to be worried about. When you're at that level, running statewide as a United States senator, it's just different. You have to treat your own election and reelection a little bit differently, and I think he did.

I don't know of a senator or governor who's run for reelection on either party that hasn't been criticized by somebody within their party for not doing more to support the rest of the ticket. It just kind of goes with the territory. There's this sort of assumption that if you're the sitting senator or the sitting governor, and you're running for reelection, you ought to have the coattails that sweeps everybody in. It just isn't really like that, and it doesn't operate like that.

I know the times when I—well, I'll give the best example. When I was state party co-chair, we had a contested Democratic nomination process with Joe Manchin, Charlotte Pritt, and there may have been somebody else in that early on. And, Senator Byrd stayed out of that. There's no doubt in my mind that he probably had a stronger relationship with Joe Manchin than with Charlotte Pritt, but Charlotte won the nomination. I would guess that if Senator Byrd had wanted to exert his power, maybe he could have changed that outcome. He certainly didn't do that. I can tell you firsthand that after the nomination and Charlotte Pritt became the candidate, even though there were a lot of people in the Democratic Party grumbling about it, and ultimately, she lost partly because of that grumbling, he did what he was asked to support the ticket and the party. Same with Senator Rockefeller. So there's always going to be that sort of criticism from some quarters, but I think, for the most part, it's undeserved.

**Sturm:** The other thing that I've heard some people say—here I sound like a rumor mill, but that's not the way I intend this to be—that there were some nominees of the Democratic Party that he didn't support because he felt they didn't quite measure up to his moral standards. Do you think that's a fair—

**Chambers:** I don't know of a specific incidence. I'm not questioning that there probably was, but I don't know why anybody should be terribly surprised about something like that. You know, I'm a partisan Democrat. I have voted for Republicans from time to time. I have Republican friends that I've thought were better candidates than some of my Democratic friends, and so when it comes down to it, I mean, we all still have an allegiance to our country and our state that dictates that we vote for who we think is best. When you're a partisan in one of the parties, you might have your thumb on the scales for your side's candidate a little bit, but other than that, you can't just abandon what you really believe. If Senator Byrd decided that some of the candidates, especially for really important statewide offices, just weren't as deserving, even though they were Democrats, then I would hope he reflected that in some of his decision-making.

**Sturm:** According to what some people have told me, I think he did.

**Chambers:** Fair enough.

**Sturm:** Let's talk about the area of the state that you're from now, and Senator Byrd, because coal has always been a major factor in West Virginia politics, at least in modern West Virginia politics. When he began, he was not supported by either the United Mineworkers or the coal operators. Do you have any idea why that was?

**Chambers:** Well, I don't. Maybe because he was independent. I think especially back in the days when he started, those two camps were so divided and fought so much, union versus management, that you just about had to kowtow to one side or the other to get their support. But I don't really know. I wasn't around.

**Sturm:** How do you think, looking back, he overcame that obstacle? Because the endorsement of the UMW or, I guess, even the coal operators in some cases, certainly was a great help to candidates.

**Chambers:** Absolutely. Back in that day, money was probably less important than it is today, at least to the extent that today it takes millions of dollars to run an advertising campaign, which is the way modern politics seems to go. Back then, obviously, money was spent, perhaps some inappropriately, but it didn't take the kind of quantity of money. But if you had an organization that had a big network, a big reach, like either the coal operators or the union, that was a big boost.

There's only one way he could overcome the lack of direct support by one or the other of those groups, and that's by what he really did so well, grassroots politics. This is a man who wasn't afraid to travel up a holler, stay till he's shaken hands with everybody who came, plays fiddle, give a good speech, remember the folks that he's meeting so he knows them by name. That sort of grassroots retail politics is what he was a master at. Even when he became the reelected senator for the fourth or fifth time and was winning 70 or 80 percent of the vote, and [had] virtually no opposition, he never forgot that, and he practiced that every election. He'd go out and shake the hands and show up at the spaghetti dinners and ceremonies and remember people and stay in touch with people. When you do that, that sort of direct contact goes over the heads of the interest groups and the special interests and gets right to the voters. That's really the only way you can overcome not having the active support of important groups like that, especially back when he started.

**Sturm:** Another coal-related question. He was always supportive of the coal industry, even though it wasn't always supportive of him in West Virginia. But in 2009, he released a statement saying that coal must change and embrace the future. What do you think was behind that? Do you have any idea what he meant by that?

**Chambers:** Well, I think I know what he meant by it, and I honor and applaud him for what he did. I think what was behind it, again, is sort of his life experience. I think he was an intelligent man, and I think he liked to use facts in making his judgments, and I think he was careful about making his judgments. He really studied things a lot, and I think he studied all of the factors that come to bear now in the coal industry. I think he studied the science of global warming to recognize that it seems real and that it's manmade or man-influenced. He saw in his own lifetime what happened in the coal industry in West Virginia. We saw jobs slashed over the

decades as employment went down, even though production was going up. He saw the potential of harm for the environment in West Virginia. He experienced in his life what happens when you don't have adequate environmental regulation and [understood] the cost that that imposes upon the land and the people. And, I think he was concerned about that continuing into the future.

I think he looked at all this and realized that these are powerful influences that will dictate the future of the coal industry in West Virginia from beyond its borders. It took a lot of courage politically for him to come out with such a strong statement. He didn't need to. If you look at his own personal situation in his last few years, he was probably going to get reelected if he didn't say a word about anything, and certainly in this state, it probably would have enhanced his election if he continued to pound the table in utter support of everything in the coal industry. But instead, he challenged them to look to the future and gave them the reasons why.

I thought that was another one of his profound decisions, like his position on the war, like his position on the separation of powers and how the Senate should operate. All those things were influenced by his life experience. And even when he's at this sort of emeritus position in the Senate, he still comes out and says what he believes and challenges a lot of popular notions and beliefs to the contrary.

**Sturm:** And he had absolutely nothing to gain by it at that point.

**Chambers:** No.

**Sturm:** Did you ever have an occasion over the years to socialize with him?

**Chambers:** Well, a few times. Usually it was in a political setting.

**Sturm:** How was he different in a social setting than he was in a political setting, or was he?

**Chambers:** The most private moments I ever had with him were several times when he was in my office, when I was Speaker. Two or three of those times were when he was going to address the joint assembly, and he'd get there an hour or something before the joint assembly. He'd just say, "Mind if I just come in here and sit, since it's close to the House chamber?"

Of course, I would say, "Yes, come in." We would just sit and talk. He was quiet, friendly, and warm, always talked a little bit about politics and a lot more about just life and what's happening with you and how your family is and things like that. He was a very warm individual, but fairly sort of quiet, really pleasant to be with and around.

When I saw him in some political context, mostly in campaigning context, you could just tell he was really "on." He would be talking and shaking hands with everybody, sort of circulating and being the center of attention, and it was really different from those sort of private moments where he seemed very quiet and thoughtful. Frankly, I could see he was one of those, I think, rare individuals that was able to live in both of those worlds and have both of those facets

to his personality. He could get away from it, and he could be quiet, reserved, thoughtful. And then when he needed to be, he could be the glad-handing retail politician who could talk to everybody and circulate in a room.

**Sturm:** That led into what I was going to ask you next, because in some instances, he really seemed gregarious and outgoing, played the fiddle, danced, sang, was on the *Grand Ole Opry* and *Hee Haw*. But then on the other hand, he didn't attend social functions in Washington. He didn't play golf. He didn't go to football games. He didn't do most of the things—

**Chambers:** He said he walked his dog. One of the main things he did outside. [laughs]

**Sturm:** What did he do for relaxation and pleasure, as far as you know, or was that his relaxation and pleasure?

**Chambers:** I think Senator Byrd was an intellectual. I think that he liked to read and study. Everybody knows about his love of history. I've got both volumes of the history of the Senate. I won't claim I've read much of either one.

**Sturm:** I have them too.

**Chambers:** But extremely detailed.

**Sturm:** Yes.

**Chambers:** He loved poetry. He could quote what he learned in the fifth grade. I think he was an intellectual, and I think it was intellectual pursuits that really provided the outlet for him. He could socialize when he needed to and when he wanted to. I think he enjoyed it. But I think for him, when he needed to get away from work and responsibility, he retreated to intellectual pursuits.

**Sturm:** Would he have been a successful politician if he hadn't learned to play the fiddle? [laughs]

**Chambers:** Oh, I'm sure he would have. But that sure helped. It sure helped.

**Sturm:** Did he ever play it for you?

**Chambers:** Not literally just for me. I've heard him play at political things two or three times. He was really good. He could play.

**Sturm:** I'm going to interview Bobby Taylor at the Archives, [who] he used to play with. So I'm going to get that perspective on him that we don't have.

**Chambers:** I'll tell you another little story, briefly. I'm not sure that I was aware that he actually could play the fiddle until one of the times I went in his office. I don't remember the date, but I went with some other folks from West Virginia to his office to meet with him, the

same morning that Timothy McVeigh blew up the Federal Building [April 19, 1995], and we literally came out of his office and walked into the hallway just outside of his personal office there, and the staff all said, “You won’t believe what’s happened.” We started looking at the TV. But in his office, he had his fiddle sitting out somewhere. He had an incredible collection of memorabilia. He could have had his own museum, probably. I hope that it is somewhere.

**Sturm:** A lot of it is at the Byrd Center.

**Chambers:** I hope so. I hope so. It would be great to recreate that office, because it was unique. I grew up in West Virginia. I, like most kids, learned a lot of West Virginia history growing up and I’ve traveled a lot of the state, love to get out and hike and bike and things, fish and things like that. So, just looking everywhere, you could just see all sorts of stuff that was pure West Virginia. But I remember his fiddle being out and being, not up on the wall, but somewhere, maybe on a stand close to his desk. I don’t think I said anything. Maybe somebody else said, “Oh, yeah, you play the fiddle?”

[He said,] “Yeah, I was just playing.”

**Sturm:** You mentioned you were there when the Oklahoma City thing happened. Did this give you any additional insight into Byrd the man?

**Chambers:** Well, not really, because, quite honestly, we had had a good discussion, walked out of his office, and we were all just like lightning hit us.

**Sturm:** Because I’d had one interview with an individual who was in his office the day that the Shuttle exploded, and I guess he really was shaken up by that.

**Chambers:** Well, we were all shaken. I know he was, but we left. We literally watched it for about five minutes, and we had to leave for our flight. But everybody was shaken.

**Sturm:** You alluded to his background, and we all know that he grew up poorer than poor, very little educational opportunity, and yet, probably at one point, he was the second most powerful man in the United States. How did this come to be? How did a man with that limited background achieve what he achieved in the U.S. Senate?

**Chambers:** Well, there’s no single characteristic or attribute that you can claim was responsible for that. It was all of those things that he was made up of. I think like a lot of successful people, whether they’re famous successful or just successful in their own private world, when they come up with obstacles and hard luck that he had, he had to overcome a lot, so that gave him an incredible drive.

He had to have a natural intelligence [or] intellect that is unusual, especially given that he didn’t really have that much of an educational background. He taught himself, and got a law degree even after he was a United States senator. So he had to have great intellect, and I think you have to be born with that, so he had the luck of birth when it came to that. But most of the other characteristics that led to that were the things we’ve talked about, his hard drive, his

empathy for people, and his ability to see and understand what real people are going through. Those things provided an opportunity for political success, and his hard work and determination and persistence made it happen.

I just finished reading the book about Abraham Lincoln a couple months ago, and, of course, it recites how many times Abraham Lincoln tried and failed at something. And although Senator Byrd certainly didn't have political failures like President Lincoln had, the persistence of effort that Bob Byrd had to demonstrate from his earliest days through his success in politics was just amazing. Look at what he overcame as an orphan in a poor community, in a poor family, the work he did, the jobs he took, and his persistence in seeking to rise to the next level above, whatever it was, and that's what he took when he got into politics. And just like he had with everything else in his life, he wouldn't quit, and he'd figure out what it took to succeed, and he'd do it.

**Sturm:** We live in a totally different world than when he entered the Senate in 1958, yet nine times West Virginia sent him back and probably if his name—

**Chambers:** Still be there today.

**Sturm:** —came up on the ballot again, he'd be there again.

**Chambers:** No doubt in my mind.

**Sturm:** Even maybe being dead he might get reelected. [laughs] What enabled this to happen? What magnetism did he have? You'd think you'd do something that would make somebody mad and—

**Chambers:** Well, I'm sure he did. I'm sure he made people mad. But it's amazing that a guy could be in the positions he held for as long as he held, and never any hint of any sort of personal scandal, never any sense that he's doing things just for himself. He demonstrated, I think, day in and day out, that he worked for West Virginia and her people, and I think that people got that. I don't think there was any reason for people to feel any differently than they did from the first time they elected him and the last time they elected him. He's the best person for the job. He's done so much for the state, and there's no reason to believe he couldn't keep doing it as long as he was alive and willing to serve.

**Sturm:** What will his legacy be, do you think?

**Chambers:** Well, that might be a little harder to put a finger on. It's easy to say his legacy is all these things with his name on them and all the projects and the buildings and all those things. Those are important and they're great, and I'm certainly not suggesting that they have less value than they obviously have. For me personally—and I guess this comes because I was a politician, and a Speaker of the House, and now a federal judge—what strikes me as the legacy that I value most about him now is his adherence to our democracy, our form of government, our balance of powers, our Constitution, our separation of powers, those things. This was a statesman who, like so many I've read about in the history books, who really put their

country and their state ahead of everything else and set a great example for leadership. To me, that's a legacy that speaks far more to me personally than perhaps the legacy of all the tangible things out there that he did for us.

**Sturm:** The word you just used is interesting, because I think you're maybe the sixteenth or seventeenth interview that I've done, and I don't think the word "statesmen" has come up before. I just thought of that.

**Chambers:** That is amazing, because when you look at the last two decades that he served in the Senate, he was an incredible statesman. The positions he took on institutional matters within how the Senate operated, the position he took on all these really important big issues that the federal government would have to deal with, I can't imagine talking very long about him and not saying this was a statesman. I believe that if he were in his prime and serving in the Senate today, he'd be one of the most outspoken for changing the current political environment and figuring out how to help accomplish that as well.

**Sturm:** He probably would know, with his knowledge of the Senate.

**Chambers:** He would, and he'd know how to deal with people, as he often did. He knew how to get the best out of a lot of people.

**Sturm:** Anything you want to add? Have you told all your stories? Everybody always has a favorite story.

**Chambers:** I'll tell you one more. It just occurred to me a while ago. Let me see if I can get my presidents right here. I guess it would have been the first President [George H. W.] Bush that nominated Robert Bork for the Supreme Court. It was very controversial and, obviously, that controversy was split along liberal and conservative sides. Robert Bork was a strict constructionist, very conservative. Most people assumed that Senator Byrd would strongly be in that camp, to support a person like Bork, even though he's coming from a Republican nominee, as the new Supreme Court judge.

I was Speaker at the time, but I was at home. We were literally having a party, and I don't remember what it was. It was just a neighborhood party or something, a family party in my house. But I got a call from Senator Byrd, and he said, "I just want to talk to you privately." I don't think I've told anybody other than my wife about this, and my mother. He said, "I want to talk to you privately for a few minutes."

I said, "Well, sure. Let me go upstairs." I had no idea what he was calling me about. He said, "I'm calling you about the Supreme Court nominee. What do you think of Professor Bork and whether he should be confirmed, and what do you think people think about this?"

We had probably half-an-hour conversation. And I shared with him that I had, at that point, recently been at some Democratic function, probably the Democratic Women's Club of Campbell County, where this had come up, and there were a lot of people that I would sort of characterize as the little old ladies in the Democratic Party, who are very conservative, traditional



women, who were very much opposed to Bork and didn't like a lot of the things that he had written as a professor and said.

So we talked a lot about it. He never told me what he was going to do, but I expressed my concerns. Of course, Senator Byrd ended up voting against Bork and was probably instrumental, because if Senator Byrd had decided to support him, I'm confident that a number of other Democrats probably would have felt they could join that vote or would have. So Byrd came out publically shortly after that. I'm not taking any credit for it. I'm sure he called a lot of people, because if he called me, there were a lot of other people he would have called first. I thought it was pretty amazing, first, that he was doing that, getting a feel for what the real people back home thought, and then having what I think was political courage to come out and say, "Even though this is probably somebody that most folks would think I would support, I'm not supporting him. Here's why."

**Sturm:** That's a great story. Judge, thank you very much.

**Chambers:** Thank you very much. I enjoyed it.

**Sturm:** I appreciate it.

[End of interview]