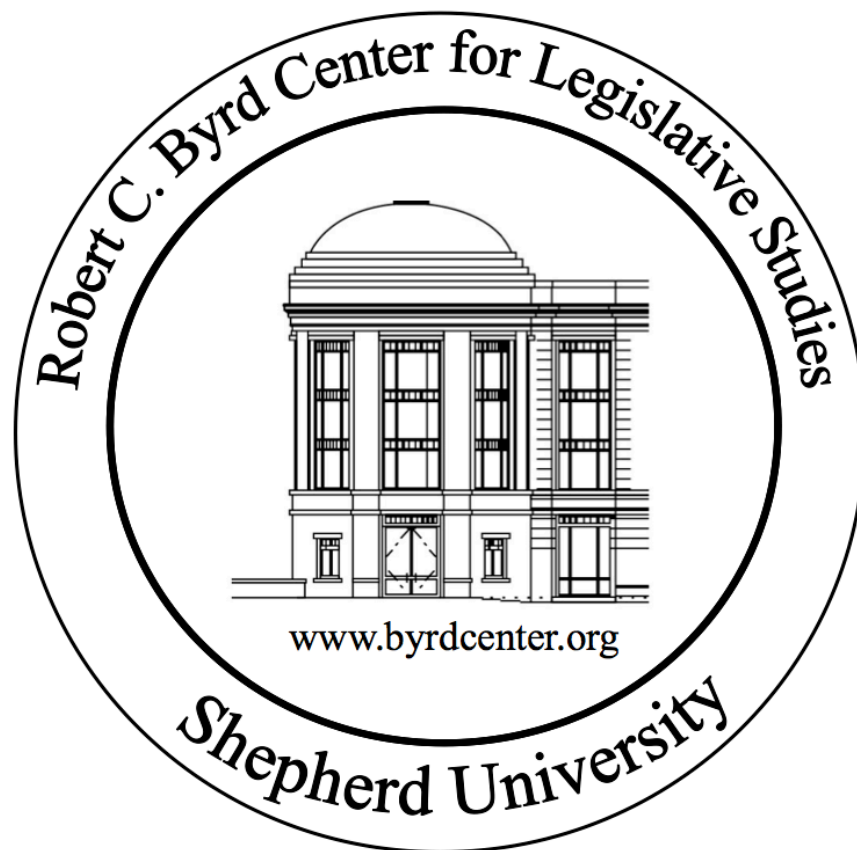


Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project

Oral History Interview

Ken Hechler

December 7, 2012



Preface

by Keith D. Alexander

Dr. Ken Hechler can look back upon an extraordinarily long and fascinating political career. While his parents were Republicans, Hechler became a life-long Democrat back in his college years, when he experienced the Great Depression under Hoover and the beginnings of economic recovery under Roosevelt. Hechler earned a PhD in American history and government in 1940 from Columbia University. He went on to teach at numerous institutions, including West Virginia State and Marshall. Drafted into the US Army in 1942, he served in Europe, interrogating prominent captured Nazis at the end of the war. He led President Truman's speech-writing staff from 1949-1953. From 1959-1977, he represented West Virginia in the US House of Representatives and from 1985-2001, he served as West Virginia's secretary of state. He has also been an advocate of environmental and social justice causes, marching with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, Alabama (the only Congressman to do so), advocating for mine safety, and campaigning against mountaintop removal.

In this interview, conducted on December 7, 2012 by Alan Sturm in Dr. Hechler's residence in Charleston, West Virginia, Hechler describes his numerous encounters with Senator Byrd. Although he and Byrd were both Democrats, they frequently found themselves on opposite sides of many issues, in particular those relating to coal mining's impacts on health and the environment. Nevertheless, Hechler maintained the highest respect for the senator.

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
Friday, December 7, 2012

Sturm: Today is Friday, December 7, 2012, Pearl Harbor Day. I am Alan Sturm. I'm working with the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies on the oral history segment of the Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project.

Today it is my pleasure to be talking with the Honorable Dr. Ken Hechler in his residence and office in Charleston, West Virginia. Dr. Hechler is a man of many and varied callings. He is or has been a scholar, military officer, historian, presidential advisor, teacher, environmentalist, civil rights advocate, member of Congress, and West Virginia secretary of state. He is a man who possesses a keen sense of history. He represented the Fourth District of West Virginia in Congress from 1959 through 1977.

Welcome, Dr. Hechler. I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview. As you know, this session is being recorded. Is that agreeable with you?

Hechler: It certainly is.

Sturm: All right. Let me do the small print and then we'll be ready to talk about Senator Byrd. A complete transcript of this interview will be sent to you, at which time you can go over it, make any changes that you want, and then send the edited copy back to the Byrd Center. At that time you will be asked to sign a Deed of Gift stating that this will become part of the Robert C. Byrd Oral History Collection. Until that happens, everything that we say is private and confidential and is subject to your control until you are totally satisfied with it and sign it over to the Byrd Center. You understand that, sir?

Hechler: I certainly do.

Sturm: All right. Now, Dr. Hechler, today I'm going to ask two types of questions. Some will deal with Senator Byrd and your interactions with him as a congressman and West Virginia public official, and others may call for some speculation on your part, based on your knowledge of the senator and the workings of Congress.

Now, you've told me that you have a story that you're anxious to tell about him, so why don't you relate that to us to begin with.

Hechler: Yes. Once when I was secretary of state in West Virginia, I had to make a trip to Washington because I wanted to consult with Senator Byrd. This was at a time when he was a powerful chairman of the Appropriations committee and a recognized leader of the Democrats in Congress. So I made an appointment with his appointment secretary to see him. I think it was something like 10:30 a.m. on the particular day that I arrived in Washington. His secretary told me, when I entered the office, that the senator had apologized for not being there at the appointed time because there was a hearing on the appointment of a new secretary of the Air Force that he was anxious to attend and testify at, so she said to me, "I'll turn on the television and you can see Senator Byrd in action at this hearing."

So when she turned on the television, why, Senator Byrd was appealing to the committee chairman that since the West Virginia secretary of state had a definite appointment with him, he was apologizing publicly to the secretary of state, and he was asking the committee chairman if he could go on first because he had this very important appointment with Secretary of State Ken Hechler, and he wanted to get there as quickly as possible. [laughter]

So he said this before the television audience, naming me by name. That's a very unusual tactic for an important US senator. He didn't have to apologize to me. I would have understood exactly the problem, but he went to great lengths to explain to the world why he was going to be a little bit late in coming to the office to talk with me.

Sturm: That must have made you feel good.

Hechler: I thought that was a thing that only Robert Byrd would do. No other person in this world would put so much emphasis on a personal relationship. I want to tell that story because it shows his personal effort to establish a good personal relationship with everyone he met. I don't think that he minded the kinds of attacks that were made on him, because he knew that people of the state would understand that these were usually exaggerations.

And his relationship with Republicans was very deferential. In other words, he carried Republican counties like Tyler County and Doddridge County, who would never vote for a Democrat, yet when he ran, he was able to be the only Democrat in history that could win those counties. I'm sure the record will show that he was the only Democrat that carried some of those basically what I call narrow-minded Republicans. [laughter]

Sturm: I believe at one point he carried fifty-four out of fifty-five counties in one of his campaigns.

Hechler: Yes.

Sturm: Before we go on with Senator Byrd, I want to get a little bit on the record about Ken Hechler. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, your background, and your accomplishments? As I said in the introduction, you are a man of many callings.

Hechler: I was born in the little 5,000-person town of Roslyn, Long Island, which is 25 miles east of New York City. I graduated [second in my class] from Roslyn High School, and I had to give a speech at Commencement. My speech was entitled "Journalism as a Career."

When I was in grade school, I wanted to be a forest ranger. I thought that would be the healthiest thing to work outdoors, and I was planning to go to the School of Forestry at Syracuse University. That was largely because my father subscribed to the *Forestry Journal*, and I was very intrigued with that. Then I became a sportswriter in high school and I became interested in journalism, as I was when I attended Swarthmore College right outside of Philadelphia.

My mother and father were both Republican officials, but I was in my first two years at Swarthmore College when Herbert Hoover was president, and I felt that the contrast between Hoover and Franklin Delano Roosevelt was very strong. Hoover kept saying things like, "Prosperity is just around the corner," and he did very little to encourage the employment. I think the unemployment rate in this country went up as high as 25 percent. I became a Democrat largely because I was in college when Roosevelt became president, and the dramatic first 100 days of the New Deal not only put millions of unemployed to work, but also raised the morale of all Americans, particularly Democrats, and many Republicans changed their [voter] registration because of Roosevelt.

I attended Columbia University to get my master's degree as well as a PhD in 1940, and I had the opportunity to teach at Columbia at its sister institution for women, called Barnard College, in New York City.

In 1957, I accepted a position to teach at Marshall in Huntington, and went on to teach at a number of other universities. I taught for three years at Princeton University in New Jersey and also in several local colleges in West Virginia, including West Virginia State, and the University of Charleston. I also delivered a number of lectures at the invitation of other colleges and universities throughout the country. That pretty well summarizes.

Sturm: I think you left a little hole in there now, Dr. Hechler. There was a point there where I believe you were presidential advisor, and you didn't mention that. I think we'd like to know a little bit about your relationship with President Truman.

Hechler: I worked for four years, from 1949 to 1953, as a special assistant in the White House to President Harry Truman, and had a very close relationship not only with President Truman, but with his daughter, Margaret, who used to say, "The Truman campaign train is the only campaign train that carries its own Hechler aboard." [laughter]

Sturm: Is it correct that you're the last of President Truman's inner circle?

Hechler: No. My immediate boss in the White House, a man named George Elsey, lives in Irvine, California, and he and I are the last two living members of the Truman White House.

Sturm: Two left. I'd read somewhere that you were the last.

Hechler: We have two.

Sturm: You said also that you came to Marshall. How did you come to pick West Virginia as your residence when you began teaching? I'm sure you had many other opportunities available to you.

Hechler: That's correct. I had a job in Washington, DC that paid a good five-figure salary as Director of the American Political Science Association. I recognized that I'm not a very good administrator. I'm much better in the classroom. So I was very anxious to get back into the classroom, rather than being an administrator with the Political Science

Association.

One of the things that I was responsible for in the American Political Science Association was to set up a recruiting service for universities that needed a professor, and I had a pretty good set of names of young teachers who were upwardly mobile and anxious to get ahead in the world, the academic world, and a college or university would send me requests for a recommendation and I would send them three names as references. So this request came in from Marshall College before it became a university, and instead of sending them three names as references, I sent them my name. They told me when I was interviewed at Marshall that I was overqualified, and I described with great passion how I was anxious to get back into the classroom, and finally convinced them to take a chance on me. That was a wonderful experience.

Sturm: Did you have it in the back of your mind when you came to West Virginia that you might actually get involved in politics?

Hechler: Well, I called on a Republican congressman, Will [William Elmer] Neal, when I got the appointment at Marshall, and I told him that I didn't want to just stay in the classroom; I wanted to get into community affairs. I asked him to give me the names of some people that I really ought to get to meet because they were the movers and shakers in both political parties. So he was very, very helpful, not realizing that I would be running against him in a few years.

Sturm: And you beat him, didn't you.

Hechler: Yes. That was a very difficult primary race because of the fact that I was accused of being a carpetbagger coming in, and there was a right-wing Republican legislator named Mrs. E. Wyatt Payne, who targeted me as a person that should never be elected in West Virginia. [Hechler defeated William E. Neal in the election of 1958].

Sturm: I've heard her name.

Hechler: When Vice President Nixon came in and gave a speech to 7,500 people at the Memorial Fieldhouse in Huntington, Mrs. Payne wrote a song that was targeted to defeat me. She printed 7,500 mimeographed words of the song and had everybody sing this song to the tune of "Reuben, Reuben." [sings] "Visitor Hechler, we've been thinking what a fine state this would be if all the New York office-seekers came to save us just like thee." [laughter]

Sturm: I've never heard that. That's great.

Hechler: This went on for about ten verses. She made everybody sing this, and this actually made me a lot of friends among the Republicans. "Here's a guy who's a very popular teacher at Marshall. He can't be all that bad." So that really backfired on Mrs. Payne.

Sturm: Let's move back to Senator Byrd, if we could. You started to tell me, before we turned the machines on, about your first meeting with him. Why don't you elaborate on

that now that we've got the machines on.

Hechler: My first meeting with Senator Byrd was when he was a member of the House of Representatives before he went to the Senate. As a teacher, I was very anxious to have my students get a fuller understanding of what went on in Washington, so I organized a bus trip for my students. In those days, that was a very long and tortuous trip along Route 60. That was before the interstates.

So we had an appointment with Representative Byrd. The first part of our meeting was very contentious because the Marshall students were trying to find out from Byrd why West Virginia University was getting a subsidy from soft drinks and why Marshall was not given equal treatment by the state legislature. Are you aware of that?

Sturm: I'm aware of that. I haven't thought of that for years, Dr. Hechler, but I'm aware of exactly what you're talking about. I believe it started out as a penny-a-bottle tax on soft drinks, yes.

Hechler: Right. So that started the interview on a negative note, because Byrd did not want to criticize WVU, but he surely couldn't satisfy Marshall, because Marshall was not being given equal treatment.

Sturm: And at that time, Marshall was just a college. It wasn't a university yet.

Hechler: That's right. They needed the money. So that was a contentious part of our interview. But then everything changed when Byrd began to recite poetry, and one of his favorite poems was of the West Virginia students who had taken a trip to Europe, and on the way home they were singing, "America, America for me. I can't wait until I can ride the bounding sea." There's a poem to this effect, which Byrd quoted beautifully to show the spirit of West Virginians who had returned from a trip overseas and their joy in anticipating coming home. This impressed the Marshall students about Byrd's ability to show the pride that West Virginians have in our state and how when they leave the state they're anticipating eagerly how soon they can return. This was a very positive note. People loved the fact that not only did Byrd express those sentiments, but he had the knowledge of the words and how to express their feelings.

Sturm: Did you have other contacts with him before you were elected to Congress, after this trip?

Hechler: Well, when I was running for the House of Representatives, I called on him. He was at the old Daniel Boone Hotel [in Charleston]. I called on him to tell him that I was running, and I also asked his staff whether or not I could accompany them, since both Byrd and [Jennings] Randolph were running for their first terms in the Senate.

Sturm: That would have been '58, right?

Hechler: Right, in 1958. Their campaign staffs right away saw that—they didn't say this to me, but they were obviously not interested in having a person who might lose the election as extra baggage to carry on, so in a judicious way they told me that if I wanted to

really get ahead in politics, that I should go for it alone. [laughs] Which, of course, was a nice way of telling me that I would be a handicap.

Sturm: The next thing I want to ask you is about the early beginnings. I understand Senator Byrd used to drive around in an old car with a bass fiddle tied on top of it, and of course he had his trademark fiddle with him that he'd stop and play everywhere. This became actually his trademark.

Hechler: Yes.

Sturm: When you started in Congress, the red Jeep became your trademark.

Hechler: Correct.

Sturm: Were you inspired by Senator Byrd's use of the stringed instruments to have a trademark of your own?

Hechler: No, I just felt independently that that was a necessary way to get attention, so that's what I used. It had nothing to do with Senator Byrd, following his example.

Sturm: I've heard that discussed a little bit, so I wanted it straight from you as to whether you got that idea from him or not.

Hechler: No, I can't say that I did. A natural asset, but because Senator Byrd used it, I didn't get the idea from him. I just thought that that was a very useful way to get attention, and the reason I used a Jeep as a symbol was because in the army I had been assigned a jeep, an olive-green colored Jeep, which had a governor on it so it couldn't go more than 35 miles an hour.

Sturm: Okay, let's move on to Senator Byrd and the Democratic Party and your relation in this. Some feel that Senator Byrd was a force of his own making in West Virginia politics, and that actually the Democratic Party was much more dependent on him than he was on it.

Hechler: That's correct.

Sturm: In your judgment, how did he relate to the Democratic Party in West Virginia?

Hechler: Well, the first thing I noticed when I got sworn in as a congressman was that the obvious leader of the Democratic Party was not the state chairman or Jennings Randolph, a fellow senator; it was Robert C. Byrd, because he initiated a weekly breakfast meeting for all the Democratic members of the West Virginia congressional delegation, and he was the obvious leader that was interested in getting the delegation to pull together on issues and to realize the importance of what Congress was doing and how West Virginia could enhance the reputation of the state through its congressional delegation, of which he was the number-one leader.

Sturm: That's interesting, because I believe technically Jennings Randolph was the senior senator, is that correct?

Hechler: Correct.

Sturm: How do you think Senator Byrd felt about Senator Randolph being the senior senator and he was the junior senator?

Hechler: Well, he could see what was needed very clearly and could see that how to get what was needed did not depend on the other senator, despite the fact that the other senator was senior. He never talked about it in those terms. He just went ahead and did it, which is very characteristic of the way he operates.

Sturm: You had a chance to observe, I guess, in these breakfast meetings and just generally throughout your political career the relationship between Senator Byrd and Senator Randolph. How would you describe it?

Hechler: Well, Senator Byrd did all the things needed to show that Jennings Randolph was the senior senator. I guess the phrase would be "he buttered him up."
[laughter]

Sturm: Did they have a positive relationship?

Hechler: Yes. Randolph could recognize the talents of Byrd and was deferential toward him because he knew that when Byrd set his sights on something, that it was going to be successful, and it usually was. It's amazing the way in which he was able to overcome the Democratic leadership and get into a position of leadership, rather than Ted Kennedy.

Sturm: I know you said a minute ago that during your first campaign they sort of didn't want much to do with you because they thought you might be a loser. Later on, did you ever have the opportunity to campaign with Senator Byrd in your reelection campaigns or his?

Hechler: Oh, yes.

Sturm: Can you talk a little bit about that, about campaigning with him?

Hechler: Well, it was so obvious to everybody that he was a leader, and to be campaigning with him was to gain the confidence that people did not have in me because I had not been born in the state, and the fact that Senator Byrd would allow me to go with him to campaign rallies was a way of overcoming the fact that I was not a native. I recognized this, and I was grateful to Senator Byrd for giving me that kind of support.

Sturm: What kind of campaign style did he have in his reelections?

Hechler: His campaign style was no different than his behavior in between campaigns. Of course, while he was campaigning, he would use the same technique of singling out members of the audience by name, and that is not only good in between

campaigns, it's particularly good while you're campaigning, because it attracts the support of people in every locality where it's utilized, and he utilized it very effectively. As I've described, he would never stay in a hotel; he would always get a person in the community to put him up for the night, feed him breakfast.

Sturm: Were his campaigns negative or positive in tone? You know, we have so much negativism now.

Hechler: Well, I guess about the best way I can describe that is to say that sometimes he had to get defensive. That's the only way [he came] close to being negative, as he certainly had to respond to charges that he was a prisoner of the Ku Klux Klan.

Sturm: He didn't, though, initiate the negative campaign.

Hechler: No, no, no.

Sturm: He just responded when attacked.

Hechler: Yes.

Sturm: That's understandable. His general attitude on law and order and things of that sort played well to conservatives, particularly West Virginia Republicans. I think we talked about this a little bit before we turned the machine on. Can you talk a little bit about his relationship to the Republican Party in West Virginia?

Hechler: Well, Republicans respected him because of his strong stand on law and order, and that's an essential Republican issue. He got aboard on that issue to such an extent that it inspired Republicans to want to support him because of his principles. That's why, as you pointed out, in his election he carried fifty-four out of the fifty-five counties. He was a hero. He was a hero to the leadership of West Virginia because of the money that he brought in. He was West Virginia's most effective economic development officer.

Sturm: Do you think he purposely catered to the Republican Party or was that just an added benefit because of his personal beliefs?

Hechler: The latter, I think. That was not a conscious effort to win Republicans, but he just happened to stand for the same issues that they did, and he basked in the glory of that. He did not personally initiate it, but it certainly redounded to his political benefit, and I'm sure he was proud of the fact that he alone among the Democrats was able to attract widespread Republican support. He recognized that, but didn't put that as a high priority; it just came to him on a silver platter.

Sturm: That's about all he got on a silver platter, though, when you stop and think about his early beginnings.

Hechler: Yes.

Sturm: Now, this sort of ties in with what we're talking about. You and Senator

Byrd, of course, were both members of the West Virginia Democrat Party. I can remember personally that when you gentlemen were both in Congress together, you didn't always see eye-to-eye on many, many issues, because you were much more liberal than he.

Hechler: Yes.

Sturm: In your view, was he really a Democrat?

Hechler: Well, I don't know how you define "really a Democrat." [laughs]

Sturm: I guess what we're going for here is, was the Democratic Party in West Virginia expansive enough to include both someone as conservative as Senator Byrd and as liberal as you were?

Hechler: Well, of course, the Democratic Party is interested in winning elections, and they would never thumb their nose at one who was more successful in getting Republican votes.

Sturm: Some people that I've interviewed have said that this goes back to the idea that he was a force of his own and the party was dependent on him, that Senator Byrd really was reluctant to endorse other Democratic candidates in the state. Did you find that to be true?

Hechler: I don't know how to answer that other than to say that every candidate wants to get a majority, and if they find a way to get a majority through a person like Senator Byrd, why, they'll go for it.

Sturm: Did he freely endorse other Democratic candidates, in your experience?

Hechler: I'm sure he stuck to his principles. I don't recall that he would go out of his way to endorse candidates that would criticize him.

Sturm: I'm sure of that. [laughter] Now, you have been described—in fact, there's a whole book about you—as being a political maverick. I think that's long before John McCain ever heard of the term, a maverick. And I think you've been proud of that title. I think you've been proud of the fact that you were considered to be a political maverick in West Virginia.

Hechler: Sure.

Sturm: But do you think that Senator Byrd could also be described as a maverick?

Hechler: No. Anybody who can win elections like he did, I mean, winning is a feather in your cap and a star on your crown, and I don't think that makes him a maverick. I should mention though that when Charlotte Pritt ran for governor, he was openly opposed to her, and he made it pretty clear that he hoped she would not win. [Pritt was defeated in the 1992 primary election for governor by Gaston Caperton].

Sturm: Now, did that happen very often? We talked about whether he endorsed people. Did he often come out against candidates, or was this an exception with Charlotte Pritt?

Hechler: It was an exception, the fact that she was running for the highest office in the state and he did not say anything publicly. But it was pretty obvious that he felt it would not help West Virginia if she became governor, because she would be destroying a lot of things that he stood for.

Sturm: I've been told also—I don't know this firsthand—that at the time that he was majority leader of the Senate, that he actually didn't come back to West Virginia that often. Can you speak to that at all? Is that true?

Hechler: It certainly is true. I mean, he had an agenda that he found difficult to complete. When he was Majority Leader, he had to embrace a lot of candidates and members of the Senate that were not necessarily in his corner politically. In other words, he began to appreciate that liberals needed support, and as majority leader, he took his job very seriously. He was there not to help people with his principles, but to help many, many people that disagreed with his priorities.

Sturm: So then as majority leader, he, in fact, was responsible for endorsing candidates that he politically might have some issues with.

Hechler: Yes, that's right.

Sturm: Nationwide.

Hechler: That's right, and in that sense he was actually, in effect, liberalizing his own position because of the fact that he was helping people like Hubert Humphrey and Paul Douglas, the people that many of the conservative Democrats labeled the bomb-throwers. [laughter]

Sturm: Do you think he found that painful?

Hechler: That's a hard question to answer. I just try to imagine how he felt. No, I think as majority leader, he was strongly trying to be an effective majority leader, and to be an effective majority leader was to produce a Democratic majority to fulfill the responsibilities of the position.

Sturm: Now, you talked a little bit about the meetings that he had with the delegation. Can you elaborate a little bit about how he worked with the West Virginia congressional delegation in your time in Congress, as far as helping with projects, eliciting support from them? What exactly were the mechanics of the delegation?

Hechler: Well, I think that at these weekly meetings he would make it clear so everybody understood how important it was for the delegation, which was actually from a small state in the Democratic spectrum, and he made it clear that only by working together for the same issues could we exert influence.

Sturm: What were some of the issues that you and he disagreed on?

Hechler: Civil rights. You could say that was one issue we disagreed on. He filibustered, as you know, I guess, the first civil rights bill. That takes a lot of dissatisfaction in order to filibuster against one of the principles of the party.

Sturm: Why do you think he did that? Did he ever give you any reasons?

Hechler: That was just part of his basic philosophy, and also he always felt more comfortable with people south of the border in the Senate.

Sturm: It's interesting, because, as you said, he filibustered against that bill and he voted against it, and I think there has been a general consensus that when he first came to the Senate he was basically a Southern Democrat.

Hechler: Yes.

Sturm: But over the years that seemed to change. In fact, I think the last few years he was in the Senate he got almost A-plus ratings from the NAACP. Did he change? Did the times change? What happened there?

Hechler: Well, I think there was clearly a philosophical change in Senator Byrd's outlook. The older he got, I think the more he began to realize that justice was on the side of the liberal Democrats. Gradually this permeated his beliefs. I think, too, he gradually began to see that there wasn't any justice in what the Dixiecrats stood for.

Sturm: Do you think his core beliefs changed over the years?

Hechler: Yes, I do. I think he became personally more liberal in his outlook.

Sturm: Do you think this was political expediency or did he, as you indicate—

Hechler: No, I think this was really a basic change in his outlook.

Sturm: So that he grew as a man and a senator. He grew.

Hechler: Absolutely.

Sturm: Let's talk a little bit about the coal industry and you and Senator Byrd. John L. Lewis, who's the former president of the United Mine Workers, a very powerful man, initially opposed Byrd. In fact, I think he said that he would do anything within his power to defeat Byrd. What was the cause of his lack of endorsement, actually opposition to Byrd? Why did Lewis dislike him so much?

Hechler: John L. Lewis was basically a much more liberal person, a pro-union person, and Byrd was never anti-union; he just didn't feel that that was to his liking. And, of course, I supported John L. Lewis and I began to oppose the leadership of the UMW when

Tony Boyle took over. That's very well documented in my book on mine safety.

Sturm: I have a copy of that, yes, sir. Now, did Byrd, even though the leadership of the union opposed him, did he have support from the rank-and-file in his campaigns?

Hechler: Oh, yes, yes. Yes, I think the rank-and-file always backed Senator Byrd, recognizing his political power.

Sturm: I was going to ask you, how did he manage to accomplish that when the leadership was so opposed? How did he manage to get the rank-and-file to support him?

Hechler: Well, I think it's fair to say that Senator Byrd throughout his career was a rank-and-file type. It wasn't only in terms of coal miners, but he was always looking for a better relationship with average people, because that was a natural bent of his in order to get support from anybody, to go right to the bottom.

Sturm: So he was a bottom-up man rather than a top-down person. [laughter]

Hechler: Yes.

Sturm: How did the mine operators and owners feel about him? Did they support him or did they oppose him?

Hechler: I don't really know too much about that. I really can't answer that question.

Sturm: That's fair. I understand that. Okay, let's move on a little bit to the black-lung movement. You were one of the powerful leaders, the powerful voices in the Congress in the sixties and early seventies for not only mine reform, but black lung. I know you and Dr. [I. E.] Buff, Dr. [Donald] Rasmussen, and Dr. [Hawey] Wells actually led the black-lung fight for miners. Now, I believe that you and Senator Byrd had differing opinions on this initially. Is that correct?

Hechler: I don't recall. Certainly he was never in the forefront of the fight, but I never thought of him as an opponent.

Sturm: I didn't mean necessarily an opponent. For example, I have read—and I don't know this firsthand—that he was not in favor of benefits being paid to miners with black lung, and you were.

Hechler: Oh, yes, that's correct.

Sturm: Can you talk a little bit about that, about how your views differed and how you managed to get together on this?

Hechler: I don't think we ever got together.

Sturm: He was never in favor of compensation?

Hechler: Well, he never really believed that as a matter of principle [subsidies] should be extended to—I think Senator Byrd was also very uncomfortable with subsidies of any type that went to lower-income people. He never would support some of the initiatives of the liberal Democrats that were always trying to raise the economic status of lower-income people. That is very peculiar, because he has so successfully dramatized his early life when he lost money that he had personally earned and deposited in the banks.

Sturm: Did he support the black-lung bill when it came to the Senate for a vote?

Hechler: He certainly was not in the forefront of the support. [laughs] And I would not characterize him as a supporter, although I also would not characterize him as an out-front opponent.

Sturm: Who were the leaders in the Senate when the black-lung bill went to the Senate?

Hechler: Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin. You're talking about the strongest supporters?

Sturm: Yes.

Hechler: Yes. These were not designated leaders; these are philosophical leaders that worked harder. Senators like Paul Douglas and [Hubert] Humphrey. So you could never characterize Senator Byrd as—he was more a friend of the coal operators.

Sturm: Did he receive campaign contributions from coal operators, do you know?

Hechler: Well, the record would show. I don't know. Those are all publicly documented.

Sturm: He didn't take that position on other aspects of mine reform, though, did he? Safety and that sort of thing?

Hechler: Well, he certainly didn't go out like I did to speak at coal miner rallies. He would never show his outright support of the miners the way I was doing. You don't ever see him waving stacks of bologna when I'm talking about the coal operators. He never wanted to draw a line in the sand so far as coal operators were concerned.

Sturm: I remember well that you were the leader in all of Congress on that. You were the man who was out front, as you said, doing whatever you could during that period.

Hechler: Yes.

Sturm: Well, you've emerged to many as a hero in the environmental movement [due to] your stance against strip-mining and mountaintop removal and your support of acid-rain legislation. Where was Senator Byrd on these issues, and how did you all work out any compromises that might have happened? Or were there any?

Hechler: Well, Senator Byrd could never have been characterized as an environmentalist. He was far more conservative in his manner of performance, as well as his core beliefs. I always tried hard not to have any direct conflict with him.

Sturm: You mentioned earlier that in 1959 or '60 you made a speech in support of Senator Byrd. Why don't you talk a little about that.

Hechler: That was simply my recognition that he was a natural leader of the delegation. He had taken the initiative to organize our weekly meetings, and he went along with some of my crazy ideas. [For example,] I wanted to put the searchlight on inadequacy of surplus commodities which preceded the Food Stamp Program. So I asked Senator Byrd if he would allow us to have our next breakfast entirely on surplus commodities to publicize how inadequate they were, and also to convince all the members of the delegation that we had to do something a little bit more serious to get people a good breakfast. I'm sure that members of the delegation went hungry after eating the surplus commodity. [laughter] They secretly probably went out and bought a better breakfast.

Sturm: Went to the Congressional Dining Room, probably.

In December 2009, Senator Byrd released a statement saying that "Coal must embrace the future." Many saw this as a break from his traditionally unquestioned support for the coal industry.

Hechler: No question about it.

Sturm: What do you think caused him to do that? Because you already indicated that he didn't want to make ripples and he supported the mine operators and that sort of thing.

Hechler: Well, I think that was a clear-cut recognition of his ability to look into the future, and that was a characteristic that I think is always to his credit. He could recognize trends in the economy. I think that he was disappointed that the coal industry itself and the county assessors who loved the severance taxes that came to them—that nobody in the coal industry seemed to be cognizant of the fact that coal was not going to last forever. They did not have the vision that Senator Byrd had, and I think all these things added up to his making a statement like that, which I'm sure shocked the leaders of the coal industry.

Sturm: Did it shock you?

Hechler: No, I was pleased. [laughter]

Sturm: Were you surprised? Maybe "shocked" is not the right word.

Hechler: Yes, I was surprised, because that represented a giant leap forward.

Sturm: You think this was another example of his ability to learn and grow as a senator and as a human?

Hechler: Absolutely. Absolutely. This certainly showed his growth, and he had to grow up fast.

Sturm: We talked a little bit about the Civil Rights Act and the fact that he voted against it. This keeps coming up, and we almost have to ask it. Did he ever discuss with you his flirtation or membership in the Ku Klux Klan?

Hechler: No, no. Of course, I always depended on his apologies for not realizing what he was doing. We never had any discussion on it, but all this is very well on the record. People could see that he was always a little bit embarrassed about his early associations with the KKK.

Sturm: Okay, let's change the subject a little bit. You were secretary of state of West Virginia from 1985 to 2001.

Hechler: Yes.

Sturm: And I'm sure that changed the relationship that you had with Senator Byrd. What kind of relationship did you have with him as secretary of state? What sort of interaction did you have?

Hechler: I think the story of my visit and his public comment about my visit pretty well tells that story. He recognized my political ability to get a nice majority, and that came out in his statements, his public statements to the committee about being late for his appointment. I mean, that's quite unusual for a person as powerful as he is to go to such lengths, realizing that I had always been regarded as a maverick and he was a regular. He didn't particularly like mavericks.

Sturm: He didn't? Were your encounters with him after you were secretary of state pretty much limited? You didn't have that much interaction with him as secretary of state, is that correct?

Hechler: Yes, but I thought that was a very—

Sturm: I thought what you said was significant, but aside from that, you didn't have any reason to go to Washington on a regular basis, or he didn't stop by the office to say, "How are things going, Mr. Secretary?"

Hechler: No.

Sturm: That is very telling.

You've touched on this a little bit briefly, but let's go back to it again. When he gave up his position as majority leader and became chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee and he announced that he intended to be West Virginia's billion-dollar senator, how did you feel about the approach he used in bringing "pork" to West Virginia?

Hechler: Well, as a West Virginian, of course, I love it. I mean, I think that was really great. I don't endorse the idea of naming all these projects for him. I mean, these are things that people should have realized we deserved, and we were usually at the bottom of the heap when it came to the kind of money that he was able to bring into the state. The fact that he had the clout to bring it in was something that everybody praised, justifiably, and praised him for his ability to do this. I'm sure that it took a lot of pulling rabbits out of a hat to make sure that these things stuck when the bunny actually arrived here. Hurrah for Senator Byrd's ability to do that.

Sturm: When did you last have the opportunity to meet and talk with the senator?

Hechler: I think the last opportunity was when the legislature was honoring him when he came here. You remember the occasion?

Sturm: That would have been 2001, when he was named West Virginian of the Century?

Hechler: Right, right, right.

Sturm: Were you there that day?

Hechler: Yes, I was there. I personally congratulated him. I also reminded him of some of the great events in his past, like when he first ran for the House of Delegates and came up with the clever phrase "Byrd by name, Byrd by nature, let's send Byrd to the legislature." [laughter] You remember that?

Sturm: I've heard that. Yes, sir, I have. So you reminded him of that?

Hechler: Yes.

Sturm: Do you think he'd forgotten it? I remember that day he pointed to the desk that he used to sit in when he was in the legislature during that first term. I guess he had a phenomenal memory.

Hechler: Oh, yes.

Sturm: By all accounts—we've talked just briefly about this—his childhood and his early adulthood were very sparse. He didn't have many educational or other opportunities that so many people had, and yet he was able to rise to powers in the United States Senate that nobody else has probably ever been able to accomplish. How did a man with his limited educational background and all that went along with that manage to do that, in your view?

Hechler: I think that there's one thing that you haven't mentioned. That is his ability as a Sunday School teacher, where he started out with a class of six that eventually grew to six hundred. I think this is something that you shouldn't overlook when you're writing about him, about his tremendous ability to utilize religion to accomplish his goals, because this was so important politically. When everybody could see that he was able as a

Sunday School teacher to build up a class that big, it made it obvious that he would be successful in the political arena.

Sturm: So basically the skills that he used to build that class up were the same skills that he used as a senator.

Hechler: Precisely.

Sturm: Can you identify specifically what those might have been, do you think?

Hechler: Well, the ability to organize, the ability to achieve success, the ability to make people realize that he was clearly a master organizer and a master inspirer of confidence, and his organizing and inspirational ability. I think even more important than the organizing is the word “inspiration,” that he inspired confidence in people that they wanted to support this man because of the fact that he had that rare personal ability to get people to feel passionate about what they were doing.

Sturm: How about his skill of manipulating the rules of the Senate? Not “manipulating.” That’s not the proper word, but of utilizing rules of the Senate.

Hechler: Golly. He realized early on that the way to get ahead was to learn those rules and learn the way in which they could be utilized for the kinds of projects in which he was interested. And, of course, this probably has nothing to do with your conclusions, but the amazing way in which he learned about the Roman Empire has not really anything to do with what we’ve been talking about, but it’s an idiosyncrasy that shows his determination to learn every little detail about what interests him. You haven’t referred any to his lectures on the history of the US Senate.

Sturm: Why don’t you talk about those a little bit. You’re absolutely right. I haven’t asked that question. I have a copy of his book, but elaborate on that a little bit.

Hechler: Well, it’s quite amazing. It’s just an illustration of the thoroughness of Senator Byrd, to learn every little detail about things that he feels West Virginians ought to know about. I mean, why should I want to know about which Roman emperor did what and when and how? But once he sets his mind to something, it’s a beautiful illustration of the thoroughness with which he addresses any subject that he may not feel would be beneficial to the state, but [which relates to] his love of history.

Sturm: That sort of ties in with what you were talking about, about his religion. Did he openly express religious beliefs, quote scripture, that sort of thing?

Hechler: Well, like everything else he tackled, he knows the Bible backward and forward.

Sturm: I guess that’s what I was trying to get at.

Hechler: Yes, he knows the Bible backward and forward. This is one reason his Sunday School class was so supportive and why it grew like mushrooms.

Sturm: Did he remain a Sunday School teacher throughout his career?

Hechler: No, only in tactic.

Sturm: Only in tactic. [laughs] Okay. That's a fair evaluation. Do you think he was an overachiever or was he a determined achiever, a man who set goals and then strove to meet them?

Hechler: I think the latter.

Sturm: Because I've heard some people say he was an overachiever. I don't have an opinion on that, but I just wondered what you thought, from your perspective.

Hechler: Well what do you mean, overachiever?

Sturm: I mean a man who achieved beyond his capability.

Hechler: Well, obviously that's a big part of his capability.

Sturm: I guess it is. [laughs] Maybe there isn't any such thing as an overachiever. That's an old educational term. That's my background. Some students that you looked at weren't supposed to do very well, but they did extremely well, and we called those "overachievers."

Hechler: I had an older brother who was such an overachiever, he was an Eagle Scout and he always wanted to get As in all this classes, and he got a scholarship to Cornell University. He wanted to be the best student in the whole class, and it was just too much for him. He had a nervous breakdown and never survived, died at an early age from overwork.

Sturm: That certainly didn't happen to Senator Byrd.

Hechler: No. No, he loved it.

Sturm: Let me ask another question about his abilities like that. How do you personally account for the fact that the man was able to win election to the United States Senate nine times? You know, that probably has never been performed up to this time, probably never will be again. How was he able to do that, do you think?

Hechler: Well, he was able to do it largely because the principles that he had were appealing not only to Democrats but also to Republicans, and in order to win as big as he did, to carry as many Republican counties, they had to have trust in him and appreciation of the fact that he was enunciating basic principles in which they believed. That's the reason.

Sturm: Well, Congressman, it sounds to me like in spite of the differences you may have had, you really liked and respected Senator Byrd.

Hechler: Absolutely. I certainly did like and respect him and appreciate even the

things we disagreed on. I appreciate his tremendous talent.

Sturm: I think at the time you all were in Congress together, people could disagree and it wasn't so vindictive and hateful as it seems to be today. You could disagree on issues without becoming personal.

Hechler: Right. Absolutely.

Sturm: What do you think his legacy will be in West Virginia as compared to, say, your legacy?

Hechler: Well, I'm sure that the fact that the legislature gave him that honor and the fact that the *Gazette* named him several times as Man of the Year, that shows that we agree that there'll never again be a person like Senator Byrd. [He had such] a passionate love for the state, and the countless things that he's done for the state and the manner which he has exerted leadership on behalf of the state [will be his legacy.]

Sturm: What do you think your legacy will be?

Hechler: All those things. You should talk with the former Adjutant General Tackett.

Sturm: I have him on my list. I haven't made contact with him yet, but he is on my list of people to contact.

Hechler: He will be a very good one, because Senator Byrd would frequently ask him, "What does the National Guard need?" and he'd go ahead and take General Tackett's advice to go ahead and get what Tackett told him that he needed.

Sturm: Wasn't he fond of saying that General Tackett was the greatest general since Hannibal? Isn't that the term Senator Byrd frequently used publicly?

Hechler: Yes.

Sturm: Everybody that I've talked with has a favorite story about Senator Byrd. You probably have many, but what's your very favorite?

Hechler: My favorite was the one I told about my visit to his office.

Sturm: Your first contact with him.

Hechler: No, I mean the last time I visited him, he publicized the fact that—

Sturm: When you were secretary of state.

Hechler: Yes.

Sturm: You told two stories. I wasn't sure whether you were talking about when

you took your students there and it was sort of nip and tuck there for a little bit or whether it was the secretary of state visit when he recognized you and told the entire committee that he had to go because you were waiting for him.

Hechler: Yes.

Sturm: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Hechler: No. I think you've been a very good interviewer. I admire the way you're going about this, and look forward to the ultimate product.

Sturm: I think you've been an extremely good subject and I've enjoyed every minute of it.

Hechler: Thank you.

Sturm: Thank you very much.

[End of interview]