

# Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project

Oral History Interview

**Governor Bob Wise**

May 17, 2013



## Preface

by Ray Smock

Robert Ellsworth (“Bob”) Wise, Jr., a lawyer in Charleston, WV, served in the West Virginia Senate from 1980 to 1982 before his election to the US House of Representatives, where he served ten years, from 1983 to 1993 from the Third Congressional District. After redistricting, he was elected to serve from the Second Congressional District from 1993 to 2001. In 2000, he was elected governor of West Virginia, serving from January 15, 2001 to January 17, 2005. Since leaving office, he has been president of the Alliance for Excellent Education in Washington, DC, a non-profit organization focusing on national education policy.

Governor Wise begins the interview with some reflections on his current work with the Alliance for Excellent Education and the importance of a vigorous national education policy before moving on to his relationship with Senator Byrd from his perspective as a state legislator, a member of the US House of Representatives, and as governor. Senator Byrd, according to Wise, was not only a master of Senate rules and procedures, but was equally well-versed in House rules. While the Senator did not try to impose his will on the House, he certainly could suggest to members of the West Virginia delegation how they might move bills on the House side.

Governor Wise saw Senator Byrd as a champion of education, not only from the standpoint of his own lifetime of learning, but for the educational infrastructure he helped create in West Virginia. As Wise put it, “A lot of people, rightly so, point to all he’s done for infrastructure, physical infrastructure in the state of West Virginia, but we should never forget what he did for education, both in his personal life and the model that he made: the Byrd Scholarship, the institutes that were created around the state, the research facilities at WVU and other places. I often heard him say, ‘This isn’t something I’m just giving to you. What do you make of this? You’ve got to make something of it. This is an opportunity, but you have to take advantage of it.’”

**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**  
**May 17, 2013**

**Sturm:** Today is Friday, May 17, 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 speaking with former Governor and Congressman Bob Wise. Governor Wise represented West Virginia from two different congressional districts. He represented the 3<sup>rd</sup> District from 1983 to 1993, and after reapportionment, he represented the 2<sup>nd</sup> District from 1993 to 2001. He left Congress in 2001 after his election as West Virginia's thirty-third governor. Governor Wise is currently the president of the Alliance for Excellent Education. We are speaking in Governor Wise's office on Connecticut Avenue in Washington, DC.

Governor, I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview.

**Wise:** Thank you.

**Sturm:** And as you know, this session is being recorded. Is that all right with you?

**Wise:** Yes, certainly.

**Sturm:** First, let's take care of the small print. A complete transcript of this interview will be sent to you, at which time you can go over it and make any changes that you want. Then we will ask you to send it back with a Deed of Gift, stating that it will become a part of the Robert C. Byrd Oral History Collection at Shepherd University. Until that happens, everything that we say is private and confidential and is subject to your control until you're happy with it and sign it over to the Byrd Center.

I'm going to ask you two types of questions about Senator Byrd. Some will be based on your personal observations of Senator Byrd during the time you served with him in Congress and during your tenure as governor. Others may be more speculative and based on a combination of your knowledge of the senator and West Virginia politics. Let's begin by having you tell us a little bit about yourself, your background, and your accomplishments.

**Wise:** I grew up in West Virginia. I practiced law when I finished law school, came back to Charleston, practiced law on my own and was involved in public interest law. I always was interested in campaigns and so got involved with the state Democratic Party somewhat. That's where I first met Senator Byrd, through electoral politics in the early 1970s, and then went on and became even more interested in politics, ran for the State Senate in 1980, won, was successful, then ran in 1982 for the House of Representatives seat in what was then the old 3<sup>rd</sup> District and was successful in that. So I got to work closely with Senator Byrd, much more closely, obviously, Senator Randolph, and then when Senator Rockefeller came in.

So I stayed in Congress for nine terms, ran for governor of the State of West Virginia in the year 2000, was successful and, obviously, had not run again for the Congress and then was governor for one term. Since leaving office in January 2005, I've been in Washington, DC, where I head the Alliance for Excellent Education, a nonprofit organization with the mission that every child graduates from high school ready for college and career, and which permits me to

actually carry out a lot of what I worked in when I was in public life for twenty-four years, which was the importance of every child getting a quality education.

**Sturm:** Yes, I was going to ask you how politics led to what you're doing now.

**Wise:** I look at what I'm doing as a never-ending campaign. I'm never running for office again, but what I do is I go out every day. I stomp literally across the country for what's necessary to improve high schools. I try to galvanize the public to act on this. So there's a lot of campaign, and also I'm trying to change policy. So I look at it as, for twenty-four years I actually got to cast the vote. Now I'm trying to set up so that those who do cast the votes, that I'm trying to set up what it is they're voting for and in a positive way for young people.

**Sturm:** You already started, so expand a little bit more on what the Alliance does, what its purpose is and what your goals are.

**Wise:** The Alliance was created almost twelve years ago by a philanthropic family. It's now supported by a number of foundations. Its mission statement is that all children should graduate from high school ready for college and career. So it's not only about graduation, but it's also about the quality of the diploma they have, that they are able to function in a modern workplace. So we tended to work for many years, essentially, at the federal level. What are the federal policies necessary to accomplish that end? But I love state policy and local policy, and that's also where, as you know, so much of education takes place.

**Sturm:** Absolutely.

**Wise:** And so we increasingly are helping inform and provide information that advances state policy and district policy, school district policy that is necessary to accomplish every child graduating. We're very much involved with the Common Core State Standards Initiative by forty-six states and the District of Columbia to identify, to develop, and now implement what is it that every child should know or skills they should have to graduate college and career-ready in English language arts, and math. We're extremely interested and involved in technology application. How is it that education technology can be effectively used to advance student learning outcomes? And then, finally, as our economy becomes more diverse, much more demanding of a higher skill level, what is it that a student needs coming out of high school?

So it's not just now the core academic content knowledge, but it's also the ability to think creatively and critically, to be able to work together in teams. As one chief executive of a major company told me recently, "We don't hire people based on just what they know; it's on what they can do with what they know, how do they apply their knowledge." And so those are the major activities of the Alliance, informing policymakers, members of Congress, administration heads, state legislators, state officials, district officials. What are the policies that need to be in place in order for this to happen?

**Sturm:** I believe I read—it's been within the last month—that you met with Governor Tomblin and you're coming up with a plan for technology in West Virginia. Is that correct?

**Wise:** Yes, I was very pleased. The governor noticed that we have something called Project 24, which we launched February 6, in which we're trying to encourage every school district in

the country to go through a planning process for how they're going to use all the different aspects of technology to raise student learning outcomes. Rather than have them purchase and then plan, we think it's a better idea to have a plan in place and then buy the technology that meets your plan. So we've actually developed a strategy template, a planning process that's all free, that school districts can use, and Governor Tomblin has made West Virginia the first state to say we want to do this on a statewide basis.

**Sturm:** I think that's excellent. It's been my experience professionally and personally that too many times the technology in the system is rated on the number of screens or terminals that are available and not the content of what goes into those things.

**Wise:** Very few people buy a car before they figure out what they want from the car. Do I want a fast car? Do I want one that gets good gas mileage? What particular aspects do I want from this car? You think that out in advance. But too often what I've seen in education is we load up on—so every child has a laptop now, but we don't have a strategy for the teachers. We don't have a strategy for what we want from it.

So our message is, just don't put a netbook on top of a textbook and stop before you purchase. Have a plan. And what we've done is develop a planning process that we think is readily doable. But we do have seven specific elements that you need to work through: data assessment, budgets, professional development, and so on. So, cover each of these elements and, first of all, identify what it is you seek to do. What are your learning outcome goals? What are your particular challenges? In West Virginia, for instance, it may be that a large number of our children live in areas that don't have a lot of connectivity, a high free and reduced lunch population, and so on.

So I've got my goals. I've got my challenges. Now, how am I going to change the role of teaching? How do I change the role of time? Because learning is a 24/7 experience now. And, finally, I've worked through all that. Now what is the appropriate technology for what I set out to do as opposed to technology first?

**Sturm:** You know, my experience on the Board of Education was that my fellow board members, most of them weren't educators and they liked to ask the technology people how many computers we had in the county. And you break that down into laptops and PCs, and then we moved on. There was no follow-up. What are we going to do with them? Do we have a strategy for using them? We just didn't do that.

**Wise:** I talk to too many principals who told me about a whole bunch of new computers come in for kids and they sit on carts.

**Sturm:** Absolutely.

**Wise:** And maybe you send them down to the computer lab for forty-five minutes a day or something, but the opportunity to have a total plan in place in which the teachers have helped you develop it, the principal, that you have identified your learning goals, and now so the teacher's getting real-time data, the student has access to learning anywhere in the world, you have professional learning or development that you can actually be doing online or building professional learning communities, you're deciding whether or not you're using textbooks,

which I think are going to be pretty much irrelevant in five years, or you're using digital content and the teacher's helping put it together. It really enhances the role of the teacher. It does not diminish it. And it also makes for a much more effective education system. But once again, it requires a plan. It's not something you can just do ad hoc, one item at a time.

**Sturm:** Well, I wish you luck with this. It's something that we all need. Our kids are our most important resource.

**Wise:** And particularly today, we're in an information-based economy, and it doesn't matter whether it's the most traditional industry such as coal mining, all the way to the latest information technology job, every job now requires a much higher skill level, much higher education level, which Senator Byrd realized. If you look at his whole life, it was all about not only educating himself, constantly upgrading his skill level, his knowledge level, it was about educating himself, but he also constantly kept driving home the importance of education for everyone else.

**Sturm:** Well, since you mentioned Senator Byrd, let's move on to him since that's what we're supposed to be talking about. Now, you just touched momentarily a few minutes ago about how you first met Senator Byrd. Can you expand on that a little bit about what your first contacts with him were and what that led to?

**Wise:** Well, my first contacts were, as I recall, through the West Virginia State Democratic Party. Well, actually two incidents. I came home and I finished college and had worked in a number of campaigns across the country in 1972. The last one I worked in was the United Mine Workers Reform Movement, Arnold Miller, in 1972 when he ran and won the United Mine Workers presidency against Tony Boyle. I had worked in the Morgantown area, so I was involved in politics at that time across the state. So then I finished law school and I came home in '75, I think it was, 1975, 1976.

Both in my earlier political life work and then in '75 and '76, I was constantly in contact with the state Democratic Party leadership. Joe Bailey, and it may have been J.C. Dillon at the time, was the chair. But at any rate, that brought me into contact with Senator Byrd in several forms. If you recall, in 1976 he was actually, at least for a short period of time, a candidate for president and he ran in the primary in West Virginia. He was very kind and asked me if I would be, in effect, his campaign manager, not the face out front—that would be somebody notable and known in the state—but if I would do the nuts and bolts of his campaign. I wasn't able to because I was involved in some other activities that I thought might not serve his interests well. I was busy suing coal companies to make them pay more property taxes for education, so I shared that with him and, very regrettably, declined, but I think he understood and was probably grateful. But it always meant a lot to me that he'd asked me.

And then, of course, I supported him in his initiatives, and then, finally, I ran in 1980 for the state senate, so I'd run into him occasionally. And then I ran, of course, for Congress in '82 and had a chance to work with him. Senator Byrd would periodically call congressional delegation meetings, in other words, for House members as well as Senator Randolph and then later Senator Rockefeller.

Sometimes when the governor came to Washington, Senator Byrd would convene the delegation as a whole. He would call delegation meetings for one of two reasons, occasionally just to check in, but with Senator Byrd, he wanted to hear what's happening to you, but he always had a reason that he thought it was important the delegation gather, and then he would also call us together on specific pieces of legislation that we needed to have a coordinated strategy on. Sometimes it was black lung. Sometimes it might be a measure that he was working on.

When I went to Congress, I was on the then Public Works Committee. I think they call it Transportation Infrastructure now, but I was on the Public Works Committee. What I learned early on was my job was, when Senator Byrd sent something over, don't mess it up, because at that point, he was—oh, he was always very effective, but certainly in his position as Majority—well, because let's remember something. He held every major position of authority, I think the only US senator to do that in history, both as a majority member and a minority member, including being Majority Leader of the US Senate. So, therefore, he provided incredible access for the entire congressional delegation, as well as incredible power, and so what that often meant was that those of us, even if we were freshmen, such as I was—and actually that year, in 1983, West Virginia sent three new congressmen to the House.

It was quite a turnover because Bob Mollohan was replaced by his son Allen, Harley Stagers, Sr., quite a powerful figure in his own right, was replaced by his son, and then I went and I replaced the one-term incumbent, Mick Staton. And Mick, in turn, had replaced John Hutchison, but really John Slack. So there was a great turnover in seniority in the House, and yet we, as first-term members, often had senior House members coming up, because Senator Byrd at that point, I forget whether he was Minority or Majority Leader, but coming up to us and wanting to have some sort of access to Senator Byrd because they knew that their legislation, their appropriation, whatever, when it hit the Senate, Senator Byrd was going to be the one that could largely determine whether it moved.

**Sturm:** You mentioned that he presided over these meetings, these delegation meetings of the West Virginia caucus. Did this happen even when he was a junior senator? When Senator Randolph was still there, was he the presiding—

**Wise:** That's interesting. I have trouble remembering. My sense is that they were probably, at that point then, it was more of a collegial one, or maybe Senator Randolph routinely called a senator, but Senator Randolph didn't—you'll have to help me out because I'm trying to remember what position in the Senate Senator Byrd held at that point. He was either Whip or Leader.

**Sturm:** He was probably Minority Leader, I would think, at that period.

**Wise:** In that case, then, we were meeting in the Minority Leader's office, and so while it was a delegation meeting, he was certainly the—and he was the junior senator from West Virginia. He was a senior official in terms of the overall US Senate, so very quickly he would be leading the discussion.

**Sturm:** I think he was Whip before he was Majority Leader.

**Wise:** Yes, because remember that's the one where he and Senator Kennedy ran against each other, and the tribute to that is that both of them became—while it was a pretty bitter race, as I recall, but yet both of them then later became the best of friends.

**Sturm:** During these meetings, what was his relationship? How did he treat the other members of the delegation?

**Wise:** He was always very deferential and he would point out why. One is, he'd come from the House, but it wasn't just that. He was a man of the Senate, and he expected a certain deference and respect for the rules of the Senate and those who served in the Senate. By the same token, he recognized the House as being an equal branch with a different set of rules. He also felt that—and he would say this explicitly—that each had a responsibility, that each had a role to be respected, and the message, sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit, was by that token, “Don't tell the Senate what to do. I understand I am not to tell the House what to do. You're your own members. But by the same token, I don't expect anyone telling the Senate what to do.”

And so sometimes in the House you would get into situations where House members would put together a letter, for instance, recommending a course of action. I remember particularly this came up when there was an effort made to do away—some things don't change—an effort made to do away with the filibuster, and fifty-some House Democrats signed a letter to then Senator Byrd, I believe, who was Majority Leader, or whoever the Majority Leader was, requesting that the filibuster rule be amended and struck down. I knew enough not to sign that letter. I think the filibuster should go, but I was a House member. He was a senator. I already had learned how strongly he felt about respecting each other's prerogatives. So no West Virginian signed that letter, and he later let us know that he was not appreciative of others. He was fine with us, but not appreciative of others trying to tell the Senate how to run its business.

By the same token, as he often said, “I am not to tell the House how to run its business.” Having said that, I do remember this, and it gave me a glimpse early on of what incredible knowledge he had of the legislative process. We all know that he was an expert—that understates it—in the rules of the Senate, and that leaders of both parties in the Senate would come to Senator Byrd and ask his advice on how to proceed. He could also tie the Senate up in knots in parliamentary procedure because of his incredible knowledge of the rules of the Senate. So we all knew that.

I remember one time he called a meeting on a particular issue. I've forgotten what it is now, but there was a measure that the Senate, and particularly Senator Byrd, was interested in. He'd sent it over to the House and it was languishing, and so he called the House delegation together to—it was in West Virginia's interest that it move forward—in his deferential way to ask suggestions and what could be done to move this forward. And so we went back and forth, and we each talked about how we saw the situation and it was tied up because of this or that. Senator Byrd listened, said, “I certainly understand.” And then he said—and I still remember—“Now, of course, it's not for me to tell you what to do in the House, but as I recall, there is a House rule,” and he cited it exactly down to the subsection, “that if invoked, could permit this to move forward on a much faster basis.”



**Sturm:** I was going to ask about that because a couple of people have told me that their impression was that he knew as much about the House as he did the rules of the Senate.

**Wise:** I mean, in his very polite, gracious way, he told us exactly the strategy we ought to follow and what rule to use.

**Sturm:** Did it work?

**Wise:** I think so. Yes, as I recall. That was an early indication of what a phenomenal knowledge he had of the rules of the entire body. As he insisted on the respect for the Senate and the House, he also made sure that the administration understood its position. He respected the administration, but he was not going to be imposed upon either. If you'll recall, he often said that when asked how many presidents he had served under, "I never served under a president. I've served with—," and then he'd name them.

But I was in his office a couple of times, one time when President Clinton had just come in, and I've understood from others that this same thing had happened with President Carter. There were a series of—I've forgotten whether it was budget cuts or what it was, but it was something that would directly affect West Virginia and it was a program that would be eliminated or greatly cut back. And I still remember being in Senator Byrd's office when he called the president's chief of staff at the time and asked that they reconsider their action, and didn't get much of a favorable response and then got a polite response. But I do remember his closing line to that official, which was, "We greatly appreciate your consideration and I may be in a position to throw you some roses sometime."

**Sturm:** [laughs] I wonder if they got the message. One way or the other, they probably did.

**Wise:** They did. And he would do this with the delegation present. He was the only one who could put a call in—there were a couple of other times we would be gathered in his office, and he said, "Okay, I think it's time to get the president involved," who could put a call in, and if he didn't get the president on the line right away, he got the chief of staff. I saw that a couple of times. I mean, the rest of us would wait weeks to get through to the chief of staff.

**Sturm:** If ever, probably. In the meetings of the delegation or any of the meetings that you were with, were there ever differences that came up where other members of the delegation didn't agree with his position or he didn't agree with theirs?

**Wise:** Yes, I was the one early on that was in that position. Actually, out of that, I think it helped forge a stronger relationship, perhaps, for me with Senator Byrd, but it was born out of adversity. It was 1982, and I was running for office and I had taken a position in opposition to the construction of the Stonewall Jackson Dam. This was a project that both Senator Randolph and Senator Byrd had long supported. Senator Randolph had authorized it. I've forgotten the cost now, but it was somewhere around \$250 million, and as you well know from the Buckhannon area, it was designed to deal with the periodic flooding of Weston and downstream, and yet there was also a strong environmental movement that opposed it. It was taking an incredible amount of land in Lewis County.

Particularly the Army Corps of Engineers had come back with the cost-benefit ratio of less than one, which meant that technically, legally, it couldn't be built, so Senator Randolph had been able to get an amendment through in one of the authorization bills that exempted the dam from that requirement. So there were a lot of arguments, pros and cons. That actually had been a fairly major part of my campaign, was opposing that. Now, this put me right in the gun sights of both Senator Byrd and Senator Randolph.

In the election—I think there were fourteen counties—I carried eleven of them. I lost Lewis, but carried the ones around it. But that's not the important part. So when I got to the House, I had made it a promise and I had an obligation. So it wasn't an issue of whether or not the dam would be approved. It had been already authorized and Senator Randolph had led that fight in the Public Works Committee, but now Senator Byrd had been doing the appropriating for it. In 1983, this was the year that the appropriation was necessary to actually start the construction, and it was the largest appropriation. It was \$80 million of the \$250 million project, but with it you would begin building the dam itself. Everything else had been clearing land and things like that, but once this one was done, the dam was under way.

So when the appropriation bill came, that particular appropriation bill came up in the House, I offered an amendment to strike the funding, and because it was just one amendment of a hundred and because I was from the district where the dam was being built, and because nobody else knew much about the Stonewall Jackson Dam or what all had gone into it, I got large bipartisan support, and besides, if somebody wants to scratch a project near a district, that's more money for folks everywhere else.

So my amendment carried, and so when the House appropriations bill went over to the Senate, it did not have Stonewall Jackson Dam money in it. Senator Byrd, of course, immediately put that into the Senate bill and now it goes to conference, and in the conference report, it comes out of the conference with that money in it. That set up a situation whereby the House could vote again, and if I offered that amendment again, to take it out of the conference report.

So Senator Byrd was livid, because this was a major, major project of his, and here comes a first-termer. And Senator Randolph was extremely upset too; don't get me wrong. But it was Senator Byrd that called 122, I think it was—because he always made sure I knew the number—members of the House who had voted with me.

**Sturm:** He called each one personally?

**Wise:** Oh, he called them personally. I had senior members of the House for a week coming up to me and I had freshmen too. But I still remember Norm Mineta, who was later to become the full committee chairman of the Public Works Committee. I remember—oh, shucks—from Massachusetts, senior Republican who was ranking member of Appropriations, great guy. He had supported me on the floor. Others coming up to me on the floor, Mineta particularly, saying, "Excuse me, Bob. Can you tell me why at ten o'clock at night I got a call from the Majority Leader of the United States Senate? When I picked up the phone, he said, 'Norm, this is Robert C. Byrd.'" And I said, "Sure it is." I remember Bill Richardson, later ambassador to the

UN and Secretary of Energy, but all of them coming up to me, just a parade of people for several days, coming up saying how they'd gotten calls.

And then finally, as I say—and I apologize for blanking on his name—[Silvio Conte (R-MA)] he's a close friend of Tip O'Neill's, but as I say, Republican leader on the Appropriations Committee coming up to me, shaking his head and saying, "What did you get me into? I hope you understand I've got to go work with Senator Byrd on a whole lot of different issues," because they were constantly in conference on these things. Because he had been one of the folks who'd spoken most eloquently about why we ought to take the money out in the beginning.

So, of course, when the vote came, Byrd just about killed me. Now, the only comeback I had when they'd start coming up to me and I realized what was happening was, "Now, think about it for a second. Here I'm a freshman. I got you something that you probably don't get but once every few years, or maybe some of you never got it. I got you a call from the Majority Leader."

Every one of them told me the same thing. He didn't lay into me. What he said was, "I understand you voted for an amendment by the gentleman from West Virginia. I have the highest respect for him and he has his convictions, but I want to tell you why this is so important to me and to West Virginia. We just disagree on this one." So he always did it in a very gentlemanly way and he did it in a way that didn't undercut me.

So what he did then, to show you, when they had the dedication—when there was a ceremony around one of his projects, there was always a major dedication—he had them invite me, because whenever I went through Weston, I had people with placards out.

**Sturm:** I remember that well, absolutely, that whole controversy.

**Wise:** They took me on a tour of Weston and people came out and showed me why it was important, but at the same time I had protestors. When the daggone thing flooded, I will say this, I got in a boat and I went through Weston, and they were going to see me, by golly.

**Sturm:** I think I remember seeing that on TV. I do, absolutely.

**Wise:** Just so that I wasn't ducking this thing.

So when they had the ceremony to turn the shovel on this, he had the committee invite me, and there were some of them who said, "Why?"

So he had me seated there on the platform and gave me a chance to speak and gave me a chance to say, "We've had this difference. Now, I just got beat, and so we can either fight, continue—" Because the appropriations cycle on a large project runs several years. But I said, "At this point, we had this battle. It's been resolved. I got whipped," and he chuckled at that, I still remember. "And so this battle's over, and so let's build this dam, and may it fulfill the promises and hopes that everybody has in it."

I think he appreciated that, and he made some kind remarks about me, "The gentleman who led a good fight and understands that it's over and now we're moving forward." So I think that

helped our relationship, because up to that point, he'd seen me only in the last two to three years as sort of a wild eye that didn't know quite where I was coming from, but undermining one of his most important projects.

**Sturm:** Did he ever talk with you individually about it?

**Wise:** Yes. Yes, he talked to me beforehand and just asked me not to do it. And I explained why I was, and he said, "Okay. I understand that." He wasn't happy, but he understood it.

Then afterwards, particularly when I pointed out, I said, "Well, Senator, anytime I get 122 of my colleagues coming up and talking to me, I can tell I'm getting taken to the woodshed." And he laughed.

But I think because we'd had that difference, he showed who was the boss around there. I recognized that and said, "It's done. We had our difference and it's done." I think that helped in the future. I certainly respected him more, and I think that perhaps he respected me some more.

**Sturm:** In the meetings, did he welcome discussion from other members of the delegation on issues?

**Wise:** He always called on it, yes, because when he'd call those meetings, he wanted us—I mean, while he had the best political antenna, or antennae, of anybody I know, at the same time, he needed to know what we were hearing and particularly where we were coming down on this. If you think about it in those early days, while he had junior members, with the exception of Nick Rahall, and Nick, of course, had a close relationships with Senator Byrd, having been an intern for Senator Byrd many years before and Senator Byrd having grown up in southern West Virginia—

**Sturm:** I think there was connection between Nick's father and Senator Byrd too.

**Wise:** And the father too. That's right. You're absolutely right. So he knew where Nick was coming from and he knew the other two through their fathers, but he didn't know them individually, but also you had somewhat good placement. I went on the Public Works Committee, the same as Nick, but then Allen was on Appropriations and that was critically important. Stagers went to—I guess he was on Agriculture and then making a bid for Energy and Commerce the next go-around. So he had relatively good placement, and particularly, come to think of it, he didn't have Allen the first term on Appropriations. Allen fought and won against the Speaker, I might add, to get on Appropriations the second term and after that was on Appropriations.

So now you had an incredible combination of Senator Byrd with his senior position on Appropriations and Allen beginning to come through the ranks in Appropriations. So he had an appropriator and then he had two guys on the Public Works Committee, which is where he did so much of his work on lock and dams, water systems, and things like that. No, he genuinely was interested in listening. I mean, you didn't wax too long. As we all know, he didn't suffer fools, but he was interested in what your point of view was and he also would occasionally just like to talk about politics and what's happening at home.

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

**Wise:** It got to be more personal as years went on. I told him this one time. I remember when I got elected I used to joke that I was the—I remember one time being quoted as saying something like—because Allen’s father had been in office, Harley’s father had been in office, both of them had been pretty powerful. I was the only one of the three. I said, “My dad was an insurance agent, and trust me,” because I was not married at the time, “and when I leave here, the seat’s open. It doesn’t go to any relative.” Particularly Mollohan, but Staggers, I mean, they all turned out, I think, to be incredibly able members of Congress.

But anyway, so with Senator Byrd, once again, I was a wild card to him. He knew the others somewhat. He didn’t know me, but over time, we—so then we had the Stonewall Jackson episode. Now, that was in the first two years, but he still doesn’t know exactly where I’m coming from. There’s peace in the valley, and the Stonewall Jackson Dam is being built, and I’m on the Public Works Committee and I’m actually now supporting his initiatives, the Gallipolis Locks, for instance, which had to come through Public Works, but he doesn’t quite know that much about me.

But I went to him and told him—I think this was as I started my third term—I said, “I realize something. I’ve been trying to figure out how to be most effective to West Virginia.” And there are two real ways you do that in the House of Representatives. You’ve got 435 members. It’s a much more disparate, diffuse group. You can either achieve a strong committee position such as Allen had just gotten on Appropriations or Nick had his seniority on Public Works, you can either do that, but I’m always going to be behind Nick. I’m not going to be on any other committee of major jurisdiction. The second one is, you can try to rise through leadership, but in order to rise through leadership, you’ve got to be willing to do grunt work. You’ve got to be willing to, for several years, toil in the vineyards and do the kind of jobs that nobody else had done.

And I said to the senator, “That’s what you did,” because I’ve heard him say that as well. I mean, if you think about Senator Byrd, what he did in the early years is—and I saw this when I was in the House—everyone else may have left the Senate, and you look up and his light’s still on. And so if you had to go home or you needed to go back to your district or to your state in the Senate for some reason, but there was some piece of work that needed to be done, he’d do it for you. So over time he built up respect and a lot of IOUs. So I told him, “I decided I know that the committee route isn’t my way because that die is already cast, so I need to follow your model and that’s what I’m working to do.”

So I started doing a bunch of grunt work and, over time, I began to—I knew early on, I decided, actually, I didn’t want to be the Speaker because I didn’t want to have to go out and raise the money and things that people need to do, but I wanted to have the influence. And so I began to rise in leadership ranks, and it took two or three terms to begin developing that credibility and build up my street cred, or bona fides. But I told him early on I was following the Byrd model, and he kind of chuckled with that, but I was serious about it.

**Sturm:** I bet he was pleased.

**Wise:** Yes, I think so. I think so, because I recognized what he had done. I mean, he told me at least once, and I'm sure he said this to others, that somebody had written an article about him that, once again, "Road to Nowhere," something, and he kind of chuckled. He said, "I've made a career out of being underestimated." And yet the prime example is— this was the old days before all the security was up in front of the Capitol. You could actually park in front of the Capitol.

**Sturm:** I remember those days, yes.

**Wise:** So I remember one night, for some reason I parked in front of the Capitol early in the morning. I must have had a breakfast meeting or something, so I'd parked in front of the Capitol and I just left my car there. And for some reason, I was leaving around midnight, and the House had gone out at six or seven. Actually, I think the House went out maybe later, around ten, but the Senate, I think they'd gone home. And I walk out at midnight and I walk across the Capitol, and I look up and all the lights in the Capitol are out except for one. I've forgotten. I think it was the Majority Leader's office, but it was whatever office Senator Byrd occupied. His light was on.

**Sturm:** Still on.

**Wise:** His car was there. I said, "I can't beat this guy." I mean, I thought that tonight, of any night, when I walk out, his light will be off and I'll be able to go home and say, "I finally stayed later than Robert C. Byrd." And I couldn't beat him.

**Sturm:** What drove him?

**Wise:** I think it was a drive to succeed, to show that a boy and son of a coal miner from southern West Virginia could rise to any position he wanted. I think there was that. I think he genuinely wanted to put West Virginia on the map. I mean, it was a combination. I'm convinced that—and I think this is very necessary, but you have to have an ego drive and you have to have some amount of insecurity in order to go into politics, and I don't hold myself immune from that. You go into it, hopefully, for the right reasons, to make a difference, but you also go into it to show something, to be known, and I think that certainly that drove Senator Byrd.

Here's somebody who had absolutely no money, that people, if they first saw him, would count him out right away, not particularly, I suspect, as a young man. I don't know how impressive he was on the stump. I suspect he wasn't an athlete. I don't think he was, from what he said. But he constantly drove himself to improve and to always show others, "You're underestimating me." Here's a man that was, to my knowledge, the only person to ever earn a law degree while sitting in the United States Senate.

**Sturm:** I think that's true.

**Wise:** And then who was his commencement speaker?

**Sturm:** Kennedy.

**Wise:** Kennedy, yes. He requested—

**Sturm:** I have a picture signed by him of him receiving his law degree from President Kennedy.

**Wise:** Exactly. So what kind of personal statement is that? So I think he was driven by, as anyone in politics is, a combination of factors. And when I say insecurity, I'm not saying that in a pejorative way. I'm saying all of us have some level of personal insecurity that we're having to deal with, I believe. Maybe I'm projecting.

**Sturm:** No, I think you're correct.

**Wise:** So it's the blend of what drives somebody, and at the same time, then, he had the ability to not only influence his life, but to influence a lot more. And I think as he got older and more senior and saw the impact that he could have on a whole lot of people that were coming up just like him, and that's why that constant emphasis on education.

A lot of people, rightly so, point to all he's done for infrastructure, physical infrastructure in the state of West Virginia, but we should never forget what he did for education, both in his personal life and the model that he made: the Byrd Scholarship, the institutes that were created around the state, the research facilities at WVU and other places. I often heard him say, "This isn't something I'm just giving to you. What do you make of this? You've got to make something of it. This is an opportunity, but you have to take advantage of it."

**Sturm:** Sort of like what we were talking about, about computers. You have to have a plan once you get the—

**Wise:** Exactly. And he was one of the ones who, early on, recognized the power of technology. Robert C. Byrd High School in Clarksburg, West Virginia—

**Sturm:** Been there many times.

**Wise:** He was responsible for that and he wanted a school that represented, at that point, the latest in educational technology.

**Sturm:** Let's go back to something you and I talked about just for a minute before we started recording. Just by, I guess, a freak of the seats that they ran for, for a number of years he was the junior senator from West Virginia and Senator Randolph was the senior senator, and you were there to see part of that. How did he react to being the junior senator?

**Wise:** Remember, that was the first two years and things were still a bit rocky between both senators and me over the Stonewall Jackson Dam. There was just some reference that I thought he made one time that maybe that grated on him a little bit. They were always affable, the two of them, because they'd both come in in 1958, and now it's 1983, '84. So what is that? Twenty—

**Sturm:** Yes, almost twenty years.

**Wise:** Yes, twenty-five years, almost, and he's still the junior senator. [laughs] And yet he's been in all of these positions in the Senate. So for some reason, there may have been a remark at one time that he made wryly about always being the junior senator.

**Sturm:** Did his attitude change after he became the senior senator, after Jay took Randolph's seat?

**Wise:** I think maybe it did, because then when he'd convene a delegation, he was doing it as the senior senator.

**Sturm:** He had the authority and the power and the right to do it then.

**Wise:** Yes. We were showing up anyway, but he clearly felt he had the mantle.

**Sturm:** Okay, let's move on a little bit and talk about the relationship when you were governor of West Virginia. Did your relationship with him change after you left Congress and assumed the governorship?

**Wise:** It deepened.

**Sturm:** I know that the mechanics of it would have changed, but the basic relationship between you.

**Wise:** No, it deepened, and this is where I feel that the best example of that was actually not only when I became governor, but before I became governor, because I went to Senator Byrd, obviously early on and told him I was going to run for governor, and he had a mixed reaction. One is he genuinely liked—by this time, because we'd been working together now—I was in eighteen years, so we'd been working together, essentially, sixteen years, as well as he had with Mollohan and Rahall, because now Staggers was out because of the redistricting. So he genuinely liked this House delegation. We worked well together, we were a team, he trusted us, and so he knew that that—

**Sturm:** And he had trained you all.

**Wise:** There was that aspect, too, and we knew that, or I knew that. So he was genuinely concerned about the breaking up of that dynamic because, I mean, he didn't know who was going to replace me, but more importantly, because he said to me several times—he wasn't trying to discourage me from running, but he just said to me several times how much he valued our working together in the House and the Senate, and all the members, that combination. Because also by that time, whatever differences might have existed in early years between Rahall and Mollohan and myself and Staggers, those had long been resolved, and we were now working as a team. Alan would come to Nick and me and talk about projects that he needed in his district authorized. We would go to him and say, "We need help on appropriations for our projects," Route 35 in my district, and so on. It was a great working relationship. So Senator Byrd was concerned about that.

The second part of it was I was going to run against a close friend of his, Governor Underwood. There was the party politics, but he and Governor Underwood had been friends for



forty years. They'd served in the state legislature together. When Governor Underwood left office the first time in 1961, I guess, as he moved along through various parts of his career, he and Senator Byrd worked closely together. And if you recall, Senator Byrd created something called the—what was it—something Technology Foundation, of which he made Governor Underwood the CEO and chairman of. So there was a close working relationship and friendship between those two, and Senator Byrd let me know that this presented him with a personal conflict as well.

And I said, “Senator, I appreciate that, but here’s why I think it’s important to run. As you know, I share your views and also whatever you want to do. I share your views and your initiatives.” And so he really wrestled with it. So I think he waited to see whether I was going to run, and I did. So I ran and, of course, I’d asked him, if he ever could, I’d value his support. So he’d give me some advice and things like that.

But then after I won the primary—was it the primary? Was it before? I think it was after the primary. After I won the primary, he called me and he said, “I’ve got to make one of the most difficult calls that I’ve ever made.”

I said, “What’s that, Senator?”

And he said, “I have to call a good friend of mine and tell him I can’t support him.” He said, “I’ve got to call Cecil Underwood and tell him I’m going to endorse you,” and he gave me the reasons why. He said, “We share the values. We’ve worked closely together. I know that I have a close relationship.” I’ve forgotten now some of the other factors. But he said, “This is going to be one of the most difficult calls I have to make,” and he made it. And Governor Underwood, understandably, tried to talk him out of it, and Senator Byrd said no and he endorsed me.

**Sturm:** Didn’t that endorsement come pretty late in the election? I mean the public part of it. He may have endorsed you personally, but it seems to me that he actually didn’t make a public statement until about a week before the election. Is that correct?

**Wise:** No, it was earlier than that. What he did the week before the election, though, is he went on the stump with me.

**Sturm:** Okay. You did a flight around the state, didn’t you?

**Wise:** Yes. He endorsed me earlier. I don’t think public endorsements make much of a difference, because one reason is I think people are going to vote the way they vote. And the second part of it is that what I found with public endorsements is if you endorse somebody, maybe some of your supporters are impressed, I don’t know, but you also bring the baggage that you bring. I remember one time endorsing somebody and then realizing I wasn’t helping them at all. [laughter]

But at any rate, I say that to set the stage. I’m convinced that Senator Byrd’s endorsement probably won me the election for this reason. He gave me the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval to a lot of people in parts of the state that didn’t know me. I had been a member of Congress and, yes, I’d represented the central part of the state, which got me pretty good

exposure to other parts of the state, but it did not get me into the northern Panhandle and it didn't get me into the deep south, where Senator Byrd was incredibly well known, and those were the only four counties I lost in the primary. I carried fifty-one counties and I lost the four northern Panhandle counties. We also knew from polling that because of my positions on abortion and—what was the other one I've forgotten about? And they thought I might be too close to Clinton. That I was having trouble in the southern part of the state and I was just getting killed in the northern Panhandle.

**Sturm:** Well, just because of where he was from, Underwood should have run strong in the northern Panhandle.

**Wise:** Yes, he was much better known there and spent a lot of time there. And as I say, I was just getting beat up terribly. My primary opponent, he carried only four counties, but they were all northern Panhandle. He wasn't known there either. They just knew they didn't like me.

And so what Senator Byrd did, though, was he said to a whole lot of people, "Whatever you think, this is somebody that's common sense that I can work with and I have highest regards for." So he made those statements. He then flew around with me, but he also made an endorsing TV ad. And as I recall, he may have paid for this himself out of his campaign funds. He made one of those robo-calls, "This is Robert C. Byrd, and I'm urging you to get out and vote and I'm urging you to support Bob Wise."

**Sturm:** Had he previously endorsed you when you ran for Congress?

**Wise:** In later years.

**Sturm:** In later years?

**Wise:** He did not endorse me my first time out, as I recall. I don't think he endorsed me against Mick Staton, and I think it was because of the Stonewall Jackson. I'd have to check on it. No, I stand corrected. He did endorse me then, although with some, probably—he knew that he liked me more than he liked the Republican. [laughter] Mick had actually taken on very fundamental—Mick was voting a straight, very conservative Republican Reagan line, including voting to eliminate the Appalachian Regional Commission, which I hung around his neck. And Senator Byrd knew that none of his appropriations were necessarily going to be protected when they came over to the House from Congressman Staton.

So, therefore, he did support me, and the picture that I treasure and I still have is on election night, and actually Joe Bob [Joseph R. Goodwin] was in it, at the state Democratic Headquarters, because it was considered an upset when I won that election, of Senator Byrd and myself and Joe Bob standing together as the newly elected member of the House.

So, yes, he had supported me, but he supported me nominally. We'd be at a Democratic function together in the Second District and he'd say something positive, but he really went out on the gubernatorial race, and so our relationship was strengthened then. He had two people that he believed in deeply and I appointed both of them—and I had no problems doing it because they were very qualified—to continue their positions. One was Allen Tackett, adjutant general.

**Sturm:** I've interviewed him.

**Wise:** If anybody knows Senator Byrd, it's Allen, or General Tackett. So Allen Tackett, "the best general since Hannibal."

**Sturm:** Absolutely.

**Wise:** And then Fred VanKirk as highway administrator.

**Sturm:** He's on my list. I haven't gotten to him yet.

**Wise:** You've got to talk to Fred, because Fred had worked very well with Senator Byrd, and Fred had the same rule that I did, which I had both as a member of Congress and then as governor: Our job was to expedite whatever Senator Byrd sent and to make sure and remove, clear out any underbrush from it being implemented. And so Fred understood that and I understood that, so we worked well together.

**Sturm:** When you were governor, did you find that Senator Byrd had an interest in the day-to-day political situation in the state and state issues, or did he more or less limit himself to ways that he could help the state as chair of Appropriations and stay out of local West Virginia politics?

**Wise:** He stayed out, and he treated me with that same attitude that we talked about earlier, "I expect you to understand my role and have deference for it, and I have deference for yours." Now, he kept his ears to the ground on state politics, and sometimes we'd have a conversation about what's happening in Raleigh County or what's happening in Clarksburg, whatever. He had, once again, one of the best sets of political antennae of anybody I've seen, but he never tried to tell me what to do.

**Sturm:** He didn't interfere.

**Wise:** Oh, good golly, no. He would only call to be helpful. He would call and say, for instance, "I think I can get x amount more for Corridor H. Do you see any problems with getting the engineering done?" or something like that.

And I said, "Senator, whatever it is, it'll be the highest priority for us." And we made sure. A senator could, and did, get money appropriated for various projects, but each state has to set, for the US Transportation Department, you set a priority list of your roads, and we always, of course, coordinated closely with the senator to make sure that his projects were at the top of our list because that's how the Transportation Department would fund it. By the same token, because he was always getting extra funding added to the Appalachian Regional Commission appropriation to complete Corridor H, and we always made sure that there was no delay in getting that money out the door, whether it was engineering or whatever it was going to be, and then not only Corridor H. He also, right at the end of my administration, he was able to get additional funding for Corridor—what's the one in Parkersburg—D, I think. It's Route 50.

**Sturm:** Yes, I know which one.

**Wise:** But anyway, both a bridge and an interchange around Parkersburg. It was an expensive proposition, but we cleared the decks and made sure. But he never called to tell me how to do my job.

**Sturm:** Did you do most of your business face-to-face or by phone or how did you work?

**Wise:** Well, as governor, it was more by phone just because of distance, but it was face-to-face largely in the Congress.

**Sturm:** Let's go back to your days in Congress again. Can you discuss his relationship with, first, Senator Randolph, and then Senator Rockefeller after he succeeded Jennings?

**Wise:** Not really. There is a unique dynamic—my observation of the US Senate is there's a relationship that you don't see between the two senators from any state. There's a combination. Hopefully, there's a friendship, unless they're from opposite parties. Sometimes there's a real opposition. There's also a little bit of a competition because who is it that's making the announcement on a certain project or—

**Sturm:** Sure.

**Wise:** It's not as much that, because usually with the—and for instance, when you have a situation like with Senator Randolph and Senator Byrd or Senator Rockefeller, both Randolph and Rockefeller were on authorizing committees, and Senator Byrd was on authorizing committees, too, but that's not where he made most of his mark. He made his mark on the appropriations side. So when it comes time to announcing an appropriation, it's pretty clear who announces that. When it comes time to announcing something that deals with authorizing or a piece of legislation, SCHIP, for instance, Child Health Insurance legislation, that's Senator Rockefeller.

But remembering that often the two senators, and this is true for any state—I'm speaking generically, not just West Virginia—two senators will probably have their district offices often in the same cities. The constituents are calling both offices for the same services, so there's an undercurrent of relationship, positive, neutral, ambivalent, or sometimes even competitive, but the outsider—and I put myself in that—doesn't see it. So I'm not well versed to talk about it. Outwardly, there's always a deference, and Senator Byrd, he was always very deferential to both Randolph and Rockefeller.

**Sturm:** Some people contend that Senator Byrd was frequently out of sync with the Democratic Party, that he created his own mechanism which was based on his own personality and goals. Do you feel this is an accurate assessment or do you think he was a team player?

**Wise:** I think he got to where he got by learning how to be a team player. You don't get to hold every responsible position in the United States Senate by being an outcast. You have to be able to get a majority of the votes of your caucus in order to get there. So at the end of the day, he's a team player.

It's interesting, sometimes people would see him for a while as being an outcast, and then all of a sudden he's a national hero, and I think that was most evident in the run-up in the war in

Iraq, where people were thinking, “Well, this eighty-some-year-old person and he’s making these long speeches on the Senate floor. Is he a bit eccentric?” And all of a sudden he’s a national hero because of his being willing to speak truth to power to then newly elected and very popular President George W. Bush.

I remember being—what was the event? It must have been a governor’s event. Anyway, so it’s 2001 or 2002 and there’s a conference at Harvard. I was there as governor, I’m convinced, yes. So I forget whether it was a National Governors Association event or whatever, but anyway, there was a conference at Harvard, and by chance, Senator Byrd is speaking at the very—I forgot the name of it, but it’s a very well known, very large chapel that’s on the Harvard campus. Who would have ever thought Robert C. Byrd would be speaking at Harvard—and that chapel was packed with people standing outside.

Now, these are some of the leading academics in the nation, if not the world, who probably disagreed with Robert C. Byrd on a number of items, who five years earlier would not have imagined that they’d come out in overcast weather—I think it was raining—and stand patiently in order to hear this man speak about the role of the Congress, and particularly the Senate, in war and peace, and then particularly about Iraq. It had to have been for him one of those moments of, once again, “I’ve made a career out of being underestimated and look who’s here to see me.” Because he was looking at the face of American academe and liberalism and they were cheering him, standing ovations for him because of the courageousness. He was the first one to actually take on this issue on the Senate floor.

I’ve forgotten. I’m sorry. So you asked about outcast.

**Sturm:** No, whether he was a team player with the party or—

**Wise:** He could do both, but he, obviously, over time was a very effective team player, or he never would have achieved the prominence he did amongst his colleagues.

**Sturm:** How about within the state, with the state party? Did he basically run his own campaign or did he coordinate with the state—

**Wise:** I think he pretty much coordinated, but the thing is with Senator Robert C. Byrd, and as powerful and influential as he was, it wasn’t him asking to be a member of your team; you pretty much asked to be on his team.

**Sturm:** Well, maybe that’s the perspective these people had who say that he wasn’t a team player.

**Wise:** He was a team player. You were on his team. I’ve seen every model of political involvement, including those who pound their fist and want to be political bosses. I never saw that of him. He didn’t have to tell you about his power. You knew it. And he didn’t have to threaten you. You came to him, and he was always very deferential. So as I say, the West Virginia State Democratic Party, my observation is that he didn’t try to take it over. Because of who he was, how hard he worked, the fact that he was the most popular vote-getter in the state consistently, it moved to him and people were delighted to be associated with him. Robert C.

Byrd would say a kind word about me running as a state legislator or county commission candidate, I'm in hog heaven.

**Sturm:** You said he endorsed you on several occasions. Did he actively endorse other candidates, to the best of your knowledge, or did he sort of stay away from that?

**Wise:** No, I think he did. I think he was judicious about it, but—

**Sturm:** Just because you were Democrat didn't mean he was going to be [endorsing you]—

**Wise:** No, no. I don't think he would openly endorse a Republican. For instance, I feel pretty confident that he supported, in his mind, Governor Underwood when Governor Underwood ran in 1996 against the Democratic nominee, Charlotte Pritt. He never said anything to me. I don't know that he ever endorsed Pritt, but I don't think he openly endorsed Underwood. But silence can be deafening sometimes.

**Sturm:** Absolutely. Sometimes the less said, the more effective.

**Wise:** But I've also seen him stand on the stump, and he definitely always supported—particularly with the congressional delegation when he was in our districts, he would say, genuinely, “I'm working with the best congressional delegation and I need Allen Mollohan,” or, “I need Rahall. I need Bob Wise.”

**Sturm:** Did he ever talk with you about his early days in the West Virginia legislature and why he left that to run for Congress? Because he took a gamble there, it would seem to me, at that point in his life.

**Wise:** He never did. No, no. He didn't talk that much, at least conversations we had. I never really engaged much in discussion or talked much about his six years in the House of Representatives either.

**Sturm:** Did he ever talk about the Klan with you?

**Wise:** Yes, he did one time. He talked about it in terms of the worst mistake he'd ever made and how he said—I still remember being in his Appropriations chair office and the issue would come up if somebody—I've forgotten, some member of Congress that had run into a problem. And he said, “There are just some mistakes that you make that you never get away from. That was the worst mistake I ever made and I'll never get away from it.”

**Sturm:** And he didn't, unfortunately.

**Wise:** He didn't. But at his funeral, if you recall, at the Capitol, so you had a large delegation of House and Senate members that flew to Charleston for that. They had several planes, as a matter of fact. I was not governor because I was out of office, had been out of office several years, but I was on the dais. So as they left, I was greeting some of my former colleagues from the House, and one of them that was getting ready to go to the airplane was Barbara Lee, Representative Lee, African American from Oakland, California. I said, “Barbara, good to have

you in West Virginia. Thank you for coming to Senator Byrd's funeral service. What brought you here?"

And she said, "Well, Bob," she said, "I'm chair this year of the Congressional Black Caucus, and I wanted to be here to say how much the Black Caucus appreciate and respect what Senator Byrd did and how much he changed."

**Sturm:** Okay, let's pursue that for a minute. You say "how much he changed." Some people have contended that Senator Byrd wasn't one man, that he was two or three different people because early he tended to vote at least, perhaps, racial, voted against the Civil Rights Act. You've already mentioned he was the hero of the antiwar movement when we went to Iraq, but at the same time he was a hawk on Vietnam and never had any regrets about that until he found out he was lied to. Later he wrote the War Powers Act. Did he change, do you think, or what happened to him over those years? Because obviously his voting record changed, and I know that the NAACP, in their later years, gave him high marks.

**Wise:** I think he did change. Remember that his son-in-law is, as I recall, Iranian.

**Sturm:** I believe so.

**Wise:** I heard him say one time about being very proud of his son-in-law, and I think that, in having made a big difference in him. No, he changed. Remind me again. I keep forgetting the little town he came out of.

**Sturm:** Sophia.

**Wise:** Sophia. So here's a kid that comes out of Sophia with all the prejudices and biases of Sophia and of the period, the time, and also to run for office, what you had to do and say, and yet over time recognizes he was wrong, and I think he spent much of his last years of his life trying to redeem and to make up for some of what he did and said in those early—we all do in life.

**Sturm:** Oh, we do. Yes.

**Wise:** Hopefully, if there's a benefit to aging, it's that we mature and realize where we were wrong. The years that I knew him, and that was after the Civil Rights Act, the years that I knew him, this was somebody that wanted to make a difference for all people, that, in my book, didn't have a biased bone in his body and was just trying to be the kind of person that he believed you ought to be, and somebody who's also been shaped by this time, by literally decades of self-education, of reading and experience. So I'm a believer that he constantly was growing. The term's used so often, it almost sounds trite, of Senator Byrd being a Renaissance man, but he was. I think people often, once again, underestimated or made a big mistake when he'd start reciting the kings of England or something, and think that this is just some eccentricity. It wasn't. It was not only him disciplining his mind and always improving it, but he was also always making a point.

I'm wandering off a little bit.

**Sturm:** That's fine. That's fine.

**Wise:** But I've got to tell this story.

**Sturm:** Go ahead.

**Wise:** So one time we're in his office. It's a delegation meeting and Rich Trumka's in there, who was then the president of the United Mine Workers, and other miners. This was all on black lung and there was a major piece of legislation or the reauthorization or whatever it was. And so Senator Byrd starts with reciting each of the kings of England, starting with John and the Magna Carta, and he brings it all the way up to Charles II, "who, incidentally, you know, led the Restoration." I'm quoting Senator Byrd. It was Charles the First, and then I think it was a sixteen-year—but then Charles II then led the Restoration, and just when you think maybe he's wandered off on us, he brought it right back to black lung in a way that he said, "And that shows the progression. The progression of these kings is the progression of this legislation and why we need to do x, y, and z."

And you think, okay, he's not only demonstrated his acumen, he's not only demonstrated an incredibly disciplined mind to be able to go through that entire list, but he's also, over the course of the two to three minutes, he has brought it right back to the topic.

So I believe that through that mental shaping process that he underwent, the formal education, the self-education, the constant reading, the memorization, which is out of fashion today as a—

**Sturm:** Yes, absolutely it is.

**Wise:** Rote has given way to more conceptual. But out of that, I think he kept shaping the new person that he wanted to be, that he knew that he should be, so I believe it was totally sincere.

**Sturm:** It's a wonderful perspective on it.

**Wise:** And that's why the chairman of the House Black Caucus takes special effort to come from California to attend his funeral.

**Sturm:** We're still talking about his personality here. In many ways he always seemed to be gregarious and outgoing. He played his fiddle, he sang, he was on *Hee Haw*. He did things like that. But many who knew him well contend that he was really a homebody. He didn't like parties; he didn't like golf; he didn't participate in athletics; didn't watch sports on TV. How did he relax? What unwound a man like him?

**Wise:** Well, I think he did relax at home. I was never in his home, so I can't—but my sense in just talking to him, I mean, he played the fiddle. I clogged.

**Sturm:** I remember that down Kanawha Street at the Strawberry Festival. [laughs]

**Wise:** He knew early on, and maybe I learned from him, is it helps to have a signature, and it's also a way of showing another side of you than just "I'm simply here as a political figure asking for your vote." As one woman said to me one time, "I'd rather watch you clog for one



minute than hear you talk for ten.” And for many, for Senator Byrd, what he demonstrated was another side of himself and what he demonstrated was a very human side. So when he would play “Cripple Creek” or “Amazing Grace,” that was taking people away from a traditional interaction and putting them into one that they could relate to as real people and showing himself as a real person. So my sense is that he did relax by reading, by—

**Sturm:** Do you think it’s a fair assessment, though, that, in a sense, he was introverted because he wasn’t a party animal in the party capital of the world, in Washington, D.C.?

**Wise:** No, I think that’s true. I don’t think he was comfortable in those settings and he would make quite clear that he wasn’t comfortable. But there’s several different types of political personalities, and one type is the introvert who understands that there’s certain rules you need to follow and certain procedures. I actually probably fall under this one, as well, not quite like Senator Byrd, but you recognize early on that what politics does is it gives you a structure for interaction, and there’s certain things you need to do if you’re going to be successful in politics. But he could use politics, that structure, to interact with others and to interact in a way that was comfortable to him.

At the same time, he could go home and then relax in the way that he wanted to. I think he probably did relax by playing the fiddle, by reading and a number of things. I do remember that story. You’re right. I remember him telling me one time, “I wanted to see why people watch sports, so I spent all weekend watching these football games, and I came back to work on Monday and didn’t feel any better or any improved.”

**Sturm:** Probably didn’t understand why people watch them.

**Wise:** Yes. He said, “I tried to understand, but—.”

**Sturm:** Well, I think you’ve touched on this, but here’s a man who was elected to the US Senate nine times. Nobody probably ever will come near that again. As you’ve mentioned three or four times in the interview, he has held every leadership position in the West Virginia legislature, the state senate. Didn’t do much in leadership in the Congress, but in the US Senate he held every position of leadership that there was. How did a man with his background, or lack of background, really, who grew up in poverty, practically no formal education in his younger days, how did he do this? What enabled Robert Byrd to become who he was?

**Wise:** I think he had an incredible drive to succeed. He recognized that he could be much more than what he was destined to be if he didn’t do anything. I can’t imagine what this young man, who grew up in Sophia—actually, it was a little town outside Sophia. It no longer exists. I mean, he’s expected to go into the mines or he works as a butcher’s assistant.

**Sturm:** A meat cutter.

**Wise:** Meat cutter. No expectations for him, shy, introverted, and there is a steel, s-t-e-e-l, there’s a steel inside him that says, “More, more, more,” and just constantly drives him, and it sometimes drives him to make mistakes. Joining the Klan was a political move. It was a move because, as I think I’ve heard him explain, that at that point, that’s one way he could get to meet some of the leaders in the community because it was a more respected thing. But it wasn’t just

the Klan. It was also him pushing himself through then Morris Harvey College, and I think he did some time at Marshall—I've forgotten. But I know he went to Morris Harvey.

**Sturm:** He went to Morris Harvey. I don't remember whether he went to Marshall or not.

**Wise:** So here's a guy that is constantly driven to go to the next step, the next step, the next step, the next step, and that's why, I think. Should he have relaxed a little more? Could he have been happier learning how to play baseball or watch football or go to a beer party? That just wasn't who the guy was. Something in his early years, in the very formative years, put steel in him to constantly go to the next step. And who knows what it is and whether—you've been doing these interviews. I've forgotten now—there's one—was it his adopted mother that he speaks of or his father?

**Sturm:** Both.

**Wise:** Both, I guess.

**Sturm:** Both of them. Yes, I've heard him speak proudly of both of them.

**Wise:** Yes, but there's something that they helped instill in him, plus I think there was always overhanging just the slightest bit of insecurity that said, "Okay, I'm rising above this. You may look at me and see one thing. I'm going to show you differently."

**Sturm:** Well, it had to be drive because, really, when you stop and think about it, at the position he was at at the time, there was absolutely no reason in the world for him to get a law degree.

**Wise:** No. Oh, no. No. Every lawyer in the country's coming to him. [laughs]

**Sturm:** Right, and that's what I mean.

**Wise:** He's writing the laws.

**Sturm:** Here he puts that on his résumé, American University, too.

**Wise:** But what that does for him, I mean, you and I would have been paying deference to him regardless, but what that does for him is now when he speaks about the Constitution, he's speaking from not only what he knows instinctively, but also from his Constitutional training as a lawyer.

**Sturm:** Yes, the intellectual side of it.

**Wise:** Yes. That's a good point. That's one thing he did revel in. He enjoyed intellectual pursuits, and so whether it's studying Roman history, whether it's the law, that mind just literally learned until the last moment.

**Sturm:** What's his legacy going to be, not only to West Virginia, but to the nation?

**Wise:** I think his legacy, which no one would have predicted when he started his career, his legacy's going to be, I think, probably the last of the statesmen senators. And, yes, he could be partisan and was sometimes. He could be bitter—not bitter. He could be sharp, let me put it that way. His legacy, I think, is going to be, he shared the ultimate respect for the democratic system that we're in, and particularly for the United States Senate. So I think his legacy is going to be one of the—I was watching the movie the other day, *The Last Samurai*. He may be the last senator of the old school.

There's a tradition that most people ascribe to the Senate. In his last ten years, I just remember there was one new senator that came on the floor and there were some others, too, that I think he did quietly, but there was one new senator that came on the floor and either attacked another senator right off the—violated some common tradition. And Senator Byrd called him out right there.

**Sturm:** Was that not the senator from Pennsylvania?

**Wise:** Santorum. Yes.

So that, I think, is going to be his legacy. Sure, he's going to be remembered for a lot of things, particularly in West Virginia, but I think he's going to be remembered nationally or internationally for that legacy of being a senator's senator and of having a complete knowledge and respect for the democratic and political system and using it effectively and constructively.

**Sturm:** Well, everybody that I've interviewed has a favorite story about Senator Byrd.

**Wise:** I think I've shared several.

**Sturm:** Well, you've shared several, but do you have just an all-time favorite?

**Wise:** Well, I have to think. My son is—well, he's twenty-five now, but at the time he's maybe four or five years old, and we're somewhere, probably in West Virginia, and he meets Senator Byrd. And I'm very proud and introduced Robert to Senator Byrd. Senator Byrd reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pen knife, a little knife about that big, pocket knife, and says, "Every boy should have a pocket knife," and he gives my son that pocket knife. And every year for years later, decades, almost till the last I saw him, he would ask whether Robert still had that pocket knife.

**Sturm:** I'll bet he does.

**Wise:** He does, absolutely.

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

**Wise:** With my relationship with Senator Byrd, at least my formal relationship, that is when I was in office, I wasn't sure how it was going to go because it was pretty rocky to start, obviously.

**Sturm:** Starting off with the dam.

**Wise:** Yes, taking on the Senator's prime project that year. Having said that, probably the single greatest experience that I learned from and treasure was my relationship with Robert C. Byrd. He would probably not count me as a particularly close friend, but what I learned from him, what I respected from him—and I think that he did regard me as a friend and somebody he could trust. He was a constant source of advice to me. There may have been a couple times that he would call me to offer advice in a very deferential way, but it was more often I would be going to him, but he was always there. So what started somewhat rocky turned out to be probably the most memorable relationship certainly in my political life, but I think in life, generally, that I've ever had.

**Sturm:** Well, thank you much for your time.

**Wise:** Thank you. Thank you for helping me.

**Sturm:** I really appreciate it. I think it's been a good interview, and we'll get a copy of it back to you.

**Wise:** Good, good. Thank you for taking the time and letting me share some of those thoughts.

[End of interview]