

**George A. Smathers**  
United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969

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**Interview #1: The Road to Congress**  
(Tuesday, August 1, 1989)  
Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

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Senator Smathers  
*Senate Historical Office*

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**Ritchie:** It's a real pleasure, senator.

**Smathers::** It's so nice to meet you. The fellow who was here ahead of you, Dick Baker, very nice guy. We had a nice talk, and he was interested in looking at the pictures on the wall, particularly that picture of [Jack Kennedy](#), and [Frank Church](#), and me, back there, when we were the four youngest members of the Senate at that time, when we first got here. And then that picture immediately behind you is when we first came to the House. That was the class that got elected in 1946. [Nixon](#) is there, and then Kennedy, and myself, [Thruston Morton](#), [Tiger \[Olin\] Teague](#) down there in front of the microphone, [Don Jackson](#) over there in front of Nixon and Kennedy. The other guys are two fellows I know, but I have never been able to recollect who in the hell they are--but I know them. They're nice guys. One was from California.

**Ritchie:** I noticed the [Alben Barkley](#) picture over here.

**Smathers:** Right, that's when I was being sworn into the Senate. That's Senator [\[Spessard\] Holland](#), who was my senior colleague. I beat [\[Claude\] Pepper](#), who had been there, and I took Pepper's place. That other picture was when [\[Lyndon\]](#)

[Johnson](#) was majority leader. [Earle Clements](#), the senator from Kentucky is sitting between [Albert Gore](#) and [Dick Russell](#), he was the assistant leader and I was the whip behind him. But Clements got defeated and I became the whip, so to speak, and served the balance of the year. But anyway, we went through these, he enjoyed it, and I did too.

**Ritchie:** They're really excellent. We've been collecting a photographic heritage of the Senate, photographs on every senator, and events of the Senate. We use them for various publications.

**Smathers:** I can provide you with copies of these pictures.

**Ritchie:** We would be very interested in getting some copies. Quite often in terms of publications we're looking for a picture that really captures the Senate at various moments. And pictures like that gathering in Johnson's office are the type of things you don't see often.

**Smathers:** That's right. See, that was in Johnson's majority leader office, which at that time was on the third floor of the Capitol. We met in there. He later moved it down to the second floor, where [Bob Byrd](#) had it for a long time. Then when [Johnson] got to be vice president, he moved it across the hall. I

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don't know what's over there now, but that had been a committee room. Some committee that Johnson made move, and he took it over himself.

**Ritchie:** I understand he had a great sense of real estate on Capitol Hill.

**Smathers:** Oh, yeah, he was big in real estate. Big in real estate. All right, sir.

**Ritchie:** I wanted to ask you about yourself and your roots. I was interested to see that your father was in politics, in New Jersey at first. Did you grow up in a political family, and a political environment?

**Smathers:** Yes. My father was very political, and there were two reasons. First, he had worked for his uncle, whose name was George H. Smathers, in North Carolina. He had worked for him when George H. Smathers was the president of the North Carolina state senate, and was a Republican. My father had been invited by his uncle to go down there to uncle and be a page. So my father fell in love with politics at that very early age, and he really never got over it.

Then my father, after graduating from the University of North Carolina, became a lawyer and went to New Jersey, actually as a professional baseball player in Newark. While he was there he took the bar and passed it, and decided to make New Jersey his home. He moved to Atlantic City, because he was a Democrat, and

there were no Democrats that he could find in Atlantic County. He figured this was the place to go to start the Democratic party. It was shortly thereafter that [Woodrow Wilson](#), who had been president of Princeton University, decided that he wanted to run for governor, and he wanted to run as a Democrat. So he came to Atlantic County and solicited my father to handle his campaign in Atlantic County, which my dad was glad to do. Wilson won and became governor, and thereafter as governor Wilson appointed my father as a county judge, so to speak.

My father served in that capacity until his rheumatism got so bad and the cold weather bothered him so much that the doctors finally said, "You've got to go south, as far south as is possible because you need warm weather. This cold, damp New Jersey weather is going to leave you in this pain that you're having." So my dad put us all on the train and we went south as far as you could go. We got off the train in Miami, in 1920. I was a very little boy, I just remember we were all dressed in long black stockings and wool stuff, and gosh it was hot! I couldn't believe it. The sun was so bright. I was five, I guess. But anyway, my dad established the family in a place called Magnolia Park, which today is almost downtown Miami! It was a little, small community at that time. We lived there ever after.

But my father loved politics all the time, from his own experience in Raleigh, and from his brother's experience as United States senator. I wanted to say

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how that happened was that when my father got sick, as a judge, he wrote his brother [Bill Smathers](#), who was also from Waynesville, North Carolina, but who had gone to Washington and Lee to school, and was a good athlete. He had graduated as a lawyer and gone back to Asheville. My father wrote to his little brother--younger brother, not little, because Bill was bigger, physically. He wrote to Bill to come up to New Jersey and take over this judgeship. He felt that he could be an interim appointee and then probably run and get elected, which is what happened. When my dad left New Jersey, the governor appointed Bill Smathers to fill the unexpired term. Bill Smathers did become a judge, and a rather prominent judge. Then he ran for state senator, and got elected, and then he ran for the United States Senate and was elected from New Jersey, and served one term in the Senate [1937-1943]. I came up to see him from Miami, twice, to see Bill Smathers. I didn't come up here to see him, exactly, but came up and saw him. So, to go back to your original question about my interest in politics, I was named after a politician, a state senator; my dad was greatly interested in politics and served as a judge by virtue of politics; and my uncle Bill was a United States senator from New Jersey. So it was fairly easy for me to have a big interest in politics.

**Ritchie:** Did your father continue in politics in Florida?

**Smathers:** No, my father became a very prominent lawyer, down in Miami. He had a big law firm called Smathers, Clutson, Huck. But my father never did get over his rheumatism and arthritis. Finally, it got so bad that he had to retire. He was one of the first guinea pigs, so to speak, that they tried cortisone on. He volunteered to be a guinea pig in some program of new medicines that were calculated to cure rheumatism and arthritis. My dad volunteered for that, and actually went through a lot of trauma and a lot of pain. He had retired from the law practice at that time, but he lived on to be eighty-three years old, as a matter of fact. He tried everything. He wore coins in the bottom of his shoes, which some--not I guess top-quality--doctors prescribed at that time. Later on, in my lifetime, you'd see guys with copper things on their wrists that were supposed to suck up some impurity out of your joint, so that it wouldn't pain you. My dad did that for a while. He went up to Canada where a fellow had some sort of strange copper treatment that he gave, you couldn't get it here in the United States.

Then he would have my brother and me go out to a beehive. We would put one of these great big five gallon jugs over the entrance to the beehive and get maybe a hundred and fifty, two hundred yellow jackets, and cover them up. Then my father would stick his hand into this big jug, and let these bees sting him. Somehow that venom which the bees put into his system greatly helped his arthritis. People used to say, "By God, that's sort of like hitting yourself over the head with a hammer in order so you'll sleep good!" But we did that, and we always had beehives at my father's house. We would catch the bees and he would get stung, and that was the one sort of sedative or medicine that really did help him. But, after creating a very good office in Miami, he had to retire finally, because he became quite deformed.

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He was always interested in politics, and I think in many ways got me started. When my turn came to be in high school, I was a pretty good athlete, played all the sports, and won the trophy for the best athlete at Miami high school. I had several opportunities for what were then scholarships, which meant that rather than give you anything free they would get you a job. If you waited on tables, and that sort of thing, that would pay your way through school. I had an opportunity to go to the University of Illinois. Zepke was a very famous football coach, and he had come down and watched me play a game or two, and offered me what amounted to a scholarship. I really wanted to go. My ambition was to go to the University of Illinois at Champagne, Illinois. But my dad kept saying, "No, that's not the place to go." He said, "You will someday probably want to be in politics" (because I'd already been elected president of the student body in high school and that sort of thing). He said, "You'll want to be in politics, and you'll need to go to the state university so that you will know boys from all over this state. I'm not going to let you go to Illinois." Well, we had quite heated discussions about that. I wanted to go to Illinois so badly. It sounded so far away and so glamorous.

Finally I had to yield to my father's insistent orders that I go to the University of Florida. So I went to the University of Florida, and had a very wonderful time, as a matter of fact, and was a pretty good athlete. I was captain of the basketball team, and was captain of the track team, and I played football for a while, but I wasn't really good. Kind of had to give that up because I kept getting injured. I wasn't very husky. I was elected president of the student body, and president of my fraternity, and that sort of thing. So I had a lot of interest, politically.

Incidentally, it was at that particular point in my life that I met [Claude Pepper](#). I was president of the student body, and had been captain of the debate team, as well as the athletic part of it. Pepper had just gotten elected to finish out a two-year term. Some senator had died; I think it was [Park Trammel](#). Pepper was running for reelection, this was 1938. I went down to the county court house along with a whole bunch of other students to hear this rather famous senator. He made a brilliant speech. I was terribly impressed with what he had to say, and the manner, particularly, in which he said it. Well, it so happened that the next day he came out to the campus at the university and I was introduced as president of the student body. He asked me, would I manage his campaign on the campus for reelection? I was so flattered that I immediately accepted that kind invitation. I organized his campaign on campus for him, and finally it got to the point that I was so involved that I began to take over the whole county, not only the city of Gainesville, where the university was, but the whole Alachua County.

Pepper ran a very strong race and won very easily for reelection at that point, but that was my first introduction to Claude Pepper. Right after that, I graduated from law school, went down to Miami to practice law in my father's office. Although my dad had been retired, but he'd left the name there, Smathers, Clutson, Huck. So I went into that office, and I had been there

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maybe about six months when I got word from a fellow named Charlie Andrews, whose father was the other United States senator from Florida, in Washington. Charlie Andrews had been a PKA, which is a fraternity right across the street from the SAEs. I was an SAE, but Charlie and I were in the same class and knew each other. When Charlie graduated from law school he went to Washington to work for his father. I went to Miami to practice law.

I got this call from Charlie, and he said, "George, would you be interested in becoming assistant United States district attorney at Miami?" I said, "Yeah, Charlie, I would. What does it pay?" I remember him saying, "Well, it pays \$320 a month." I said, "Boy, that's a lot of money." And it was a lot of money in those days. I said, "I'd love to take it." He said, "Well, there's one caveat. Can you get Senator Pepper to okay it?" "What we do," he said, "is we take turns whenever there's a vacancy in a judgeship or in a U.S. attorney's office." In those days, the senators did all the appointing. He said, "Can you get Senator Pepper to go along.

He doesn't appoint anybody when it's his term that my dad doesn't agree to, and we do not appoint anybody to these kind of jobs unless he agrees. So can you get him?" I said, "Surely, I can get him. I'm confident that I can." I called Senator Pepper, and he very graciously and very kindly said okay. Some years later, he forgot about the fact that I was Senator [Andrews'](#) appointment, and he said that he had appointed me. Which was not actually the case. He had endorsed me, but he had not appointed me.

Anyway, I served in that capacity--now am I doing this all right? Let me just stop to say, is this what you want me to do?

**Ritchie:** Sure, I have a few questions I'd like to go back to.

**Smathers:** Okay. Anytime you want to interrupt me, why you go ahead, because I just get going here. So you stop me, and guide me, and lead me, and I'll be glad to have that.

**Ritchie:** One person I was really interested in was your roommate in college, Phil Graham.

**Smathers:** Yes, let's go back to Phil, because Phil is a wonderful fellow. When I was in Miami high school, one of the interesting guys that I met was Phil Graham. He was fifteen, let's say, and I was sixteen. We were about the same age, but I was a little bit older than he. He was a very bright guy. Tall, skinny guy, whose father owned a dairy, called Graham's Dairy. Philip's mother was a fascinating woman. She was a great intellectual. It was from her that Phil Graham got his intellectual inspiration and I think much of his intellectual talents, from his mother who I think shortly after this period of time passed away. She was the first person I ever knew who read *Time* magazine, for example, who read the *Saturday Evening Post* regularly, who was a great reader. They had a debate team at Miami high school, and among other things, Phil Graham was on that debate team. I recall one time he got me to try out for it, and I wasn't that good. But anyway, I got to know Phil.

As I said earlier, his father owned and ran this Graham's Dairy. His father became a state senator. I don't recollect just when it was, but it was before Phil got to Miami high school. His name was Ernest Graham, and he was a wonderful looking guy, rather large and husky, with slate gray hair and gray eyes. Very handsome guy. He had become a state senator, and then he decided he wanted to run for governor. Phil was obviously very involved in his campaign, and Phil's sister Mary, and they got me involved because I was president of the student body at Miami high school, as well as at the University of Florida later. When Ernest Graham ran for governor, I became the Dade County Young Man's Chairman for Graham for Governor. I got to know Ernest Graham very well, and of course

knew Phil intimately. Graham didn't make it, he was defeated. He made the second primary, but I think it was a fellow named John Martin who defeated Ernest Graham for governor. Now, we were still in high school at that time.

We went to college, Ernest Graham ran back to the dairy, Phil and I joined the same fraternity. He went up there a year earlier than me. He went to Gainesville, the University of Florida, a year ahead of me. Phil was a wild guy. He was so smart, and studies were so easy for him, that he could sit around and never study anything until the night before the exam. Then he would go through everything and once he had it was just like that [snaps fingers], and he was making straight As. Then he got to drinking whiskey. In our fraternity we had a lot of whiskey drinkers. That was kind of the thing to do in those days. The girls were up at Tallahassee, at Florida State University, which is today a great big university. That was all females, and down at the University of Florida in Gainesville it was all males. So every weekend there was this great transmigration of women this way and men that way to see each other. Anyway, Phil began to drink and raise Cain. He became the editor of the *Alligator*, which was the college paper. He had some articles written, and some of them were funny as hell, and some of them offended some people.

One weekend, Phil and his group began to celebrate pretty early, and he got very well polluted. In those days, when people drank whiskey, they didn't drink socially. It wasn't to take a sip like we all later on began to do, and sip a drink and maybe have another drink and then go to dinner. It was nothing like that. I mean, in those days when a guy started drinking he'd drink at two o'clock in the afternoon and he'd be absolutely plastered by six. He'd wake up again maybe at nine and get drunk again. But that was the thing. He was doing that one afternoon when his father, Ernest, showed up. I never will forget this, as long as I live.

They had a little fence around the SAE house, which couldn't have been eight or twelve inches off the ground, a little chain fence. Somebody went in and started looking for Phil, and said, "Phil, your Dad's here." "Where is he?" "Well, he's outside sitting in his truck talking to a bunch of the students." I think maybe I was one of them, if not John Stembler was, a guy who's alive today, who was one of Phil's very closest friends, and another boy named Billy Gaither, who's not still alive but anyway was a great buddy of Phil's. Somebody

found Phil, and he was really plastered, so Philip tried to run out to see his daddy, and he tripped on this little old fence, it was about six inches high, and fell on his face. Then he got up. His dad looked at him and said, "You come home, tomorrow. We ain't gonna have this anymore." He jerked him right out of school and put him back to work driving a milk truck. So that ended Phil's career for that year at Florida. Starting the next semester he went back to school. Made

wonderful grades, and he and I graduated at about the same time from the academic school, we both got AB degrees.

I didn't know where to go to law school. My dad was saying, "Go to Florida, you're still going to meet all the boys. The judges are going to be Floridians, and all the people that you practice with. You don't give a damn about going up to Harvard or somewhere." But Phil's mother talked him into going to Harvard, because she was a real, genuine intellectual. She knew the importance of Harvard and what it would mean to Phil. So Phil departed and went to Harvard that following September. I entered Florida, Phil went to Harvard. As you know, while there at Harvard he made the highest grades, and I think I'm saying this correctly, he made the highest grades that had ever been made up to that point. As I understand it, the grades that he made then are still the highest that anybody has ever made.

Phil was so smart that Justice Felix Frankfurter, who was then on the Supreme Court, offered Phil the job of becoming his--I think it was his chief clerk. Phil became the chief clerk for Frankfurter and helped write some very important decisions. It was shortly after that the war came along, World War II. I joined the Marine Corps, and Phil went into the Army Air Force. It was called the Army Air Force then, not the U.S. Air Force. I didn't see Phil anymore, they sent me out to the South Pacific and I stayed out there two years, even though I was already old enough to avoid the war, and I already had a son, and another son on the way. But I felt like I ought to go ahead and do my part of it. But to get back to Phil for a minute, Phil went into the Air Force. During the war I was based here for about six weeks with the Navy before I went overseas. Phil took me to dinner one night with a girl named Katharine Meyer. We went to the Mayflower and had dinner. I thought she was a reasonably attractive girl, but she was quite an intellect herself. Phil, after he took her home, he called me and said, "What do you think about her?" I said, "Well, I thought she was very attractive." He said, "I'm thinking about getting married." I said, "Well, I think that would be a mistake."

I learned from that experience, you never want to tell any guy who's thinking about getting married, and he's got some particular girl, you never want to tell him that that's not the girl. Because invariably he will be smooching with her a little bit and he wants to tell her how much he loves her, and he'll say to her, "Well, I want to tell you something, I love you and we're going to get married even though a lot of my friends don't think I ought to marry you." Or something like that, to prove how much he's going to love her in spite of some of his friends. So she naturally says, "Well, who are those friends?" And he starts naming them off. And of course she never forgets them.

That has been my situation with Katharine Graham, except I made another unguarded remark later, which I'll tell you about, as long as you want to know

about Phil Graham. But anyway, I offered my two bits worth, which was worth nothing, and it haunted me subsequently most of the rest of my life, although we naturally are very cordial to each other when we see each other, Katharine and I.

The war got over, Phil then came back from the war. Eugene Meyer bought the evening paper, I guess it was, here in Washington, and put Phil into it. Then they bought the other paper and merged two of them to become the *Washington Post*, and Phil became the editor of the *Washington Post*. It was about that time I began to run for Congress and came up here as a Congressman. So I would see Phil from time to time, and Kay Graham, and they came along with their family. Their children were the same age as my children. Donnie Graham who today runs the *Post*, as much as his mother lets him, he was the same age as my oldest son. We all became very good friends and used to see each other. His sister Lolly Graham, she used to date my other son Bruce, for a while. So we were pretty close to them. In the meantime, Phil became more famous. *Newsweek* was Phil's idea, so far as I know, with respect to the creation of the new *Newsweek*. It was his idea to make this a service with ABC and a couple of other newspapers. Phil was brilliant, and made the *Washington Post* the preeminent newspaper that it is today.

Then, I don't know, the pressure or whatever it was began to get to him. He began to take barbiturates to an alarming degree. And he began to do a lot of sort of stupid things. I'd see Phil from time to time, but I was busy over in the Congress. I would hear about these things, and then from time to time we would meet, but never for me to talk to him about it. One of our very dearest friends, who had been in the same fraternity with Phil and me, named John Stembler, John used to come up from Atlanta. He had gone to Atlanta to live, and he used to come up and stay with Phil and Kay a great deal. Then we'd all get together. John helped keep Phil pretty straightened out there for a while. But Phil wasn't physically a very strong guy, and I think the pressures of everything began to get to him. Finally he shot himself. They had a farm down in Virginia, and he was down there one weekend, this is what I heard, and he shot himself. Somebody asked me about it later, and in an unguarded moment I said, "Well, if you'd been married to Kay Graham you'd have probably shot yourself too." Somebody reported that back to her, which I had said, you know, in a smart ass, stupid, inconsiderate way, which I regretted. I didn't mean it at all. I was just being smart--thinking I was being smart. So Kay heard that, and naturally she didn't like George Smathers from that point on.

Before Phil died, they bought a television station in Miami. He got interested in Channel 10 in Miami. It's called WPLG, W Philip Leslie Graham, it took his initials and became the call station there, the principal CBS station. I was in the Senate and I helped that go through, as a matter of fact. Later, Phil was then gone to his reward, Katharine wanted to buy a station in Jacksonville, WJAX. Somebody told her that I was stopping her from getting

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it, which was untrue, completely. I had nothing to do with it, even though I was on the committee which had jurisdiction over the Federal Communications Commission. I had appointed a fellow to that Commission named Richie Mack. He had a lot of influence, and he apparently had voted against Kay taking the Jacksonville station over, and she thought I had put Richie Mack up to that. She thought my brother, who was a banker, that he wanted the station. That's what she has told people, that my brother Frank stopped her from getting the station for a while, which is totally incorrect in that my brother is a banker and didn't give a damn about television stations, and never has.

So, regrettably, Kay and I have never hit it off real good since then. But I love the children, and I respect her. I loved Phil, and I'm trying now at this very time, I'm trying to get the Graham Foundation to do something with the journalism school at Gainesville, at the University of Florida, where Philip went to school, and have them name the school the Philip Graham Journalism School, which they would be agreeable to doing if the Graham Foundation will put up several million dollars. Anyway, I'm working on that now. That's pretty much the story of my association with Phil Graham.

**Ritchie:** Did Phil Graham get involved in your political campaigns at all?

**Smathers:** Yes, Phil was for me. He never got to the extent where he was beating the bushes for me. But his father, all the time he was alive, helped me. Phil's brother Bill helped me a great deal. Phil's mother died, and then Phil's father married another woman, and she and Phil's father were the father and mother of the current United States senator from Florida, [Bob Graham](#). Bob Graham was the governor, and a wonderful senator. He's a half-brother of Phil's. But Phil helped me a great deal, and Phil got very close to [Lyndon Johnson](#), and he was close to [Kennedy](#), and he was close to all those people, as I was. So I'd see Phil on a fairly regular basis and we got along great. Phil was without doubt the smartest fellow that I suspect I ever knew. Just plain brainy. He lacked some balance at time, as some of these brilliant fellows do. He lacked sometimes common sense, but he was brilliant, and a wonderful guy, sweet fellow.

**Ritchie:** I got the feeling he was fascinated with politics, too, even though he never got into it.

**Smathers:** Loved politics. His daddy was in it, and he was in it, so he's always loved it.

**Ritchie:** One of the questions I wanted to go back to, you mentioned that you went into the Marines. You were about twenty-seven at the time. . .

**Smathers:** At the time I went in the Marines I think I was twenty-six.

**Ritchie:** You were older, and you had a child. How did you decide on the Marines?

**Smathers:** Well, I'm glad you asked me that because I love to tell this story. The U.S. attorney's office at Miami in the federal building was on a corner. We had about three offices there. There were two assistant U.S. attorneys, Stuart Patton and me. In the next office was the United States Marine Corps recruiting office. As you had to walk from our office to the court room, which they had three different court rooms, and we were always in court, I'd walk by the Marine Corps office every day, and this went on for about a year, or a little less than a year. I would say, "Now, fellows, when you get a real soft job, let me know. Maybe I ought to go. Maybe I ought to do my part." Something like that. And I would kid them a lot. They had recruiting sergeants in there.

So, one day, after I had said this for about six months or so, the war started in December, 1941, so this was 1942, I was trying some very important cases and loved doing it. It was just the best job I really ever had in my life, just loved it. Putting everybody in jail. Nobody was safe. You know, I had the FBI working for me, and I was in charge of the whole south Florida. The Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Internal Revenue Service, you name it, Alcohol Tax Unit, they all worked for me. And they were always in there saying, "Hey, George, we ought to prosecute this guy. We ought to prosecute this. We ought to do this." They were for putting everybody in jail. And they had gambling at that time in Miami. To make a long story short, we indicted people that I've thought about thirty years later, I think it was really outrageous in a way. It scares me to death to think about it. But we ended up putting a lot of people in jail that I don't know now that I'm mellowed and older I don't know that I would have ever brought this kind of case against them. We ended up putting the county solicitor in jail, putting the state's attorney in jail, put the head of the OPA in jail. We had the biggest white slavery case that had ever been had up to that point in time, and I tried that case against some of the great lawyers who were brought in from New York and Jacksonville. I tried that case and we convicted them.

I learned then a couple of things, that if you want to convict people you want to get a real young jury, because a young jury was just like I was. They had not lived long enough to know that in the course of your lifetime you're going to make a lot of mistakes. Most of them are fairly innocent mistakes, but when you're young, you don't know that. You think everything's either black or white. Or if you can't get a real young jury, then get a real old jury, who have forgotten about making all those mistakes. I got onto that pretty quick, and I would pick a jury, we'd have a panel of seventy-five guys, and I would pick six, if there were going to be six on some cases, or twelve in other cases, I'd pick young people, and then talk about "we have to uphold the law. We can't let these people start breaking it down. This

whole society will go crazy." All this stuff. Anyway, we put everybody in jail. Nobody was safe. Until I went to the Marine Corps.

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One day they stopped me as I was walking by and said, "Say, Smathers, we got just the job for you." I said, "What is that?" They said, "Well, they've opened up a new thing where you can go to Officer's Candidate School. You've got to go to Parris Island, pass the physical part of it for six weeks, then you go to Quantico and pass the Officers' Candidate School. Then you'll start out being a Second or First Lieutenant, depending on how well you do." I'd finished a big case there, and I thought, "Well, I ought to go and do my duty." So I volunteered for the Marines and went through Parris Island, went through Quantico. Then I came to Washington--they put me here for a little while. That's when I saw Phil Graham, just before he was going overseas. I stayed here, and it looked like they were going to try to make a desk guy out of me and keep me here in Washington. But I thought as long as I'm going to be in the service I'll be damned if I'm going to sit around here pushing paper and being a lawyer for the Navy. So I feigned having an appendicitis attack. They took me to the Navy Medical Center. They took my appendix out, just on my representation as to where it was, and how badly it hurt. But that broke the umbilical cord with the administrative section of the Navy and put me back in the Marines.

When I got through with the Navy Medical Center out at Bethesda, when I finally got out of that, they sent me down to Cherry Point, North Carolina, which was a brand new Marine Corps base. From there they put me into an air group. I was a security officer. I had to go through some more schooling. Then they put me with a group. I went to California, to Camp Pendleton, and we went overseas. I was overseas in Guam and the Solomon Islands, those campaigns, up to the next year and a half.

While I was in the Marine Corps, the war passed us by down in the South Pacific. We Marines had been told that the next landing after we had won at Bougainville, there were minor battles at Vella Lavella, at Munda, where I was in an airplane that was shot down. We had a lot of very interesting episodes. They kept rotating these guys, but I never got rotated because I was the adjutant. I was the oldest fellow, actually, in these air groups. There would be six hundred guys in there, and I was twenty-eight years old, and I was the oldest fellow there, that is of officers. There were some enlisted guys who were older, but of the officers I was always the oldest. So they kept me there while they would rotate the fliers. I would be in charge of all the security on the ground for these various operations. I began to get very impatient.

About that time, we had the Tarawa battle, and Midway, and then [Douglas] MacArthur took over and went into the Philippines. In the meantime, we had been training. We in the Navy and the Marine Corps were going to land at

Mindanao, which is the southern tip of the Philippines. We'd been told very secretly that we were going to get ready, those of us in that area, and those who were not eligible could come home. When you'd been out there about a year, most everybody rotated. But I'd been there a year and never been rotated. I'd been to Australia for leave on one occasion--which was really great. But anyway, suddenly we awakened one day to hear on the radio (of course, there

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were no newspapers, we were out there and never saw anybody, never did anything) that MacArthur had landed. And he had landed up in the middle of the Philippines, and here we were, we had been trained, we were going to land at the tip end. Well, he had already gotten two hundred miles ahead of what the Navy and the Marine Corps were thinking about. The Army and the Air Force were already going up ahead of us. So that meant that all this training was then of no value.

So I said, "Look, I've got to get home. I've got two children now, I've never seen one of my kids." I began to write people, saying, "Let me get out. I'm the only fellow in this whole air group that's never been rotated." I wrote a letter to Senator Pepper, saying: "I wish, senator, you would look into letting me out. I'm overqualified in the sense that I was too old anyway, I've got a family, and I'd like to get out." I wrote Senator [Holland](#). I wrote to the attorney general Tom Clark, who knew me because when I was assistant U.S. attorney I had worked under him. He was not then attorney general, but he had a job in the Justice Department. This is Ramsey Clark's father. He knew me, and Ramsey's mother, they knew me rather well. They'd come to Miami while I was assistant U.S. attorney, and I'd taken them to dinner a couple of times, and he had watched what I had done down there, winning some big cases, and had written me a letter commending me for it. I wrote him a letter, and he's the fellow that I soon discovered was the guy who talked to the Navy and said, "Look, you've got a guy out there, he's got a family, he's been out there a year and ought to be rotated." He was the fellow who arranged for me, actually, to come back.

Now, Pepper claims that I wrote him, which I did, but that he's the one that arranged it. Well, the fact is that he didn't do it. Senator Holland and Tom Clark were the guys who helped me come home, although I did write to Claude, there's no question about that, asking him to help. And I don't say that he probably didn't do something, but it was Tom Clark, because when I came back Tom Clark made me an assistant United States attorney general in charge of trying war fraud cases. The Navy brought me from San Francisco back here to Washington, and I was here in Washington for a while, and then I got put into the reserve and immediately went to work for Tom Clark over in the Department of Justice. I was there for maybe three months before I finally said I wanted to go back to Miami. So that was my war story.

**Ritchie:** When you came into the Senate later on, there were a number of other Marine-Senators. [Paul Douglas](#) and [Joe McCarthy](#), an unusual assortment. . . .

**Smathers:** That's right, and [Mike Mansfield](#) was a Marine. There was [Danny Brewster](#) from Maryland who was Marine Corps. There were a number of them. I never saw Joe McCarthy while I was overseas. I was in the Solomon Islands, starting at Esprit de Santos, and moving right on up. Guadalcanal had already occurred by the time I arrived out there. But we had the battle of Bougainville, and we raided Lurabal. We went into Munda, we went into Vella Lavella, we went into Choiseul. They were small operations. And the air

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groups were very much involved, because there was a boy named Walter Mayberry who was head of one of the squadrons out there who had been captain of the University of Florida football team. I remember seeing him in a dogfight with the Japanese, and he got shot down. We never did find his body or anything. But Joe McCarthy, I read later where he said he was out there, shooting a tail gun, and all that stuff. I can't say that he did, and I can't say that he didn't. My own impression was that he didn't.

**Ritchie:** The reason I brought it up was because the Marines seem to have a special bond, more than the other services. Does that carry over to senators who served in the Marines?

**Smathers:** Yes, the Marine Corps being smaller, they stick together very well. I got to know Mansfield, I loved Mike Mansfield and one of the reasons I loved him was because he was in the Marines. I think that's the reason we got along so well. Danny Brewster was the same way. Paul Douglas, I don't know when Paul was in the Marines. He had been in the Marines, but see Paul was considerably older, probably fifteen to twenty years older than we were, but he'd been in the Marines.

I've got here on the wall a certificate of retirement as a colonel. What was funny about the Marine Corps to me was that I couldn't get promoted while I was in the Marines. I went in as a lieutenant and I came out as a captain. I went from second to first lieutenant real quick, and I got to captain and stayed there, all the rest of the time I was in the Marine Corps. When I got retired I was still a captain. After I got elected to Congress, all of a sudden I get notice one day--I had just retired, and I hadn't gone to retirement schools or anything--and I got notice that I had been promoted to a major now that I'm in the Congress. Well, that's great, boy I'm now a major. I talked around with Mansfield, and Mansfield said, "Yeah, I got a promotion too." I said, "Gee, that's great, but you know, I was in the damn Marine Corps for three and a half years, overseas two years, and I couldn't get a promotion while I was there." Here I am in Congress and I went to the Senate, and I got a notice that I was now a lieutenant colonel. My God, this is really something! Here I am, I haven't done anything, and I'm getting promoted. We

had a guy, I think it was that fellow there, [Robert] Cushman, I don't know, who had gone to the University of Florida, who had become the Commandant of the Marine Corps. I ought to remember his name.

**Ritchie:** Robert Cushman was Commandant under Nixon.

**Smathers:** Yeah, under Nixon, later. Before that, this guy, very nice guy, he was in the ATO fraternity in Florida, and he had become Commandant of the Marine Corps. One day I went over there to see him. I said, "Now, let me tell you something. I love the Marine Corps. I thought it was a great outfit. But I am embarrassed by the fact that since I've gotten into Congress and haven't done a damn thing, I get promoted three times. I couldn't get promoted once when the war was going on and I was really doing something. Now, this

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is ridiculous. You've got to stop this. I can't help you. I don't know if you're promoting me because you think I'm helping, or whatever it is I'm doing. And I have just finished talking to Mike Mansfield and he feels the same way. He wants to tell you the same thing. You promoted him two or three times. It doesn't make us proud of the Marines, and we don't much care about being something that we aren't. If we were going to summer school," (which some guys were doing, they'd come out of retirement and go back to active duty for maybe six weeks in the summer), "but we're not doing that. We've got to be here in Congress." So, anyway, he said, "Okay, we'll stop." I said, "Well, stop, for God's sakes." I loved the Marines, but they really were pretty bad about that."

**Ritchie:** They had their defenders in Congress. . . .

**Smathers:** Oh, yeah, they always did.

**Ritchie:** Who kept various administrations from cutting them out.

**Smathers:** Oh, sure. There were a lot of them in the House. Lot of guys in the Marine Corps naturally. . . . You know, there's an old expression that Marines like to talk, and they brag. We're the worst braggers, I guess, in the services. They used to say you never should go up and ask a guy if he was in the Marine Corps. If he was he would have already told you, and if he wasn't there's no sense in embarrassing him! The Marines used to tell that around, and laugh all the time. Of course, everybody in the Marine Corps thought they were superior, as I guess I did, to other branches of the service. Now, let's see, I had gotten myself where?

**Ritchie:** You had come back and were assistant to the attorney general.

**Smathers:** Yes, I came back and after I had been here in Washington for a short time I then got back to Miami and full retirement from the Marine Corps. The

office building in which we had our offices when the war started was the old DuPont Building. The Navy took that over during the war, and the Navy was still in it, and there was nowhere to open an office. I got back with some of the fellows who I had been close to. Jack Thompson was a wonderful fellow, and I talked with him about what we ought to do. We decided we'd open an office in another small building and we'd get a law firm going called Smathers and Thompson. We really didn't have much business or anything like that.

A fellow named Dan Mahoney was the editor of the *Miami Daily News*. He had married a daughter of [James] Cox from Ohio. Cox had been the governor of Ohio and the Democratic nominee for president, and a great politician. Dan Mahoney was a typical, handsome Irish guy, great politician. Good looking fellow. He called me one day--this was early '46--and said, "George, come down

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to the office here. I'm having Bun Gautier and Bill Lantaff, who have themselves just got out of the service, and I want to talk to you three guys." So we get down there, and he says, "Dade County" (which is Miami, Miami Beach, Hialeah, all that) "they need good representation in the state legislature, and Dade County is entitled to three legislators. I want to nominate you three guys with my paper. I will elect you. I will go out a hundred percent with this paper." And the paper was very powerful--it was before Jack Knight had really gotten the *Miami Herald* to be the big paper. He said, "I'll support you three guys. I want you to run, and the sooner you announce the easier it will be." Gautier, a good friend of mine, had been in the Navy, good Navy pilot, he said, "I'll do it." Bill Lantaff, who had been in the Army, Army Engineer, wonderful fellow, said "I'll do it."

I said, "Well, Mr. Mahoney, I don't know whether I want to go to the state legislature or not." If I'm going to get in politics, I would rather, I'd always felt, go to Congress. I'd rather be a Congressman. I don't really particularly want to go to Tallahassee." He said, "Well, you can't win. We've got a good Congressman named [Pat Cannon](#)." I said, "Well, I don't know, but I don't really have any desire to be in the state legislature." He said, "Well, I'm disappointed about that, I wish you'd reconsider," and so on. To make a long story short, I thought about a week, talked to a lot of my friends, and decided if I was going to get in politics--which I might as well because we couldn't open a law office, we had no place to open it although we hung a shingle on this building which we just had gotten back from the Navy--I said if I'm going to run I might as well run for Congress instead.

So I went to the FBI, who had been my big helpers before the war. The guy who had been the head of the FBI in South Florida was a fellow named Danner, Dick Danner. Dick was a wonderful guy, he was still the head of the FBI in Florida. I said, "Dick, I'm thinking about running for Congress. Would you be willing to manage my campaign?" He said, "Well, I've been with the FBI now all through the war and before the war and so on, and yes I'd like to make a change. I will do

it." I said, "If you'll do it, well I'm going to run." So I went to see this big fat guy Pat Cannon, who incidentally was a law partner of Gautier, who was the other guy that Dan Mahoney had brought in there and was going to run for the legislature. I went to see Pat, he weighed about three hundred and sixty pounds. He'd been a policeman. He'd gone to the University of Miami. He'd been a judge--no, he hadn't been a judge then, he was a judge later. I said, "Pat, I'm going to run for Congress. I'm sorry that it's going to be you. But I've got this wild hair to try myself in politics. I've thought about it a great deal. I want to run. And I'm not running against you, I'm just running for this seat." He said, "Well, George, I've defeated fourteen fellows, and you'll be the fifteenth. I'm sorry you're going to do it, but you'll see what you got into. You'll learn."

Danner helped me. I picked up a lot of young guys that I'd gone to high school with. They formed a group of young guys, a lot of war veterans, who were just out of the war, just back. Pat had not been in the war. The American

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Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, all those began to endorse me, and say "Smathers is the man." We worked like beavers. I knew these guys since high school, and they all helped. Pat Cannon called us the "Goon Squad." Smathers and his goons. So we got proud of that, we began to call ourselves the "Goon Squad." That district then included all of Miami, which is Dade County, all the way to Key West, Monroe County, and over to Naples, which is Collier County. That was the entire district. We really worked hard and we organized well. Danner, who was the head FBI guy, had a wonderful organizational mind, really good. He had as much to do with my getting elected as anybody. I won. I later got him the job as city manager of Miami. He managed my campaign also for the Senate later. But anyway, we won that seat.

I came to Congress, that was 1947, we got sworn in. I had met Joe Kennedy when I was district attorney putting everybody in jail. Joe used to come down from Palm Beach to go to the races. He always had with him the fire commissioner or the police commissioner from Massachusetts. Danner, who was the head of the FBI, big Irishman, he knew these Irishmen from Massachusetts. Joe Kennedy and Fitzgerald, and one named Fitzgibbons--there were two "Fitz's" I remember, one was police commissioner and the other was fire commissioner of Massachusetts. They would invite us to go to the races with them. I had met Joe Kennedy like that. I knew he was the ambassador to England. I knew he had been head of the Security and Exchange Commission. I had never met Jack Kennedy. I had never met any of the children at that time, but I knew Joe from just going to the races. I didn't know him well, of course, but that had occurred about three times. I learned a little later, and got more sophisticated, Joe was using some of us as sort of foils in a way, because he always had some really good looking girl along with him, and some of us were always getting credit as the fellow who was at the races with this good looking girl. We got so we laughed about that later.

I didn't know Jack Kennedy at that time. I never met him, I just knew that Joe had a couple of kids. When I got elected to the Congress, I came here and opened an office in the Old House Office Building. Two doors down from me was Jack Kennedy's office. My administrative assistant that I brought from Miami was a guy named Grant Stockdale. Stockdale fell in love with Jack Kennedy and Jack Kennedy loved him. Later Jack Kennedy made him ambassador to Ireland, when Jack got to be president. Ted Reardon was Jack's administrative assistant, and Ted and my guy Stockdale became intimate friends, and Jack and I became very close friends. Because Jack, as you can see from that picture, only weighed about a hundred and twenty-five pounds. Of the fellows least likely to be president, you'd have to vote Jack number one. He only weighed about a hundred and twenty-five pounds, and he had this bad back, and he had another illness that we didn't know about at the time, but he didn't look well. He was not well, he was in pain most of the time. When they'd ring the bells for us to go over to have a vote or have a quorum call, this poor guy would have a hard time getting over there. So the way it would happen is I'd go by and holler, "C'mon Jack, let's go." He would lean on me, or Stockdale, or Ted Reardon, and we'd all kind of march over to the floor of the

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House of Representatives where he would cast his vote, or vote present, or whatever was the order of the day.

We got to be very, very close friends during those four years that we were next door neighbors. He invited me up to Hyannisport in that summer of 1947, I guess it was, or '48. I went up there and met Eunice, and Pat, and all his family, and Mrs. Rose Kennedy. Later on, for some reason I got a very good [committee] assignment, when I got to the House. You know, in those days you had two committees. They put you on one good committee and one sort of bad committee. My so-called bad committee, or weak committee, was the Post Office and Civil Service. My good committee was the Foreign Affairs Committee. [Sol Bloom](#), ancient Congressman from New York was chairman. He used to tell us some wonderful stories all about when he first got there. He knew [Calvin] Coolidge and so on.

I might just tell you this story here, just for the record, which really was a true story that Sol Bloom told us, which I will never forget, about Coolidge. That Coolidge called him over one day to the White House about something. That Sol Bloom smoked cigars all the time. That Coolidge smoked cigars, which I didn't know about. That Sol Bloom, being chairman of the committee, was seated up near Coolidge's desk. It got to be about 5:30 in the afternoon and Coolidge got out a cigar and lit it up and started smoking it. Sol said that he looked so hungry, he didn't have a cigar with him, but he looked so anxious about it that President Coolidge finally looked at him and said, "Oh, yeah, Congressman, I hear you smoke cigars." He said yeah. So Coolidge opened his drawer and here was a

whole box of cheap cigars, five cent cigars, or maybe two for five, I don't know, but Sol telling this story said you couldn't believe these cheap cigars that this guy was smoking. So he said, "Here Congressman, have one." Sol said he took the cigar, but it was so cheap he just put it in his pocket. He didn't light it. Coolidge was looking around, and puffing on his, and talking to some of the others, and he looked back at Sol and sort of looked quizzical and puzzled, and he finally reached over and said, "Well, Congressman, if you're not going to smoke that cigar, I'll take it back." And he took it back and put it back in his box! Old Sol used to tell that story, and everybody would laugh, and it was a funny story.

Anyway, I got on that Foreign Affairs Committee. I forget what committee Jack Kennedy went on, but in any event we made a trip to Europe. I made two trips to Europe, both with Kennedy. Just he and I went to London, we went to France, we went to Spain, we traveled around a good deal and didn't really accomplish anything but we wrote a report to the committee when we got back as to what we discovered, and what we found. I made another trip with [Scott Lucas](#), who was then the [majority leader](#) of the Senate, and [Bill Fulbright](#), who was then a big guy on the Foreign Relations Committee, although I know he wasn't chairman then but he was already recognized as a very astute and able foreign relations senator. I somehow was invited along. We went into Berlin. The Russians were still in control. It was a very, very interesting, fascinating trip. Everything was on ready, I mean you could have started another war there

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in two minutes. I was shocked beyond my capacity to see how devastated the whole city was. I had never been to Berlin before, but there was nothing but devastation. You could stand in the middle of Unter den Linden street and look as far as you could, 360 degrees, and you could not see one single building standing completely. These people, the Germans, were walking up and down the street, they had nothing. If you had a handkerchief you could just throw it out and they would dive on it, fight for it. Everybody who went over there just gave away everything they had to these starving Germans. It was a shocking, pitiful sight I had never seen before.

When I got back to Paris, I called up Jack Kennedy to see where he was. He said, "I'm on my way coming over there on some trip," and I said, "Well, I'll wait here for you." So I waited for Jack. I remember his father kept an apartment at the George Cinq Hotel, the fanciest, most expensive hotel in Paris. Jack walked in, and I mean you would have thought he was the king. We went up there and stayed for about three days, ate nothing but the best food, smoked the best cigars, drunk what little--neither one of us were big drinkers--but whatever we drank it was the best. We had a marvelous time. Then he and I went on down to southern France and visited around there, went into Italy on a short trip. Then I had to come back, and I left him over there. I didn't see him for about a month after that. He had a very interesting time, and I had a lot of fun.

Jack and I went on another trip, we went to Cuba. This was while we were in the House. We did more traveling together than we did any other time. He was a very interesting guy in that he never had any money with him. Never. He didn't really know what money was. When I first began to go around with him a good deal and have dinner, the check would come and he'd always say, "Well, I'll get my half." So I finally said, "Okay, put it up." He would reach into this shirt pocket here. I soon learned that any guy who's got any money never carries in that shirt pocket. When you see a guy reach in this pocket to pay you something, you can just forget it. The guys who have got money have either got it in their hip pocket, or they've got it in this pants pocket. He didn't pay for anything. It used to bother me, so finally I complained to him about it. He said, "Well, I wish you'd talk to my dad about that." So I did. I said, "I don't know if you give him any money or not, Mr. Ambassador," I would never call him Joe. He said, "George, he doesn't know anything about money. Not the first thing. He's never had it, he just sends in chits to the office. That's what you ought to do." I said, "I don't think I can do that." He said, "Here's what I want you to do. You just pay for whatever it is, and then you send in this bill at the end of the month for half of what the cost had been, and we'll pay it. And I did that, for the next seven years or eight years, and got paid out of the Kennedy family fund for Jack's expenses.

Jack and I were very close, and he met [Jackie](#), and he invited me to be in his wedding. He told me that I was to be the best man. He said, "You're the only politician I'm going to invite." So I said, "That's fine, and I appreciate that." Later, I said, "Jack, while I was at the wedding, I talked to about nine guys and

everyone of them kept saying that they were the best man." He said, "Well, I told every fellow he was the best man." We had the wedding, and Joe came to me the night of the party, which the bride's father, Bouvier or Auchincloss, or mother put on, and Joe said, "Now, you're going to have to speak for the groom. I want you to be funny. I want you to be clever. I want you to say everything that you can think of that's going to make Jack look good. I don't want the Bouviers to be outshining us." I said, "Well, OK, Mr. Ambassador, I wish somebody had told me this a little while ago. But anyway I'll do it the best I can." I don't think I was very good, really, but I got a big hand and it went off fine. So I spoke for the groom's side. That was quite an occasion.

I thought Jackie, still do think Jackie is about as lovely a girl as I ever saw. She's a real lady. She did a lot for Jack Kennedy, spoke beautiful Spanish, beautiful French, some German. She made several of those trips that he went on, particularly the one down to Bogota, Colombia, where Jackie really got more acclaim, more recognition, than Jack Kennedy did, because she was so bilingual and she could talk so beautifully in Spanish. She did the same thing in France. She did pretty much the same thing in Germany. I think she was great. I think she put the White House on a very high level and improved the tone of it enormously.

She's been criticized for having spent too much money. As a matter of fact in some of these books they've got me quoted several times as having said that Jack came to me and talked one time about her spending money. That's absolutely the fact, he did talk to me about what do you do when your wife spends so much money. I said, "All wives spend money, that's the first thing you've got to remember. There's hardly any wife that the husband doesn't think she spends too much money. That's just normal. Secondly, she's trying to improve the White House. She's buying a lot of stuff that's dramatically improving the looks of the White House, and you've got to remember that she comes from an atmosphere and an environment where everybody was pretty well off. You and your family are supposed to be rich, so you shouldn't be minding this at all." He would shake his head, but that was about the extent of it.

See, I've been quoted a lot saying things like that about Jackie. Some of those quotes have been distorted and exaggerated enormously. This latest book [*A Woman Called Jackie*] that C. David Heymann wrote, I don't remember ever having seen that guy in my life. What he does is pretty interesting, he says that each one of these quotations there was an interview that justifies this quotation. What he doesn't say is however, I did not make this interview, this was somebody else's interview that he was gathering up from around in various places.

I had Kitty Kelley interview me. If I had things to do over, that would be one interview that I would not have given. But at that time Kitty Kelley was not a well-known author. She came to me and said, "Do you know where I have been lately?" I said, "No, I never saw you before. How would I know that?" She said, "Well, I've been down to the Greenbrier in Texas." I said, "That's very interesting, what is that?" She said, "That is a fat farm that women go to in

order to lose weight and to get healthy." I said, "You look very good, it worked." She said, "Well, could you imagine who my roommate was?" I said, "No, I have not the vaguest idea." She said, "Your first wife was my roommate." Now, that is something. That puts me under some pressure, because I could see these two women lying up in bed at night conversing, and here I am a divorced man at this point. So then she started off, she said, "Now, I know all about your trips to Europe you made with Jack Kennedy. I know where you were when Jackie called." I said, "Okay, you know all this stuff." She said, "Yep, I know when you all went to Cuba." I said, Okay. She said a few or three things, and my response was "I guess that happened," because my first wife is a very charming lady and a very truthful lady, but she wasn't happy about our divorce, as I don't guess any of us were. She didn't like the life here, and she didn't like the activity, with me being gone a lot and that sort of thing. She was a more normal wife who likes to be the hell out of Washington, doesn't want to be here, entertaining and having people ringing you on the phone all the time.

As a matter of fact, to go back, I personally am of the opinion that [Lyndon Johnson](#) in a way was the guy who put my marriage on the rocks by calling me when I was the whip, his assistant, when [Earle Clements](#) ran in Kentucky. I point to Earle Clements' picture there. When he got defeated in Kentucky for reelection, I took his place, and then Johnson had the heart attack about that time. So I was actually the majority leader. Johnson would call me incessantly, every thirty minutes. You couldn't be on the floor and get things done because Johnson wanted to know what was happening, what's going on, who did that, what did this?

When he had the heart attack down in Virginia, I was down there with him that day. The first big heart attack. [Lady Bird](#) was down there. We were to George Brown's place. [Clint Anderson](#) was there, Senator from New Mexico. I'll never forget the morning that this happened--I'm wandering around a little bit here in this recitation--but let me go back and tell you this story about Lyndon and his heart attack. I've been talking about Kennedy and I ought to finish that before I get on Johnson, but anyway, I may never have a chance to say it again, so I'll say it now.

What happened was that Johnson said to me, I was his assistant, he said, "I'm going down this weekend and stay at George Brown's house, and I want you to go down with me." So you have to say yes, because he was the majority leader. He said, "Saturday we'll drive down." Okay, Saturday came, I came over to the Senate, Johnson was already here. He said, "Well, let's go." We get in the car and he says, "Now, we're going to stop by the Naval Medical Center and say hello to Senator [\[Walter\] George](#) of Georgia, who's sick." Okay, we go by. On the way out to the Naval Medical Center, Johnson said, "I feel terrible. I've got gas on my stomach, terrible gas." "Well I'm sorry Lyndon, why don't you try a little bicarbonate of soda?" Well, we haven't got any. So we go see Senator George, then we start for Virginia. On the way down, he's complaining "Oh, I have this terrible pain." So we stop finally at some little grocery store looking thing on the way down to Virginia, and we bought some bicarbonate of soda.

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We got some water, and put the soda in it, and he drank it, and belched and burped. He was a fellow who did that all the time anyway, but these were exceptional.

We go on down to George Brown's big estate down in Virginia and Lady Bird's already there, Clint Anderson is there, and several other people. George Reedy, I think was there, and I don't remember who else. We get there in time for dinner. We have dinner, and now Johnson wants to play dominoes. I go to bed, and the next morning I go down to the living room, and in addition to the big living room there was a sort of an anteroom, smaller but a part of the living. Clint Anderson was lying down on the couch there, reading the paper. I went in and he said,

"Here's part of the paper," and I sat down and shared it. Pretty soon, Johnson and Lady Bird came walking in. They'd been out on a walk somewhere.

Johnson looked terrible, was all nervous looking and distraught. He said, "Clint, you've had a heart attack, haven't you?" And Clint said yes, as a matter of fact Clint had a big heart attack. He had been Secretary of Agriculture and given up his job to go back to New Mexico before he got elected senator. He said, "Yeah, I've had a big heart attack." He was lying there and Johnson was standing up. Johnson said, "Well, let me ask you a couple of questions, did you have pain right down here in your left arm?" Clint said yeah. He said, "Well, Clint, did you have a feeling on the top of your stomach right there that somebody had stepped on you, like a horse, the weight is just awful?" Yeah, yeah. "Well, did you have something here behind your ear, which hurt like the mischief?" Clint said yeah. And Johnson said, "Well, God almighty man, get off that couch and let me lie down, I'm having a heart attack!" So Clint got up and said, "You probably are." He said, "George, we'd better get a doctor." Lady Bird said, "Oh, my goodness, we've got to get a doctor, what are we going to do?"

I went to the telephone and called the operator and said, "How do I get hold of a doctor right away?" She said, ring this number, so I did, and said it was an emergency, and a doctor came on the phone. I said we're at this house, George Brown's, and this is the address, and we need a doctor right away because one of the people here is having a very serious heart attack. It wasn't but about ten minutes till a guy drove up to the front of the house. We were looking for a car, and I saw him come in, a nice looking guy, he walked in and he had a little bit of a case with him. He walked in and saw Lyndon, and I said, "There's Senator Johnson and we think he needs some attention." He looked at him, and he didn't say a word, he just got up, said "excuse me just a minute," and went out to his car and got another, bigger satchel. He pulled out a big needle. I give you my word it was over a foot long. Johnson said, "What are you going to do with that?" And he says, "I'm going to give you a shot," and he took that needle and he stuck it into Johnson like you wouldn't believe. You could see him push the other end of it, and he turned around and Johnson was going "Ohhh, ohh," but didn't holler out or anything. The doctor turned around and said "You've got to get this guy to the Naval Medical Center as quickly as you can, because he's having a big heart attack."

I called a guy named Lon Thompson, who's a doctor here in Washington, who had looked after Johnson some, and looked after me. I said, "Lon, how do I get hold of a good doctor in addition to the Naval Medical Center." He said, "Well, give me the number." Well, some of us called, I can't remember who exactly, but we got hold of the Navy and they said we'll be there, with an ambulance, within an hour. I don't know why we didn't think about flying, but we didn't. Anyway, as Johnson stood up finally, Johnson was asking the doctor questions. "How serious

is it?" The doctor said, "It's very serious." He said, "Can I recover?" The doctor said, "Yes, but you've got to take it very easy." Johnson said, "Well, I'm head of the Senate, when can I go back to the Senate?" He said, "You can't go back to the Senate for thirty days, at least." Johnson said, "Well, I've got to go back before that." He said, "You'll have to take that up with the other doctors, but as far as I'm concerned, you can't."

Johnson then turned around to me and said, "Look, if I've got to go, you're in charge." And he said, "And I want to tell you right now, Smathers, this is no time for you to be your usual happy, sweet, nice guy. You've got to be tough. You've got to get these things done. We've got pass this piece of legislation, this piece of legislation. . . ." And he started enumerating them. "This has got to be done." I remember he turned to Lady Bird and he said, "Here's my money, here's my watch," and so on. What happened was, instead of waiting for an ambulance to come down from the Navy we got an ambulance there in a little town. But we made a reservation at the Navy Medical Center. It wasn't very long before that ambulance was there. Johnson and Lady Bird and somebody else got in it, and they were gone. We never saw Johnson again for some forty days, although he began to call us on the telephone in about a week. Just ran us crazy talking to him on the phone, getting things done. He was the most hard-driving guy I ever saw in my life.

I'm getting a little long, you just interrupt me, or say, okay we've heard too much about that, let's here about something else. And you might just ask me some questions.

**Ritchie:** I wanted to ask you more about that Class of 1946. I was looking over the list, and a lot of them you never hear from again, but some of them became very prominent. There was [Carl Albert](#) and [Hale Boggs](#), and yourself, and [Richard Nixon](#), and [John Kennedy](#), and [Jake Javits](#). I was impressed by looking over the list. Did you find that there was any sense of a class? In other words, did you identify with people that you came in with?

**Smathers:** Yes, I think that you do, as that picture right behind you shows. Now there were other fellows, but I don't know why there are just that few, just that nine there. There's Nixon, there's Kennedy, there's Don Jackson, there's Tiger Teague, there's Thruston Morton, myself, and these two fellows, one from California and one from Colorado. Don Jackson, Nixon appointed him later as chairman of the FCC, but he was a good Congressman. Yes, we were the "war baby" class, so to speak. We were all really very close.

I knew Nixon as well, I guess, as anybody. Nixon was a very hard fellow to know. I know Nixon today. I see him regularly. I introduced Nixon to Bebe Rebozo, and Rebozo and Nixon became the best of best friends. For the last four years, maybe

longer, every time Nixon has a birthday, I go to his party. Pat his wife does not attend those little parties, because they're not big parties at all, but anyway she's not feeling well. But Nixon comes down, and he has his birthday with Rebozo, and they always invite me and my wife, and my brother Frank and his wife. We four men and wives celebrate his birthday every year. Then he's down there with Rebozo, or Rebozo's up with him at least every other week, if not more frequently than that.

So I still get to see Nixon frequently. And I'm proud of the way he's handling himself, the way he's done. I don't know of anybody who's been criticized more than Richard Nixon. I don't know of anybody who has been more unfairly criticized. That's not to say that some of the criticism was not justified. Much of it was. But then he continues to get criticized, and made fun of, and ridiculed, and it really isn't fair to the man. The man has demonstrated that he's quite a man. He's an able fellow. He has done magnificent things. Certainly he was the guy who opened China up to the United States. He was the first fellow who talked about the SALT treaties and limitation of weapons, this sort of thing. He's a very interesting guy in that he's very hard to know, he's very hard to get acquainted with, as well as I know him. And I introduced him to Rebozo and he has no closer friend, as I said. He's hard to know, but I think he's a very honorable guy, unfairly abused, but that's the fate of some of us.

Now, let's see, you started off about the class. I still see him, and of course I saw Kennedy regularly, Thruston Morton came in that court. I used to see Thruston, he's now gone to his reward, a wonderful guy, we were very close. Tiger Teague same way, very close.

**Ritchie:** [Kenneth Keating](#) and [John Carroll](#) were also in that class.

**Smathers:** Was Keating in that class? Did he get elected in '46?

**Ritchie:** Yes, and Javits too.

**Smathers:** And Jack Javits. Well, I knew them both well, and liked them very much. I thought Javits was a particularly able fellow, Republican, he and Keating. Very liberal Republican, Jack Javits was, but a very able fellow, very fine speaker. Keating also a very able guy from New York. Both of them became senators. It's amazing how many of the class of '46 became senators. Just about everybody.

**Ritchie:** A good number of them. Among the other members of the House, beyond your class, who became senators, did you get to know them in the House, men like Lyndon Johnson and others?

**Smathers:** Sure. Well, I met [Scott Lucas](#). See, what happened to me, which was very nice in a way was that when [Truman](#) got the nomination in his own right-- well, let's go back before that. Truman never did like [Claude Pepper](#). In Margaret Truman's book, on page 375, or 375 I forget which, she has in there a reproduction of a letter which President Truman wrote to his daughter in which he said, "Honey, the three most dangerous people in the world are Joe Stalin, Lenin, and Trotsky, who are ably helped by their three close compatriots over here, [Henry Wallace](#), Claude Pepper, and [Glen Taylor](#)." The most dangerous people in the world. Well, to go even further back the history was that Pepper never did think much of Truman. Truman apparently reciprocated. Pepper did not want Truman to become even vice president, and when Roosevelt in effect dumped Wallace as the third-term vice president, Pepper was afraid Truman might get it and Pepper tried to stop it. He made speeches for Wallace, and made appearances, and naturally made Truman pretty mad.

When Truman got it, Pepper made a big speech, at the 1944 convention, that this would not have happened had it not been for Bob Hannegan, and Boss Hague in New Jersey, and these other big city bosses who made Roosevelt bow down and take Harry Truman instead of Wallace. The '48 convention, I did not go to that convention, Truman wanted to get the nomination in his own right, and Pepper again tried to forestall Truman. He nominated Henry Wallace as a candidate, and made some very fiery speeches about Wallace, how great he was, and so on. When Wallace did not get it, then Pepper offered himself as the candidate. But he could not get the Florida delegation, which was headed up by a guy named Frank Upchurch from St. Augustine, who was chairman of the delegation, he could not get the delegation to be for him. So he had to withdraw. The *Miami Herald* recently had a picture of that convention and it showed Pepper standing on a ladder taking down the name of Wallace and putting up the name of Pepper for president. Then when Pepper didn't get anywhere with his own nomination he then went to [Eisenhower](#), and said we ought to nominate Eisenhower, we don't know what party he's in but we ought not to ask him. He's just such an outstanding man he ought to be president anyway. All of this to stop Truman. So Truman's resentment and dislike of Pepper was very understandable, even at that stage.

So anyway, Truman succeeds in getting the nomination over Pepper's objection, even though it turned out that Pepper did what he frequently did, he would speak against something and then when he saw it wasn't getting anywhere he'd turn around and vote for it. He said, several times in his book that he'd really voted for the nomination of Truman, but the fact of the matter is he tried to do everything he could to defeat him first, and when he saw it was impossible he voted for him. In his book he says, well I really voted for Truman; Truman was my good friend. Of course he was not a friend. Truman really despised him.

Okay, where do I come in the picture? I come in the picture that I'm the Congressman for Key West, in addition to Miami. Truman goes to Key West regularly for a visit. It's customary for a president to invite the local

Congressman to ride on the airplane back to the district, in the event he wants to go. I got invited to fly with Truman to Key West at least a dozen times over the course of about three years. During that period of time I was able to meet Clark Clifford, I got to meet Judge [Fred] Vinson, I got to meet Harry Vaughn, I got to meet all of Truman's friends. I was going to read you something that a guy just sent me the other day about Truman writing my mother saying "I helped George" and so and so. It was after he got the nomination, my mother wrote him a letter to congratulate him, and he wrote my mother back.

[To secretary:] Sandy, do we have a copy of that letter which Jim Clark of the Orlando *Sentinel* sent? My mother's letter and Truman's back. It was really good.

But I got to know Truman on these trips. Well, here we are now after I'm getting to know Truman pretty well and Truman has observed me in action some. One day I get a call. Truman recommends a program called aid to Greece and Turkey, which was designed to stop the Communist encroachment on Western Europe by aiding Greece and Turkey. Pepper speaks against it over and over again, bitterly, but when he sees he's going to lose, finally, he ends up voting for it, but he tried to stop it. George Marshall was the Secretary of State, he develops a plan called the Marshall Plan, which is calculated to strengthen the free countries of Europe. Pepper speaks and votes against that. They had a program called the European Recovery Act, which again was another program calculated to strengthen the free countries of Europe and the world. As a matter of fact, Pepper speaks and votes against that. Pepper goes over to the Soviet Union, meets with Joe Stalin, comes back to Madison Square Garden, makes a speech, and says Joe Stalin is the greatest man on earth, we should all say our prayers every night and thank God that we've got a friend like Joe Stalin. Thirteen thousand people in the audience. He comes down to the floor of the United States Senate about three weeks later and says the same thing, but goes further and says we should share with Joe Stalin and the Soviet Union all of our nuclear weapons, all of our nuclear secrets. This is the wave of the future. This is Claude Pepper. This isn't George Smathers, this is Claude Pepper saying this on the floor of the United States Senate! All you got to do is look at the Record and there it is.

So you know how Truman feels about this. It was along about 1949.

[Secretary enters] Here's this letter from the Orlando *Sentinel*. It says "Dear Senator Smathers, I am finally getting somewhere, I hope your health is good. I thought you might like to see the enclosed letter from your mom to Truman. I will be in touch. Best, Jim."

Here's the letter from my mother, who says, "Dear President Truman, First wish to congratulate you on your magnificent and courageous campaign and your victory." He got elected now, and this letter is dated November 8, 1948. "I believe

the prayers of many good women had much to do with that victory. They believe as I do that God is always on the side of the selfless servant of the

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people. Having been blessed with a wonderful mother as you have, I thought you would find the enclosed news item amusing and interesting, which was: Granny Smathers, 95 years old, is Congressman George Smathers' grandmother and has never voted anything but the straight Democratic ticket--which she is very proud of especially and so am I."

Truman writes her back and says, "Dear Mrs. Smathers, I certainly enjoyed reading your letter of November 8. I want to thank you for the inspiring expressions which it conveyed. I especially noted the clipping and your references to Mrs. B.F. Smathers. It is indeed remarkable that a person of 95 years of age can be active. Please extend to her my very best wishes for her health and happiness. Very sincerely yours, Harry S. Truman. Then he says, in his own handwriting: "Had a good visit with George at Key West. He's the only public official I invited to see me. The others invited themselves." That's in the president's handwriting.

We began to like each other very much. That's when I got called over to the White House one day, and Harry Vaughn was at the door. I go in. I really think that was the first time I had ever been in the White House, in the Oval Office, even though I knew Truman and had been seeing him on these trips a lot, but I had never been in the White House. Harry Vaughn called me and said, "President Truman wants to see you." This was 1949, long about the later summer or early fall. I go in, and Harry Vaughn says, "Go on into the Oval Office. Sit there, the president will be in just a minute." Pretty soon the door opens and here comes the president. He's got a whole bunch of papers under his arm, and he's talking to Harry Vaughn and somebody else. He comes on in, and I stand up and salute as a good Marine will do, and he says, "Sit down, sit down, sit down Congressman." So I sat down. He signed a few more papers and he gives them to Vaughn. Vaughn is standing there, and Truman looks over at me and says, "George, I want you to do me a favor." "Yes, sir, Mr. President, whatever." "I want you to beat that son of a bitch Claude Pepper." Well, boy, that really shocked me. I don't know what exactly I said, but I said something like, "Well, Mr. President, I don't know. I know Claude, I know he's been way off the beat, he's been saying things I can't believe he'd say." "No, you can beat him, you can beat him. Don't worry about it, you can beat him." By that time, Harry Vaughn had come in and he starts signing some papers. I get up and he says, "I want you to do it now," and I walk out.

It was at that point that I really seriously began to think about running against Claude. I talked with Claude about it, because I felt like I should, as I had talked with Pat Cannon when I ran against him. I went to his office one day and said, "Claude, I'm getting a lot of encouragement to run against you, and I think that

Millard Caldwell who's the governor will probably run against you, but you got to straighten up. Everybody in Florida thinks you're off your rocker with this Joe Stalin bit." He said, "Oh, no, no I'm not. I'm not worried about it anyway." So I said, "I think I'm right, and I think that's the way to go. I don't think the people agree with you."

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We were on a plane trip together about a month or so after I went to his office. I told him again, I said "Claude, you're going to be amazed at how people over the state are very unhappy with this position that you're taking. People don't like this communist bit." He said, "George, I don't have to worry about it." I remember him very well saying this. He said, "I had this same problem in 1944. They called me Red Pepper then. Ollie Edmunds ran against him. He said, "I only made two speeches over the state and it was all over." He said, "That's all I got to do again." I said, "Well, I don't think it will be that easy this time." I then talked to a guy named Bob Fokes, who's still alive, who lives in Tallahassee, who was Pepper's administrative assistant. I said, "Bob, you've got to get your guy straightened out. I'm amazed at the amount of urging I'm getting to run against Claude. I don't particularly want to do it. He's a great speaker and really a very able guy, but he's really off his beam on this." Bob said, "I know it, I know it. But we can't get him back."



Claude Pepper  
*Senate Historical Office*

It went along like that. I kept getting people who did encourage me without my solicitation. I could see that somebody was going to beat him. So I thought well, I think I'll just go ahead and do it. So I ran. You know, they called it a dirty race and all that sort of stuff. All races are dirty, but you never see the winner call it dirty, it's always the losers. It was a tough campaign, I knew it. I mean, things were done that Claude didn't have anything to do with, where I was put in an elevator that dropped five floors. Why we all weren't killed I don't know. Claude didn't, I don't think, have a damn thing to do with it. But the labor people hated

my guts so much, that somebody in that particular group decided--and I don't think the labor leaders themselves knew. We had the bolts on our steering gear on the car twice go out on us. These things happened.

One of the things that didn't happen, however, was that story that I went around in West Florida saying that his sister was a thespian, that he practiced celibacy, that he vacillated on the Senate floor. All this stuff. You know, actually, it's funny. It's so funny that that's why it keeps getting circulated. But it's a kind of an insult to the people of Florida to think that you can tell them that kind of junky stuff and get away with it. The people in Florida are not that dumb. I mean, you can talk about the Panhandle. That's where FSU is, that's where Central Florida is, that's where the University of West Florida is. In the state in that campaign there were 38 daily newspapers, 36 of them endorsed me. They would not have endorsed me had I been a little snotty-nosed guy running around saying ugly things. They endorsed me. I won by almost 2 to 1. That was dirty if you lost. I offered a reward of \$10,000 to anyone who could prove those things were really said, and no one ever collected it.

Bob Fokes, who was Pepper's administrative assistant, can tell you exactly where it got started, up here at the National Press Club in Washington. They had a group of reporters, it was a very colorful and important campaign at that time, and a group of reporters would follow Pepper for two or three days and then they'd switch off and follow me. Each of us had our sound trucks and all the other stuff. They began to exchange views, take off and come back here to Washington, to the National Press Club, and sit up there and talk to each other.

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"Did you hear what Smathers said about Pepper this week?" "Did you hear what so and so said about him?" You know, back and forth. They began to make this sort of very clever and very funny, but it really did not happen that way.

See, what Claude did, after that defeat in 1950, people forget this, he then waited. In '56 I was up for reelection, but he knew he couldn't beat me, so he didn't run against me. He was then living up in Tallahassee, up in north Florida. He waited two more years and ran against Senator Holland, who had been his colleague in the Senate. He talks about me being an ungrateful friend, and then he ran against Senator Holland who had been his colleague for some twelve years. He said about Holland, and this is quoted in the *Miami Herald*, had it on the front page not too long ago, he said "Holland is Rip Van Winkle, he's too old. You cannot have an old man up there representing you. Florida deserves better than a man that old and decrepit." This is the guy who later becomes the champion of all the old people, saying that about Holland. So, you begin to look at really happened.

Then he got defeated by Holland, so then he decides, where can I really get elected? He said, I gotta go to Miami and pick out a congressional district. I don't

know that he did it just like that, but he moved to Miami, and there was a district there, the Miami Beach district where there were a lot of minority voters. And there were old people, sixty percent elderly people, retired people, maybe not that many, fifty percent. So he ran as a candidate for the elderly and he won. And I've got to hand it to him. From that day forward there was a guy with two careers. From that day on he was the champion of the elderly, and did a very fantastic job. As a matter of fact, I contributed to his campaigns, the last twelve years that he was there.

I went further than that. When the Miami Kiwanis Club wouldn't take him in, because they remembered him as a great liberal in 1950, I was a member. One day on an airplane he said, "George, you'd really do me a favor if you'd get me in the Miami Kiwanis Club." I go to the Miami Kiwanis Club and make a speech for Claude Pepper to become a member, and they take him in.

**Ritchie:** There's a wonderful irony in that.

**Smathers:** Yeah. So we got along fine. Unfortunately, he wrote that book [Pepper: *Eyewitness to a Century* (1987)]. As some of the papers said, "Claude Pepper rewrites history." He told his version of the campaign, which was all obviously one-sided, and I thought very slanderous of me in a way. But he was getting old, he was encouraged to do that by a lot of the writers, make the book more salable or something. But we got along fine for the last twelve years of his life.

[End of Interview #1]