

Richard B. Russell, Jr. Oral History Project
RBROH-045
Senator Margaret Chase Smith interviewed by Hugh Cates
April 23, 1971

CATES: April the 23rd, 1971. I called Senator, oh, I take that back. She called me. I'm referring to Maine's senator, U.S. Senator Margaret, Chase Smith. I had called her earlier about interviewing her concerning Senator Russell and she called me Friday to ask that I read from the Congressional Record a speech she gave after his death. And this would better enable me, she said, to know how she felt about Senator Russell when I did interview her. On Monday April 26th, I am supposed to contact her and see if she can work it into her schedule at that particular time for me to see her. She said some mighty nice things, things in the Congressional Record of January 25th, 1971. She repeated a speech that she had given in April, 1969. She said at that time, "Mr. President, one of the great privileges of serving in the United States Senate, the greatest legislative body in the history of the world, has been to associate with truly great leaders--statesmen whose deeds and wisdom and courage have deeply inspired so many. I am deeply fortunate to be serving in my twenty-first year in the Senate and my seventeenth year on both the Senate arms--Senate Appropriations Committee and the Senate Armed Services Committee for which I feel doubly fortunate because of my association during these years with the man who now chairs the Appropriations Committee and after chairing the Armed Services Committee so brilliantly and wisely for many years. Yes, the Senate has several great leaders in its history, but I think that to most of us there are only three or four or maybe five who stand out above all others--who are truly the giants of integrity, wisdom, achievement and dedication during our respective tenures in the Senate, the giants who really inspire their colleagues. One way that an outsider can identify a giant in the Senate from a viewpoint in the Senate gallery is to watch the Senate Floor, to see the turnout of the senators to listen to a giant's speech in the hushed silence when a giant speaks. An extremely reliable measurement within the Senate itself is whether the individual senator can really sway votes when he rises to speak, and voice his respected, often revered views. To me, Richard Brevard Russell, the senior senator from Georgia, the senior senator of the Senate, and the President *pro tempore* of the Senate, has been and is one of the rare few giants of the Senate during my tenure. I know that many, many senators share my view. I agree with those who say that Richard Brevard Russell should have been president of the United States. I wish he had, not only because he had been, has been one of the most eminently qualified to be president, not only because he so richly deserved to be president, but even more important because our nation would be a better nation had he been president. But in a selfish manner as far as the Senate is concerned, and in a less selfish manner as far as the people of America are concerned, there has been a very meaningful advantage in his not becoming president. For had he been elected president in 1948 or 1952, our nation would have been without his leadership since 1956 or 1960, when he might have retired after eight years as president. Thus the people of America would have been deprived of his leadership in the Senate for the past eight or twelve years, and we in the Senate would have been deprived of his sage advice, counsel, and leadership. An unfillable void in the Senate would have been created. Richard Brevard Russell has been an inspiration to me in many ways. He has been a shining example to follow. I now reveal a secret with respect to one very specific way in which I have

tried to emulate him. Despite his brilliant record and the innumerable achievements, his biographical sketch in the Congressional directory year after year after year by his own choice has simply read "Richard Brevard Russell, Democrat of Georgia". Such is the modesty of this tremendous giant of the Senate. Dick Russell has a quality of human kindness and warm gentleness that is not known as much as it should be. He is indeed a gentleman in the fullest sense of the word. He has so many attributes of greatness that I hesitate to single out any two or three of them to the exclusion of the many others--integrity, intellect, wisdom, patience, forbearance, courage, and many more. When he was honored recently as the recipient of the James Forrestal Memorial Award, in accepting the award, he displayed many of these attributes but none of them any more than his great attribute of courage to speak up and to speak out. He said what has been in desperate need of being said, in my opinion. He spoke the heart and the mind of the majority of a deeply troubled America. He made a declaration of conviction that needs to be repeated again and again and again. May the good people of Georgia, in their great wisdom, continue to give Richard Brevard Russell to the people of America and send him to the United States Senate for as long as he is willing to serve in the United States Senate" I thought it would be pertinent to quote from the Congressional Record since Senator Smith had asked that I read this and I was certainly impressed by what I read. Since I will be interviewing her more than likely tomorrow, I thought I would put this on the same tape for quick reference by future researchers and historians.

CATES: This is Hugh Cates, April the 26, 1971. I'm in the office of U.S. Senator Margaret Chase Smith, who is a Republican from Maine. As I have indicated earlier on this tape, I've had several--well, one conversation with Mrs. Smith last week and she was kind enough to lend me the Congressional Record of January 25, 1971. And I have read into this tape the remarks by Senator Smith as related to some remarks that she made on April 1, 1969, about Senator Russell. Senator Smith, we've had a little chat prior to the taping this morning and you indicated that you've had some strong ties to Georgia over the years. You might want to relate these first and then talk a little about your association and relationship with Senator Russell over the years.

SMITH: Thank you, I'm very pleased to have this privilege. Anyone who ever knew, observed or worked with Senator Russell I'm sure felt as I did that he was one of our greatest men and I tried to express myself in the speech which you have already referred to. Actually I'm something of a product of Georgia. Having been born and brought up in the state of Maine, I lost my husband in 1940. And his physician was a doctor Paul F. Dickens of Georgia, formerly on President Roosevelt's staff as the Navy doctor. It was he who urged me to be a candidate to save my husband from the task of campaigning when he was quite ill from a heart attack. So I was started out from a loyal friend and citizen of Georgia. When I got into the House in 1940, I wanted a major committee and finally did get on my second choice which was Naval Affairs Committee and found myself under the leadership of Chairman Carl Vinson of Georgia. Later when I was a candidate for the Senate, I became--I worked for a major committee and after four years in the Senate and on the District of Columbia Committee I finally got on Appropriations and Armed Services Committee both of which were committees of the late Senator Russell, Senator Russell being chairman of the Armed Services Committee, and a great chairman. He was the Armed Services Committee, he was Mr. Defense himself, and the Appropriations--I think the records will show that Senator Russell and I served on the very same committees throughout my service in the Senate. In fact, I think that Senator Russell, Senator Stennis, and the then Senator

Lyndon Johnson and I were the four who served on the same committees and the same sub-committees through our time. It was a very, very great privilege and of course an education as far as I was! concerned and a privilege to work under the leadership of Senator Russell. He was always very kind in his references to me. He was very patient with me in learning the Senate side of the business. He usually called me "Sis" and of course this I considered one of the highest of compliments from a man of his position. I worked up to finally become the ranking member of that committee and Senator Russell still called me "Sis"--quite often turned around and said "Sis" before he spoke to me. He always gave me great credit for doing my homework. When the ROA, Reserve Officers Association, decided to give me an award in 1964, they asked whom I'd like to present it to me at their annual banquet. And I said of course I would rather have Senator Russell than anyone that I knew of but I would not feel that I could ask him because he had such a heavy load to carry and was not feeling too well. They finally asked him and he consented and said of course he would be very pleased to. Later they talked about having the president, President Johnson, presenting it to me with Russell as a--with Senator Russell as a backup, because of his heavy load. Up until nine o'clock that evening, I think, it was expected that President Johnson would present the award. It was a mean day. It was a snowy day, a cold day, and Senator Russell had a little cold. He'd planned on going to the banquet and the President had assured him that he was going to be there. It was one of my greatest disappointments throughout my entire service that the President didn't show, and has never been able to explain just why, and of course left Senator Russell. Senator Russell was at home and it was too late to do anything about it. So I missed that great honor of having him present that award to me. We worked on legislation together; we introduced some legislation. I used to talk with him about some of it. I followed him quite closely of course. I remember he is quoted as having said that Margaret Smith was just honoring us to be a good president of the United States, if she ever got elected, which was a very interesting, amusing, idea. I think--I could go on and on about his many kindnesses and courtesies and thoughtfulness, but I'm sure you may have some questions.

CATES: I cannot help but ask you this question. You said that he called you "Sis". Did anybody ever think that perhaps you were brother and sister, when he referred to you in public as "Sis"?

SMITH: I think not. I don't know that he--he would-- lie most always came over to see me on the Floor of the Senate and he'd say, "Hi, Sis, how are you?" and--no, I would doubt it. I think that I thought of it as sort of a family matter. He had such great love and affection for his sisters and I felt that he was thinking of me as one of--one of them. But I would doubt if the public thought that.

CATES: Senator Smith, you said among other things that the death of Richard Brevard Russell marks the end of an era when the U. S. Senate achieved its greatest stature and prestige as an institution. As I've indicated, I have recorded the full statement on this tape but would you elaborate on this point, please, maybe perhaps some things that you didn't put in this particular speech.

SMITH: Well, I could pretty much write an article on it because I feel very strongly about this. Senator Russell was a great parliamentarian. And when he was around no one feared him but they had such great respect for him that they handled themselves better on the Floor than they did when he wasn't around, or I thought they did. I think in more recent years too many have--

have--do not have the respect for the Senate that they used to have. I think some used it as a sort of a moonlighting job for a stepping stone to something else, speechmaking, lecturing, writing, or candidacy for higher office. I think that there has been--it's quite evident to me that there's a breaking down of the committee system, a breaking down of the old dignity and integrity of the Senate. Now there's some fine senators; I don't want to seem to be critical of my colleagues, yet it's just a different Senate than it was when Senator Russell was there.

CATES: As you've indicated, you've served about eighteen years on both the Senate Appropriations Committee and the Senate Armed Services Committee. Could you cite human reactions by Richard Russell to human situations arising from these committee activities? Things which would give an insight into his character.

SMITH: Well, Senator Russell was very thoughtful and he had a great sense of humor. He didn't often mix it with the official business. Once in a while he would, especially when Senator Saltonsall was the ranking Republican on the Armed Services Committee. Senator Saltonsall used to blush very easily and Senator Russell could just say something about Senator Saltonsall and Harvard University and Senator Saltonsall would turn red and try to answer back but he was no match for, for Senator Russell, nor is anyone else a match--was anyone else a match for Senator Russell. I could--thinking, I'm sure, I could think of many things but he was--he--he was very generous. If he--he appreciated what you were doing he was quite apt to say so in committee. I know he used to quite often say that I had done so much and was the authority for the reserve of the mil--military reserve which of course made my face turn a little red but pleased me very much. I would have to think a little bit about the other incidents. There were many, many of them.

CATES: Senator Smith, you said Russell was one of three, four, or possibly five giants of the Senate. Who in your opinion are the others and how does Russell compare with them?

SMITH: Well, I think--that that I would want to--think very carefully about. When I made that state--there have been some changes. I think no one was greater than Russell. In my opinion he was--he was--if not one of the greatest, the greatest United States Senator and I would say this if I was talking with anyone else or talking any other place. I've said it many, many times. He had something that few people have. He was a great historian. I remember one day in the Appropriations Committee. We were waiting for someone to come in. And--he--he turned to me, and I never was very much of a historian and I used to get a little confused if he spoke to me abruptly on something other than the matter before us and he referred to a historical date and name in Maine. And I was so confused I didn't remember that I knew anything about the Maine history at all. I immediately went back to my office and decided he wouldn't catch me that way again. But he was *a* great historian, great parliamentarian.

CATES: And what you just said, if I understand correctly, is he was the greatest senator of all times in the U. S. Senate.

SMITH: I think he could easily be classed that way.

CATES: To what do you attribute Russell's ability to sway votes of his fellow senators? You mentioned this in this speech of April 1, 1969.

SMITH: Well, he was so dedicated. In the Armed Services he'd made--he'd given us much of his life to it and we knew that we could depend on him. He was a very dependable man. He--you just didn't have to have any further documentation other than Richard Russell's word. And I think many of us, many senators, I hear them speak of it even now, when he spoke on the Floor they knew he was not speaking lightly. He had not only done his homework but he had much information that others would not have. And he would not make--mislead his fellow senators.

CATES: Senator Smith, you were just telling me when we were changing the tape that you were down in Atlanta to speak at Georgia Tech or to give a lecture at Georgia Tech. I'm sure that Senator Russell was aware of this. Did he comment about your going to his native state?

SMITH: No, I don't recall--I don't recall that--that I talked with him about it. He always welcomed me to Georgia and quite often said why I didn't get into Georgia more often. But I don't remember that there was any contact. I just had a feeling that he may have made the suggestion that I be invited down there.

CATES: Senator Smith, assuming Russell had won his party's nomination for President in either 1948 or 1952; would he have run again for the Senate when he left the White House, in your opinion?

SMITH: I would not want to presume to guess on that. I--I don't know. He'd a made a great president, I think.

CATES: Right. You had mentioned you know, in your speech, that we--the country would have lost his services had he been successful in this endeavor but knowing from my conversations with so many persons his deep love of the Senate, I would think that he probably would have come back to the Senate after serving in the White House and I just wondered if you had any ideas.

SMITH: No.

CATES: You said that Russell has a quality of human kindness and warm gentleness that is not known as much as it should be. Would you elaborate about this?

SMITH: Yes, he was so very quiet in his kindnesses. He was--new members coming in he was always very kind to them, very thoughtful, in not advising them unless he was asked but you know, coming into the Senate as a new member it means a great deal to have one of the senior members and one as--in the position that Senator Russell was in, just to even speak to you, call you by name because through my years, I remember it would take so long before you knew your way around the corridors or--or--and to have him call you by name and remember that, for instance, I was Margaret Smith meant a good deal to many of us. I think that was what I was thinking about most particularly.

CATES: Did you know Senator Russell when your husband was here in the House? Or did you first meet him when you came to the Senate?

SMITH: No, I met him when I--after my husband died, long after my husband died. I was on the Naval Affairs Committee as he was over here, of course. And I met him in my capacity as a member of the House Naval Affairs Committee.

CATES: I see.

SMITH: I might go back there on the many kindnesses of Senator Russell because I think where he was most kind was in Committee. He always let us ask questions or if we had anything to offer, you know this is quite a privilege in Committee, especially by Mr. Chairman himself. This is a kindness that few of us think about.

CATES: Course, this would be expected concerning a committee which he chaired but did you ever happen to see Senator Russell in a meeting, not necessarily one in which he was in charge, and I have been told that people respected him to such a degree that the leadership in a lot of instances would just kind of gyrate to him. Did you ever witness that, Senator Smith?

SMITH: Yes, yes he was a member of the Space Committee also, not chairman, and I would see it there. I would see it in a luncheon meeting at the--when we attended a luncheon meeting with--when the majority leader would have the President up or someone else, Senator Russell was usually looked to as a sort of lead the way for all of us.

CATES: Would this offend the person in charge?

SMITH: I've never seen--I never saw anyone offended by Senator Russell.

CATES: Senator Smith, in your 1969 speech, you listed some of the attributes of Russell. They were integrity, intellect, wisdom, patience, forbearance, courage to speaking--to speak up and speak out. Which of these do you consider his greatest attribute?

SMITH: Oh, that's a--that's--I--I would not want to--I think he was all of them. He was a man of great integrity; he was a man of courage. As I said in the speech, I wouldn't think that there was any one over the other.

CATES: Having been closely associated with him for about seventeen years on these two committees, I'm sure that there must have been one or two times when Senator Russell was either peeved or upset. How would he react when he was peeved or upset? By either a situation or a person testifying or--?

SMITH: I don't know that I can answer that. I--I don't know--I'm sure he was irked with me now or then on a vote but I don't remember that he ever showed it in any way.

CATES: Someone wrote, "Russell was a human person who derived pleasure from helping others". In what ways have you seen him help others?

SMITH: Well, as I--as I said before, being kind enough to recognize us and--I think he helped some of the younger members get started over--especially over on his side of the aisle.

CATES: You know of any instances where he helped persons other than, say, members of the Senate? What prompts this question is of course going in and out of the various Senate buildings for the last couple of weeks. Whenever I go in I have to show my briefcase and--so onetime this guard said, "Are you with the press?" and I told him no, what I was doing. And he said, "Oh, yeah Senator Russell", and he told me three instances where Senator Russell had helped him. And this guard was born in Missouri, lived in Illinois, but yet--Senator Russell helped him when he came to him for help, and the guard said he didn't mean to imply that he would just help anybody off the street but he recognized that he was a guard here and that--so he helped him. So do you know of any instances along this line where he helped a person?

SMITH: Well, I could think of--I could think of some, probably not right off--without thinking back a little but this is what I meant a few moments ago when I said, that he was so very kind to so many people, but so quietly that it was not often known. I think people--he never wore his kindness on his sleeve.

CATES: I think you've given several good illustrations of his memory, but this same writer that I spoke of told of the prodigious memory of Senator Russell and do you have any other instances of stories that you could recite that would indicate his prodigious memory?

SMITH: Well, he--he could quote--he could quote dates and names and incidents in committee, especially when we were sitting around the table waiting for someone, reminiscing. And I'm always amazed I have an administrative assistant whom you met, who is similar to that. I have no memory. I can't remember what day it was yesterday. And I think it's largely because I knew Senator Russell was around, to remember for me.

CATES: Another point the writer made was that Russell sought information from any source and course, you've indicated this by saying that he would certainly want to hear from every member of the committee. Do you know of any other instances where he would try to seek out information from persons that might help him?

SMITH: No, I don't--I--I don't think I could comment on that other than it was very evident that he let people talk and had people in when he--this is how he had such a--how his memory was so useful and how he had--he was depended on so much. He had--people had such great confidence in him. They knew that he did not talk only--talk on one side only.

CATES: Senator, you had mentioned in your speech that you thought that the Senate began to deteriorate when his health began to deteriorate. Would you comment in the area now, of his deteriorating health as you saw it, as a member of these two committees and as a friend of the Senator?

SMITH: Oh, yes, I think the last two years especially it's been very evident. There hasn't been the leadership and the control. Now, Senator Mansfield is a very kind man. He's a good friend to many of us but Senator Russell was a leader and--he--he was pretty orderly in his leadership and this we haven't had for the last two or three years. It was very evident two years ago in the Armed Services Procurement Bill and again on the Appropriations Defense Bill. Senator Stennis was acting Chairman and Senator Stennis had been closely associated with Senator Russell for so very long and I have been associated with him and have great admiration for him but he was not acting on his own and he was not able to have the control that Russell had and I think this was the reason why we were so late in getting out the bills in the last two years, lack of leadership that Senator Russell had always given us.

CATES: Yesterday, I was talking to the public information officer out at Walter Reed Hospital and I hope to maybe interview some of the physicians that attended. Senator Russell, but this particular person was commenting about Senator Russell and he said that one of the doctors had told him that Senator Russell probably could have prolonged his life if he had taken a portable oxygen bottle with him and would use it during the day but it was this doctor's opinion that it probably was a matter of pride and that he would not do that. Would you comment about this?

SMITH: Yes, I admit Senator Russell was a very, very proud man. When I had my hip surgery in 1968 the sergeant-at-arms provided a little cart for me to travel back and forth with. And they tried so hard to get Senator Russell to use one because it would have saved--saved him so very, very much--effort and strength and his breathing, he had so much difficulty with his breathing. Aryl he didn't come to it until just a few weeks before he left for the last time. He was proud, he was proud. He always walked with pride. He and I went to the Dirksen services over in the Rotunda. He was always thoughtful and asked me to walk along with him, course there isn't anything any member likes better than that and I'm not any different. Perhaps like it a little more. But when they came along with a chair for me, thinking that I should not stand the hour, I could stand all right but I thought of Senator Russell not being able to stand and when they offered me the chair I said that I would sit if Senator Russell would sit with me, thinking that he might do it that way when otherwise he wouldn't. He did. He sat down. Later one of the columnists wrote that everybody stood this hour long service except the aging and ailing Senators Russell and Smith, which was most unfortunate. It was most unkind.

CATES: Did you visit him in the hospital during his last illness?

SMITH: No, I did not. I sent him a bowl of sweetheart roses and had a handwritten note from him the very last of his living out there. No, I did not go out there. I have regretted it very much. I was out there for a long time myself with my hip and I have always felt that people were better if they didn't have too many visitors unless they requested them personally. But I would think that you could get some very good stories out there. The people have spoken very highly of him as a patient.

CATES: The reason I asked that question was that I've been told that some persons whom he had known for a long time wanted to visit him and on some occasions he would prefer that they not visit him. Because here again, I think, and this is a personal opinion that I was saying that he had so much pride and I understand that he had lost a considerable amount of weight and he just

didn't want some friend that he had indicated, sometimes even members of his family to see him. You indicated that there was something else that you wanted to say?

SMITH: Yes, I neglected to say one thing, when you were talking about the oxygen. Often, he-- when we were sitting side by side in committee he would put his hand over on my arm and he would say, "Sis, why didn't you stop me smoking long before I stopped?" He said that--time--time and time again to me.

CATES: I've been told also Senator, that he would spend nights at Walter Reed Hospital and then go over to the Senate. Were you aware of this?

SMITH: No, I was not.

CATES: Senator, I know that you have somewhere else that you have to go. You certainly have been a most interesting person to interview about your relationship with the Senator. - Before we end this taping session do you have anything you'd like to say?

SMITH: No, except to say that we miss Senator Russell very, very much and I think there won't be a time that he won't be missed while we forget our people, our colleagues, too often, I feel that Senator Russell will be one of those who is not forgotten.

CATES: Thank you very much, Senator Margaret Chase Smith.

