

Richard B. Russell, Jr. Oral History Project  
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Senator Thomas F. Eagleton interviewed by Hugh Cates  
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CATES: This is Hugh Cates, April 27, 1971. I'm in the office of U.S. Senator Thomas F. Eagleton who is a Democrat of Missouri. I'm here for the purpose of discussing with him any association or impressions he might have about the late Senator Richard Brevard Russell. Senator, would you mind probably starting by recounting a little incident which happened in the private dining room of the U.S. Senate concerning the appointment of Judge [George] Harrold Carswell to the U.S. Supreme Court?

EAGLETON: Yes, I'd be glad to. I remember the day very well. I can't recall the precise date but that can be readily ascertained. It was the day that President [Richard Milhous] Nixon sent up to the Senate the nomination of G. Harrold Carswell for the Supreme Court of the United States. I was--there's a private dining room on the first floor of the Capitol building to which senators, and senators only, are admitted. There are two big tables there: one's by tradition the Democratic table; one's the Republican table. Further by tradition, the head seat, as it were, at the Democratic table was Senator Russell's seat. I mean there was no sign there or plaque or anything, but it was just understood that that's where Senator Russell always sat, because he was not only the senior senator in terms of longevity in the Senate, he was the senior senator in terms of respect of his colleagues. To digress a minute, I'd say the two senator's senators in my brief tenure here that are held in universal esteem--Richard Russell of Georgia; John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky, the Republican. Those were the two men that all other senators--young and old, liberal or conservative--those were the two men to whom everybody looked up to. I mean that's just how highly they were regarded. Well, anyway, this day the word came in that this gentleman named Carswell had been nominated; and I'm sitting there along with, oh, like--I think [Philip Aloysius] Phil Hart of Michigan was there and several other senators. At one end of the table as I said was Senator Russell; at the other end of the table was Senator Spessard Holland of Florida, who had served as you know I think twenty-four years in the United States Senate--he just retired after the last election, didn't run for re-election--and someone--it wasn't me as I recall--but someone said, "Who's Carswell?" I think Holland spoke first; he said, "Oh, he's from my state; he's on the Court of Appeals down there. He's a very able young man; he'll make a good justice." Then there might have been a pause or something; then Senator Russell spoke up--and when Senator Russell spoke at that table, again, because of the esteem in which he was held, even if you were engaging in a little conversation with the fellow next to you, you stopped and listened--and he said something to this effect, this isn't a precise quote, but he said, "Yes," he said, "I know Harrold Carswell," or G. Harrold Carswell. He said, "He used to live in my state." He said, "He's a very fine young man." He said, "I knew his family well; I knew his daddy well." He may have added, or maybe I learned later on, that G. Harrold Carswell's father, I believe, ran against Senator Russell maybe for governor or some office in the state of Georgia back many years ago. And he went on to say what a fine family they were and that he, too, thought Harrold Carswell would make a fine justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. I inferred from that little colloquy that took place

there, and I think a couple of other senators did, that the genesis of the Carswell nomination--maybe my inference is unjustified, but I inferred from it--came from these two senior senators, Holland of Florida and Russell of Georgia. It would be my guess [they] submitted Carswell's name to the President of the United States, and President Nixon, of course, held Senator Russell in the highest esteem. You see there's--we're partisan in the Senate; a bunch of us are Democrats and a bunch of us are Republicans, but there are some individuals that transcend those party labels--Russell was definitely, is in that category; as I said, [so is] John Sherman Cooper. They just--they're just--well, let me put it another way: When I came here--I'm a new senator; in 1968, I was elected--Senator [Michael Joseph [Mike]] Mansfield lectured to the new senators--not lectured, but talked to the new senators--and he said, "Now listen, gentlemen," he said," everybody in the Senate's got one vote; everybody in the Senate's got the right to speak; everybody in the Senate's equal." I've often said to myself after that, "Yes, we're all equal, but there's some that are a little more equal "; and Senator Russell was one of those who was just a little more equal because of his ability, his knowledge, his grasp of the parliamentary process, many other reasons.

CATES: Senator Eagleton, how did Senator Russell take the defeat of Senator; Judge Carswell? Did you have a later occasion, maybe, to discuss this with him, or see how he reacted to it?

EAGLETON: Gee, I don't know specifically; I can give you an impression.

CATES: All right.

EAGLETON: Some senators, those who were very vocal on the [Senate] floor on his behalf--especially Senator [Roman Lee] Hruska, Senator [Robert Joseph] Dole of Kansas, and Senator [Edward John] Gurney of Florida--they did most of the speaking on the floor during the Carswell debate. Senator Dole particularly took the defeat, well, in a rather ungentlemanly way. I know Bob Dole; he's what we call in politics a gut fighter. He's a free swinger and he was very uptight about the defeat of Carswell for the Supreme Court. My recollection of Senator Russell is that true to his gentlemanly nature--sure he wanted to win; he was for Carswell; he made no bones about it, but the real pros--was Russell--[Warren Grant] Magnuson. Magnuson lost, for instance, on the SST [supersonic transport] vote. They'd learned what some of us young fellows just--it will take us time to learn, me included, that--what's the old saying--You live to fight another day. As strong as Russell believed in Carswell, or Magnuson believed in the SST--and you -fight hard, but you fight in a way that so the next issue that comes down the line you hasn't left a lot of scars, residual scars. That's *really* political statesmanship in the Senate. That's what sets Russell and Magnuson and these guys apart, and Cooper. That's what we younger guys who lose our tempers and say things that, in the heat of debate, that we regret--that's what's going to take us ten or twenty years to learn. Perhaps, it took Russell that long to learn it. I don't know. When he came here, in 19--what was it--1930?

CATES: 1932.

EAGLETON: 1932, he was a very young man. I would just suspect that in some of those early years between, say, 1932 and 1936 or 1938, maybe he made a mistake or two that he later regretted, but he learned. He sure learned.

CATES: Senator Eagleton, when you came to the Senate did you have an occasion to drop by and pay your respects to Senator Russell?

EAGLETON: Oh yes, yes. I was told by my senior colleague, Senator [Stuart] Symington, who's been here about twenty years--before I came here, we had lunch together in St. Louis, and he said, "Now, I don't know what your time schedule is, whether you'll have a chance to call on every senator." He said, "In due course you will; you'll either see them on the floor of the Senate or in the barber shop or in a committee room; introduce yourself and tell them who you are, but," he said, "there are a few," he said, "that I would go--by all means, make an appointment and just go by and see in person"; and of course, on that list he said, "By all means, go to see Senator Russell, see Senator Mansfield, see Senator [Allen Joseph] Ellender." He said, "Make personal calls on those three gentlemen if no others,"--and I did. I remember the day very well. I showed up at the appointed time; I was a little nervous, frankly, meeting you know one of the giants of the Senate, and he said, "Sit down." He said, "How old are you?" I said--by--I think I was then thirty-nine, and he said, "Well," he said, "I was"--I think he said thirty-three, or what was his age?

CATES: About thirty-two.

EAGLETON: "About thirty-two or three," he said, "when I came to the Senate, so" he said, "you're not too young to be in the Senate," which, you know, put me at ease. I don't know how it came into the conversation, but we--it turns out [that] both of us were devout baseball fans. My father used to own part of the St. Louis Cardinals back some years ago, and I used to spend every March in Florida going to school as a kid at spring training time and I'm what's called a baseball nut; and I say reverently of Senator Russell [that] he was a baseball nut, and I use that word in the nicest sense. So, we spent about ten minutes talking; he talked about the Atlanta Braves and [Henry] Hank Aaron, and I talked about the Cardinals and [Robert] Bob Gibson and [Louis Clark] Lou Brock and he really knew is baseball good--I mean he know so-and-so was as we say a sucker for a curve ball and a shortstop wasn't very good going to his left. He loved baseball and he knew it, and so we--you know, when there is an age gap--you know, when you hear about the generation gap, well, there is a generation gap. After all, here was a thirty-nine-year-old freshman senator talking to a man in his late sixties who'd been in the Senate--well, he came to the Senate three or four years after I was born--and so, how do you establish--quote--"a common bond?" Well, baseball became our common bond. I wouldn't, I don't masquerade as a close, intimate friend of Senator Russell's. There was this age difference, of course, but when we encountered each other, whether it was the dining room table or on the floor, either he'd bring up or I'd bring up some item in the baseball news and we'd kick it around; and then, of course, nothing I'd rather--next to politics, there's nothing I'd rather talk about than baseball.

CATES: Senator Eagleton, in looking at your biographical data sheet, I see that you were elected Circuit Attorney of the city of St. Louis, Attorney General of Missouri and Lieutenant Governor

of Missouri, and at the time of your election to these three public offices, you were the youngest man ever elected to such offices in the history of Missouri. Now, as we have intimated and talked about here, Senator Russell went to the [Georgia] House of Representatives when he was twenty-one. He stayed there approximately ten years. He was speaker of the House for the last four years and he was elected governor about age thirty. Did you ever talk, or compare political experiences, along this line?

EAGLETON: Well, in this meeting that I mentioned earlier, this courtesy call that I--

CATES: Right.

EAGLETON: --paid on Senator Russell, part of the conversation was how he started out as a young man in politics. I don't recall him mentioning that he--being in the House at age twenty-one. I do specifically recall him saying he was governor in his early thirties or at the age of thirty, and he described how he crisscrossed the state of Georgia almost house-to-house as it were campaigning for governor. As I recall, he told me that his father had been on the Supreme Court of Georgia, that the name Russell was a well-known name, but Richard, young Richard Russell specifically, maybe, wasn't too well-known. The family was, yes, but maybe he wasn't; so, he said, "I had to overcome that fact of being young and not too well-known," and he said it took intense, personal campaigning. He told me of an incident where he went down a back farm road, as I recall it, and he knocked on a farmer's door and he wasn't there. He was out in the fields maybe or in town, but it was so important to him to canvas that area that he went on to some other place and came back just to see this one farmer, and this one farmer was so impressed with that fact that a fellow running for governor would even return to see him that that guy, that farmer, took off from work during the heat of the campaign and covered the whole county for Russell, saying, Listen, this is a good young man; I want to tell you this young man went to the trouble to come back and see me when I wasn't even there and came back a second time. And he [Russell] said--became my greatest advertising campaign, and he said these little things, he said, in politics, Eagleton, that count. He said we always--I'm not quoting him with exact words, but this was the gist of the conversation--he said in this day and age where everybody talks about television, yes, it's important, and radio and newspapers. That's all important, but he said it's those little personal things that make you or break you in politics; and I couldn't agree more because my state, although it's somewhat different from Georgia--but in out-state Missouri as we call I we have two big cities, St. Louis and Kansas City, and then the rest is rural; even with television and all of the modern gimmicks, person-to-person campaigning of the type that Senator Russell described is indispensably vital.

CATES: Senator, do you know of any instance where he had swayed a vote or changed a vote in the Senate, since you've been in the Senate, by his personal magnetism or logic or intellect?

EAGLETON: I'm sure there are some; as you ask that question, I can't cite you a specific case in point, but I can answer this question generally. As you know in the last--I've only been here two years--Senator Russell during that period did not speak often, indeed very seldom; when he did, everybody listened because of who he was and because he didn't over-utilize the floor of the Senate. You see, there is some--and I'll leave them nameless--who perhaps speak too often, and

hence, they wear out their acceptance because they're up so often on so many issues. They lose--well, the word I guess is some of their credibility. Senator Russell used his privilege to speak on the floor sparingly and, hence, to maximum advantage. So, when he spoke on the war [Vietnam], as I recall--I think he did once during 1969, at least when I was there--when he spoke on the ABM [Anti-ballistic Missile] or on an Armed Services matter, as I say, it just carries greater weight, because here's a man with experience who isn't, as I say, like my--well, put myself in this category--mouthing off. I tend to mouth off--I'm sad to say of myself--but he didn't. I'm sure if I think about it I probably could cite you a case in point, but I'm sure that the power of his persuasiveness and his great credibility did sway some votes.

CATES: What would you say was his most outstanding personality trait?

EAGLETON: I think he was a warm man. What I would--you'll probably interview lots of senators and each one of us will have a different slant on this. What endeared him to me was the fact [that] here I was young, somewhat brash, brand new to this prestigious club and he accepted me and was as kindly to me as if I'd been here fifty years, you see. I mean that he made me feel that I belonged, and believe me, for a newcomer that's sort of frightened by the whole thing and a little uptight about this thing we call the United States Senate, for one of the greats to make you feel at home is something that I'll never forget.

CATES: Senator, I see that we have really exceeded our time limit that you had set for this interview, and I want to thank you again for an excellent interview.

EAGLETON: Thank you, Mr. Cates.

CATES: Thank you.

