

Richard B. Russell, Jr. Oral History Project
RBROH-156
Barboura G. Raesly interviewed by Tom Jackson
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JACKSON: Well Babs, how long were you the senator's personal secretary?

RAESLY: I was--originally joined his staff on June 1, 1956, and stayed with him until the day he died. It came out to a total of fourteen years, six months and twenty-one days.

JACKSON: And then did you come immediately to the University of Georgia library?

RAESLY: Not directly, but that's where I was aiming at. I came to the University of Georgia library through the Richard B. Russell Foundation while the papers were in the custody and ownership of the estate of Senator Russell. I worked on the papers at that stage as an employee of the foundation. When the papers were transferred and put on deposit in the University of Georgia library, I became a member of the library staff.

JACKSON: And how long have you been here in Athens?

RAESLY: I have been here since March 26, 1971.

JACKSON: And we understand that you're having to leave us. Is there work to be done in Washington still?

RAESLY: Well, after all we have to admit that since I left in March of '71 things have deteriorated a great deal up there. (laughs) But seriously, I came down here to sort out the confusion in Senator Russell's files and the materials we shipped from Washington, those forty-five tons. This will be completed by the end of June and it's time that I turn the library over to a professional librarian who has the training and the temperament to process the materials and that I go back to Washington to find my future.

JACKSON: Do you have a place that you're headed in Washington right now?

RAESLY: No, I have four offers of employment but I have not yet applied for a job.

JACKSON: That would be an interesting situation to have your pick in today's job market. You're a fortunate person. Let's talk a bit about the type of material here at the library. When you talk about forty-five tons, there's a question of where to begin, but what types of material generally, do we have here?

RAESLY: The largest in bulk, of course, are those office files of Senator Russell and conservatively, you can count those files at between a million and a half and two million pages of documents. Those were the biggest chaos. In the process of being packed to come down here

that work was done by employees of the General Services Administration who had no idea as to how things ought to be and they certainly totally tore apart our filing system. So this had to be put back in order and this was what primarily required a former staff member. In addition, we have the significant furniture out of Senator Russell's office, some seventeen thousand books out of Senator Russell's library, audiovisual materials such as tapes of his radio broadcasts or video tapes of TV broadcasts. We have oral history that was conducted by the Russell Foundation following Senator Russell's death. In essence, it's a small presidential library. Our volume is not as great, but we have material in every area that they do. We have some two thousand artifacts of a museum nature that are on display in the exhibit room.

JACKSON: How will this material be used in the future, simply as an interesting point of history, I'm sure, but also for researchers? When will this be available?

RAESLY: It is the desire of the library staff that this be done as soon as possible. We operate under the restriction, however, that none of the materials can be made available for research until they are all made available. And the reason for this is to protect the researcher. We might think that we have all the information, for instance, on the MacArthur hearings. And we open them for research and someone uses our material in a book and it's published and then six months later we find something else that puts a different light on it, and we have distorted history. So to protect the researcher, everything has to be processed first. And this will be made available for use on the same basis pretty much as the special collections department of the University libraries. It will reveal to a very large extent, Russell's role in many national and international events of the fifty years of his public career.

JACKSON: Along these lines, we'd like to know what the man was really like. Now that's a very convoluted and complicated question but, generally, what was his overall mood? Was he a quiet man, a shy man? Was he tempestuous and angry or did he have great changes of mood? What was the man like?

RAESLY: I'm sure that everyone who knew him saw him a little differently. But the most outstanding thing that comes to my mind when I think of him as a human being and of his character, is number one, his integrity. That was first. And number two was his compassion. And number three, he was a very modest man. In fact, he was so modest he was almost shy, but very few people really knew this or realized it. He was quiet, reserved, and yet he was a warm, loving man with the members of his family and his friends and his associates. He would stop anything if a niece or a nephew or even if I went to him and said, "Senator, I've got a personal problem. I need advice." He would, he'd just stop his whatever he was working on in the public area and had all the time in the world to advise and counsel the people that he was relating with.

JACKSON: Now he was a bachelor lifelong. Who were his closest family members

RAESLY: Who-hoo no, I'm not gettin' in that one. (laughs)

JACKSON: Not gonna touch that one.

RAESLY: He was one of thirteen brothers and sisters and he loved them all. (laughs)

JACKSON: You are a diplomat and a scholar. What incident do you remember as angering the senator most? What brought his temper out?

RAESLY: Do you mean a human incident or a philosophical argument?

JACKSON: Let's go with an example of each. I'm sure we have a political situation that might have upset him the great--the most.

RAESLY: In the political situation I think what upset him the most was the attitude that he so often could feel among certain members of the Senate and of the House and of government where the South was discriminated against because of something that happened a hundred years ago. He felt that the South had paid many times over for the unpleasantness of the 1860's. He did not feel that we should continue to wear a hair shirt in repentance at that. And he would get angry when he would find evidences and there are some members of the Senate who felt that the South should have a second-class citizen simply because of the unpleasantness of the 1860's.

JACKSON: What particular incidences are we talking about? Specifically, civil rights legislation?

RAESLY: Specifically civil rights legislation, the voting rights where the southern states simply because we had at one time had a white primary--you can not change your voting areas without getting permission of the federal judiciary. This sort of thing.

JACKSON: Some people who are newcomers to Georgia or the younger ones of us might not realize that Senator Russell made a serious bid for the presidency in 1952. Can you describe his disappointment at not being able to become president in 1952?

RAESLY: Well, let me clarify this just by saying first of all, I'm not Methusela. I was not working for him in 1952, but he has discussed with me the 1952 campaign. I believe he really went into the campaign to stop Estes Kefauver, and once he beat Kefauver in Florida, of course, he had to go on through. There has been a great deal of speculation by those who worked in that campaign with him as to whether or not he ever did really believe that he, a southerner, could get the nomination. They have come to no conclusion and if you hear the arguments on both sides, I can come to no conclusion. But knowing Senator Russell, it would be very hard for me to conceive that he was not a political realist enough to know the odds against his winning.

JACKSON: Did he ever place the blame for not being able to go ahead specifically in conversations with you? Did he ever place the blame specifically on his being a southerner?

RAESLY: In not being able to go ahead?

JACKSON: In not being able to win?

RAESLY: No.

JACKSON: No, he never placed it. Who were the senator's closest friends? And let's look at this both on the--did you have something else you wanted to add there?

RAESLY: Yeah, I wanted to say on the subject of this 1952 campaign, Senator Russell felt that no matter, in later years this was, that no matter who had won the Democratic nomination, it was [Dwight David] Eisenhower's year. But that if he, Russell,,had won the nomination, he could have carried more states than [Adlai Ewing] Stevenson could and, of course, Adlai Stevenson and Richard Russell were cousins. Stevenson was descended from Hugh Brevard, Senator Russell from Alexander Brevard, both of whom were Revolutionary War soldiers.

JACKSON: Very interesting. Along the line of the senator's closest friends, I'm sure that--well, I'm not sure, but I assume--that these would be divided into friends in Georgia and friends in Washington. Could you give us some of his closest friends in both of those arenas?

RAESLY: I think that in Washington in the years that I knew him, I would have to rate among his closest friends, John Stennis, senator from Mississippi, Senator Milton Young, two fine examples. In Georgia he as a young--very [he was only twenty-one when he entered the legislature], and the men that he associated with in the legislature, who helped elect him governor, who helped get him in the Senate, who helped him beat Gene /Eugene/ Talmadge in 1936 and who prevented him from ever having an active campaign after that, have to be rated among those with the closest association. They would come in the office and he would see them regardless of what he was doing. There has been a great deal of discussion about a friendship between Lyndon /Baines/ Johnson and Richard Russell. The nature of this relationship is covered in the papers and material in the Russell library. It will be revealed when the library is opened.

JACKSON: What did the senator like to do in his spare time? Did he look forward to getting back to Georgia and the homeland and relaxing and what did he do in his spare time in Washington?

RAESLY: Well, he came to Georgia any time he got the chance. He never got the red clay of Georgia off his shoes no matter where in the world, literally, he went. He never forgot where he came from and any time he had an opportunity to get home, he did. One of his favorite diversions after television came along, well, and even before really, he was an avid baseball fan. And he could pick out anybody, minor league, major league player that you want to name and he'd give you all the statistics about him, tell you where he was from, what high school he went to, anything you wanted to know. He was also a great football fan and the University of Georgia football. In the later years of the 60's we got a WATTS line hookup, and we would call Athens the afternoon of the game and have somebody place the telephone by the radio and turn it on so that everybody in the room could hear through the speaker outlets and we'd sit in the little office, and Senator Russell would sit there with us and we'd all listen to the Georgia football games. (laugh)And he could tell you about all the players and, of course, in 1969 and I think also in 1968 he came over and talked with Vince /Vincent Joseph/ Dooley. And Vince Dooley was surprised that Senator Russell knew the players so well never having seen them.

JACKSON: We have several pictures here, as a matter of fact, and film of Dooley with the senator. How did the Washington atmosphere suit the senator as opposed to Georgia? When he first went, was it a big change--did he ever confide in you on this? And you say he liked to get back to Georgia. There must have been something in Washington that caused him to need to get away.

RAESLY: Well, in Washington it's very hard for a man in the public spotlight to find the quiet and the area of privacy that every individual has to have from time to time. In Washington, Senator Russell utilized his lifelong habit of reading to meet this need. Coming back to Georgia, he would still read--he would read three or four books at the same time and have a photographic memory on all of them. But in Washington he was in the--he told me a story once and maybe this will describe the situation. When he first went up there, of course, every senator gets literally hundreds of social invitations every month. And Senator Russell had been raised that if you had an invitation to go someplace and you didn't have other plans, you accepted. And he found he was chasing out someplace night after night after night. He was always on the go and Senator [Walter F.] George never went anywhere. And so he asked Senator George, "How come you don't get all these invitations?" And Senator George said certainly he got 'em, he just didn't go. And that's when Senator Russell got off of the cocktail circuit, so to speak, and got to be a very elusive guest. He would accept White House functions generally.

JACKSON: What is the funniest incident you ever saw the senator in? What's the funniest thing he ever did or the funniest thing you ever knew him to say?

RAESLY: You'd better shut it off while I think of this one.

JACKSON: (laughs) Okay. (tape stops and starts again)

RAESLY: Senator Russell's humor--he had a fine sense of humor but it was a very dry humor. He was not a man that in a business situation would pop out with a joke in the middle of a serious discussion. But if you got him in a social situation he had a great capacity for mimicry and he could mimic some of the public figures with whom he came in contact. I won't name which ones. (laughs)

JACKSON: What do you think motivated the Senator politically? Why did he run for the legislature and go to the governorship and to the Senator? Was it family background, personal pride, a sense of serving the people or a combination? What was it?

RAESLY: Well, this is a highly speculative question and I can only answer you on my own speculation, as I knew the man and as I always assumed him to be motivated. But he came from a family that was, in general, motivated to service in the public area in some form. His father, of course, was chief justice of the state. He had run for the governorship. He had run one time against Senator George. Senator Russell was therefore politically oriented also. But I believe that his motivation was to serve the people of Georgia to the best of his capacity and to serve them in the highest idealism of the time, and yet at the same time in a realistic and vital arena of life. That is a very complex answer.

JACKSON: Babs, Senator Russell served under a number of presidents, each of which had a major event in history occur during his administration. I'd like to run down these if we can and get a short comment on each one. The senator either had a role in the events, or if not directly related, he had an opinion on it. He went to the Senate under President /Herbert/ Hoover during the Depression. Do you know anything about what his ideas were when he first went off to the Senate during this time of economic hardship?

RAESLY: Well, let's back it up a little bit. When Senator Russell was governor of Georgia in 1931 and 1932 he had become acquainted with, and had entertained at the governor's mansion in Atlanta, Governor [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt of New York. In July of 1932 he had seconded the nomination of Governor Roosevelt at the Democratic Convention. Senator Russell described his period of service as governor as some of the most agonizing experiences of his life. When he ran for governor he had a program for reform of state government, but it was not predicated on the fact that we would be in the middle of severe depression. And of course, he started out by reducing his own salary by almost a third. When he went to Washington there were barely two months left on Hoover's term. And Franklin Roosevelt was sworn in as governor in March of 1933--as president, that's right. From that point on, for some period of time Senator Russell was a strong supporter of Governor--President Roosevelt and of F.D.R.'s program for the rural electrification. Later Senator Russell authored the school lunch act and was the father of it. By the way, he considered the school lunch act to be the most significant contribution he made to the country during this years of service.

JACKSON: Now of course, the major issue during President Roosevelt's term would be the war and the conduct of it. Did the senator have any direct input into the conduct of the war? Did he have any comments on how President Roosevelt was handling the situation?

RAESLY: Number one, I'll take your second question first. Senator Russell was not an armchair quarterback to the president. If he had advice he gave it to Roosevelt. He didn't try to second guess him and write it in his memoirs anywhere. What he said to, and what advice he gave to Roosevelt, to some degree at least, is contained in the materials that are in the Russell Library. Senator Russell did chair the only committee of the Congress that toured the war zones in 1943, and that was a round the world tour, which made a very vital contribution to the war. He was studying, not the military tactics, don't: misunderstand me. He was trying to see if our boys had enough of what they needed and sufficient quantity and quality.

JACKSON: President [Harry S.] Truman came into office in April of 1945 and almost immediately was required to make a decision on the ending of the war and how to bring Japan to its knees. He decided to drop the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What was Senator Russell's opinion on this and what was his input?

RAESLY: Of course, Senator Russell was one of those who not only knew of the Manhattan project which was the development of the atomic bomb, but he knew the exact number of atomic bombs that we had. There is a fascinating exchange of correspondence in the Russell Library between Russell and Truman on this very subject. It is actually dated August the 7th, the date the first bomb was dropped, and the response from the president is the next day. So, it's a fascinating exchange and that's there for the researcher.

JACKSON: So it's not yet open to the public.

RAESLY: That's correct and this is not an area that I know beyond what I've said from my personal knowledge.

JACKSON: We also have under President Truman the removal of General [Douglas A.] MacArthur from command and Senator Russell chaired the committee that looked into this. I believe that was in the Eisenhower administration when the committee finally came to pass. Can you tell us about this?

RAESLY: This was in 1951 and this I can talk of from personal knowledge. General MacArthur had been speaking to the press and by public statements in matters of strategic tactics to be used in Korea where he was allied commander-in-chief, in contrary position to that of the president and the joint chiefs-of-staff. President Truman, this was not Eisenhower, this was Truman, went to Yalta /sic/, I believe it was, and talked to him personally. And three times asked him questions to verify that he had understood the president's instructions. MacArthur acted contrary to those instructions. He was fired. The bad thing about the firing of MacArthur, in Senator Russell's view was not that he was fired, but the manner in which it was done. Senator Russell felt that some other many-starred general should have been sent to Korea and gone into General MacArthur and said, "General, I have the honor of relieving you" and giving General MacArthur the orders of relief. Instead, MacArthur found out about it when his wife heard about it on the radio and telephoned him in Korea to tell him. Senator Russell felt that this was very poor management on the part of the White House. At the same time Senator Russell felt that we do have a defense establishment which is based on the theory of civilian control and that the military must remain subordinate to the president regardless of the military view. This is the way we do it in this country. So, while he did not condone the method of the firing, he did agree that MacArthur should have been fired. Now, great deal of controversy and a lot of politics involved in the hearings which were conducted in a joint basis by the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The Republicans were planning on running MacArthur for the presidential nomination in 1952. And at that time the Democrats were thinking they were going to get Eisenhower in 1952. And they were making noises at Eisenhower and MacArthur was trying to get the Republican nomination. So politics was inevitably meshed entirely through it. They held extensive hearings which were closed but at the end of each day a censored transcript was released to the American public and amazingly less than two percent of the actual testimony was actually censored. The hearings, the bound volume is in the Russell Library. There is additional material in the Russell Library and just why a report was never issued by the joint committee perhaps may be revealed by what is in the library.

JACKSON: Under President Eisenhower we had an action, not by the President himself, but rather by the Supreme Court in 1954, case of Brown vs* Board of Education which set into motion much of the civil rights action we have talked about earlier. Now we know that in this era of civil rights legislation Senator Russell opposed all of the measures. Was he a Georgia racist?

RAESLY: He was not a racist. He did not oppose the civil rights bills on personal grounds nor on emotional grounds. He opposed them on constitutional grounds. And very briefly, to quote

Senator Russell, "If the federal government had the right to tell a hot dog stand owner by the roadside that he must serve black haired men with blue eyes, then the federal government under the same interpretation of the Constitution had the right to tell that same hot dog stand owner by the roadside that he could not serve blond haired men with grey eyes." And Senator Russell saw nothing in the Constitution that gave the federal government that authority.

JACKSON: Hear. Hear.

RAESLY: (laughs)

JACKSON: Under President Eisenhower at the very end of his term we had the Georgian, Francis Gary Powers, shot down in the U-2 over Russia. What was Senator Russell's opinion and role in this?

RAESLY: Well, in the first place, he thought that the U-2 flight should have been canceled before Eisenhower went to the Summit conference. He thought that was the greatest mistake, I believe. And of course, Gary Powers, as were the other U-2 pilots, was well paid, so he certainly knew what he was getting into.

JACKSON: President [John F.] Kennedy started his administration off with the Bay of Pigs. Did the senator express himself on this?

RAESLY: There is a complete memorandum of a telephone conversation between President Kennedy and Senator Russell which I took both sides of. It is on file in the Russell Library.

JACKSON: Will this come out later?

RAESLY: I will let that speak for itself.

JACKSON: And we have also, under President Kennedy, what many call his finest hour, Kennedy versus [Nikita] Khrushchev in the Cuban missile crisis. What was the senator's comment on this?

RAESLY: Well, in the first place, Senator Russell--and this is tied in with the mess that we were in in Vietnam at the same time. Inevitably, in this area you should make a proper comparison. Here we are with Communist stronghold three hundred miles off our shores and we're not doing anything about it. Nine to twelve thousand miles away where we can hardly support our own troops we're going in there and trying to get rid of Communism. Senator Russell just couldn't see the sense of this. Nor did he see any sense in not just eliminating, while we had the excuse, the possibility of there being any further missiles in Cuba by just eliminating the sites. He thought a stronger response should have been made.

JACKSON: In other words, he was calling for military action at the time?

RAESLY: That's correct.

RAESLY: That's correct.

JACKSON: Under President Kennedy, actually it was under President Johnson--Johnson appointed Senator Russell to the Warren Commission to investigate the assassination of President Kennedy and I believe this turns out to be a large part of your library. Do you not have a lot of the findings of that commission in the library.

RAESLY: Uh--

JACKSON: (Not really. I'm off track)

RAESLY: (laughs) There is some very interesting in the library on this. I might say and this certainly is--Senator Russell said it during his lifetime and I think it is pretty general knowledge that he did not want to serve on that Warren Commission. He had just about all he could handle with the defense appropriations bill moving in behind that one. He had a civil rights fight on his hands and he didn't really have time to serve on the Warren Commission. And he tried to beg off and Lyndon Johnson went ahead and announced his name to the press and called him back and said, Well, I've already made it public. You have to do it." Senator Russell had some questions as a result of the Warren Commission's hearings and made a significant contribution to the final wording of the report. This will be reflected by what is in the library.

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After the hearings were published, Senator Russell did to the press, express reservations as to whether we had received all of the information that was available in regard to [Lee Harvey] Oswald's alleged trips to Mexico and also in regards to Oswald's stay in Russia.

JACKSON: Senator Russell died as Vietnam was winding down. This was without a doubt the tragedy of the nation, the tragedy of the Johnson administration. And it totally enmeshed four presidents that he served under, served under Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and [Richard Milhous] Nixon. Senator Russell was considered a war hawk at the first was he not?

RAESLY: Well, at the first Senator Russell was very much opposed to our going in there. Eisenhower, with John Foster Dulles, as the secretary of state, had proposed that we send two hundred American military advisors into South Vietnam. And Senator Russell at the conference with the president and the secretary of state opposed this violently. And Lyndon Johnson joined Senator Russell and he was opposed to it. was The Congress recessed a few weeks later and Senator Russell came back to Winder and then assistant secretary of state and later senator, Thruston Morton of Kentucky, came and told Senator Russell that the president had changed his mind; that he was indeed going to send the two hundred military advisors. Senator Russell said at the time, "If you send two hundred, you're going to send two hundred thousand and then it's going to be four hundred thousand." He a prophet without honor in his own country. But once his flag was committed, as he said, he was committed. And he felt that we ought to go in there and bomb the port of Haiphong and fight the war with both hands and let our men either win it and get out or get them out if we weren't going to let them win it.

JACKSON: The last of the presidents that Senator Russell worked with was Richard Nixon. Now he knew Nixon as a congressman, as a senator, and as vice-president, also as president. What was his relationship with Richard Nixon?

RAESLY: I don't believe he had much relationship with Nixon when he was a congressman. This was when Nixon was making his name on the Alger Hiss case. I think Senator Russell probably was personally acquainted with him and he was watching him, but it would have been most untypical of Senator Russell to have expressed any opinion at that point. When Senator Nixon was in the Senate with Senator Russell, I don't know of any committees they served on together, although they may have, nor do I recall that Senator Russell ever really commented too much about Nixon's service as a senator, except in so far as it later was reflected when Nixon was the vice-president; and this was in connection with the civil rights issues. He felt that Senator Nixon, or Vice-President Nixon, was one of those politicians who was quick to take advantage of public issues for their personal gain or their personal gain. And I believe that in that sense, he saw Nixon as a crusader for civil rights because it was the in thing to do at that time. When Nixon became president, I was surprised at the cordiality between the men and this was brought about by Nixon, who courted Senator Russell.

JACKSON: Thank you very much, Babs Raesly.

Richard B. Powell
Library for Political Research and Studies