

**AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD BAKER**

Interview by Benjamin Guterman

Richard Allan Baker, a former president of the SHFG, is retiring after 34 years as Senate Historian. In 1975, he was chosen to establish the Senate Historical Office with the mission of promoting the history of the Senate. He assembled a staff and charted the course of the office, creating a variety of archival, oral history, editing, photography, and reference services. Dick Baker championed openness in government, drafting in 1980 the Senate's first rules of access for its records at the National Archives, which opened most Senate records after 20 years. He has worked closely with the Center for



Legislative Archives, and helped establish the Advisory Committee on the Records of Congress, which has overseen the development of records programs in both the Senate and House. He was involved in all phases of planning the exhibit hall in the new Capitol Visitor Center. His role as historian involved him in the planning of joint sessions of Congress, presidential inaugurations, and state funerals. He was active in preparing for the National Bicentennial of 1976 and the Bicentennial of the Constitution in 1987, and he labored prodigiously on designing the Bicentennial of Congress in 1989. He has made regular appearances on C-SPAN, and spoken about Senate history to countless groups in and around the Capitol. In all this, Dick Baker also found time to write or edit a number of books, including *Conservation Politics: The Senate Career of Clinton P. Anderson* (1985); and *200 Notable Days: Senate Stories 1789–2002* (2006). In this brief interview he provides some insights into his remarkable career.

— Don Ritchie

**Starting the Historical Office in 1975 must have been both daunting and exciting. What were your earliest plans and priorities for the new program? What specific Office programs and procedures did you establish first and how?**

My first priority was to make our office known throughout the Senate and the federal governmental history communities. Next, I recruited staff likely to flourish within this institution's unique culture. The Senate had been without a historical program for the past 186 years, so we had a good deal of catching-up to do. One of the principal motivating forces for the creation of the office was general concern over the management of Senate committee records and members' papers. We drafted, and the Senate soon adopted, regulations that opened most previously closed committee records at the National Archives 20 years after their creation. We began work on what soon became a 1,000-item general reading list, published as a Senate Document under the title *The United States Senate: A Historical Bibliography*. Relying on

available staff and seasonal interns, we dug into the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections and surveyed research libraries throughout the nation to determine what had become of former senators' office files and personal papers. Using 3- by-5 slips, we ransacked the card catalog at the Library of Congress for writings by and about former senators. We also set out to collect visual images of those members. Today, the results of this intense labor are readily available online at <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

### **Early on, who were your mentors and role models?**

We established an advisory committee of distinguished historians to keep us from an unnecessary car wreck. Among our earliest guiding spirits were Richard Hewlett, Walter Rundell, Forrest Pogue, William Leuchtenburg, and Harold Hyman. Directors of historical offices within the departments of State, Labor, and Defense—as well as leaders of major national historical and archival associations—responded to our innocent questions with courtesy and sympathy.

### **How is the Senate historian's work unique? What are the special opportunities of the position, and the restrictions of being an institutional historian?**

Senators, congressional staffs, the news media, scholars, and the general public expect us to know a great deal about the 1,900 individuals—many of them now deservedly obscure—who have served in the Senate since 1789. We are also called upon to be conversant with the Senate's institutional development over the past 220 years. Because the Senate reveres precedent and tradition, we often need to walk only a short distance to observe contemporary practices rooted in the 18th and 19th centuries. Few academics have the time, funding, or inclination to pursue projects such as a nuts-and-bolts administrative history of the Senate. We do. Our only restrictions in responding to questions are self-imposed: We do not provide information on currently serving senators, no matter how long they have been around. We also try not to get out in front of the Senate's party leaders on controversial procedural matters, no matter how deep their historical antecedents. Journalists are surprisingly quick to understand those restrictions and are happy to take our referrals to qualified outside scholars.

### **What are your one or two most memorable experiences in your Senate career?**

I particularly enjoyed planning a series of commemorative activities associated with the 200th anniversary of Congress in 1989. Among them were special sessions of Congress in Washington and Philadelphia, and collaboration with Senator Robert C. Byrd on his four-volume bicentennial history of the Senate. We also spent seven years in preparing educational content for the recently opened Capitol Visitor Center. Our efforts included establishing the six chronological time periods into which the main exhibit is divided, drafting major display text, and contributing to the general orientation films. I have given lots of talks in 34 years, but my best audiences have been newly elected freshmen senators on the first evening of their orientation program and, at the

request of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman in 2000, the United Nations Security Council.

**For many years, you have opened the weekly Democratic conference meeting with a “historical minute.” Can you share some of the highlights of that experience? In what ways has that experience shaped your role as Senate historian?**

For the past 12 years, I have greatly enjoyed observing senators in this informal closed-door setting. That experience has offered unsurpassable insights into the Senate’s culture and has helped me to establish a close professional association with some current members. One recently told me that these historical vignettes about key personalities and events from the Senate’s past remind him and his colleagues “that we are not the first ones to serve here and that today’s issues are not as novel as we think they are.”

**Do you see any additional opportunities or needs for historical work for the Office in the future, new directions or types of documentary projects perhaps?**

The office began with a staff of four and has since grown to nine. Countless projects lie ahead. We have an active oral history program, with several dozen individual series available online, others that will open within the coming decade, and always a few currently underway. The proliferation of Senate permanent records in electronic format poses no end of new challenges. We offer through [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) a continuing online documentary history series on Senate election, expulsion, censure, and impeachment cases. We are considering detailed written histories of major committees, perhaps beginning with Finance and Appropriations.

**Recalling your term as SHFG president in 1985–87, what were your leadership goals or priorities for the Society, and what were some of the issues the Society faced?**

During my time as SHFG president—when the term of office was two years—I had some first-rate support from the Society’s officers and council members. They included David Allison, Bill Nolte, Martin Gordon, Arnita Jones, Sherry Wells, and Charlene Bickford. Jim Cameron and then Wendy Wolff edited *The Federalist*. We tried to improve the Society’s communications with current and prospective members. Roger Trask and his Publications Committee devoted considerable time to shaping *The Federalist*, to compiling an updated membership directory, and to framing an attractive brochure. We considered that brochure an integral part of our campaign—as the federal government’s 200th anniversary neared—to get every cabinet department, and the White House, to establish formal historical programs. The *New York Times*, on July 8, 1985, ran a generally favorable feature article on the work of federal historians. Under the headline “Collecting the Lessons of History,” it quoted USDA historian Wayne Rasmussen, Bill Slany of the State Department, and me. Unfortunately, the piece appeared at a time of Reagan-era budget cutting. Noting a universe of 450 government historians, it created severe heartburn within the Air Force history program with the misleading statistic that the program employed “234 historical researchers.” The Society’s two annual dinners attracted more than 120

members to hear former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Wilbur Cohen (whom President Kennedy once dubbed “Mr. Social Security”) and Wayne Rasmussen deliver Richard Hewlett Addresses. The Society conducted a well-attended September 1985 special conference at the Library of Congress on “Federal Information Management: Setting the Agenda.” Five days later, Society representatives testified before Chief Justice Warren Burger’s Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution at the Supreme Court. Perhaps the most significant “reform” of my two-year tenure was a by-law change providing that all future presidents serve just a single year.