Floyd M. Riddick

Senate Parliamentarian, 1964-1974

Interview #12
The Senate in Retrospect
(December 4, 1978)
Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

Ritchie: I'd like to ask a retrospective question at this point. You served with the Senate from 1947 on through to your retirement in 1974, and you've kept on working for the Senate for the Rules Committee since then. That's a healthy span of years. I wanted to ask you how you feel the Senate has changed in the decades that you have been observing it. Is the Senate today the same as the Senate that you came to in 1947, or do you see any significant changes?

Riddick: I think basically it's the same institution. Obviously, even the years that I've served the Senate it was not the Senate that started off in 1789 when you had a very small membership. It was almost like a committee meeting then -- thirteen states eventually making twenty-six members, that is, thirteen states after North Carolina and Rhode

Island came in and got their senators up here, they only had twenty-six members. Well, we've got committees larger than that. So it was a different problem. We've had variations in the Senate that have been very distinguishable, depending upon the membership itself. I think the Senate must have been a very august body when you had the leadership of Clay, Webster, and Calhoun in it, because they were such admired personalities in the history of our country, and they were dominant; I think there have been times when the Senate has dominated the presidency. There have been times that the President practically dominated the Senate. So depending on its membership over a long period of time, I don't think a five year period makes much change in the Senate, but over a long period of time with personalities present who are dominating, it brings the Senate into a new image as far as the country's

concerned. But the Senate when I first came here was greatly different. You know, senators were still wearing cut-away coats, long-tailed coats, and came so dressed to the floor for debate. They were very reserved. If they were going to hold a press confer- ence, sometimes they'd call the press gallery and have the reporters come to their offices and they'd hold a press conference there. They were much less glib to talk and express their feelings with various individials between the Senate chamber and their offices, or even on the Senate floor. I think

I recall mentioning to you my experiences with Senator Vandenberg, and Taft, and George. They did not engage in much levity and conversation. If they wanted to ask you your opinion about something, or what the rules were and the precedents were, they would ask you, and as soon as that was over they were through talking with you, because

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they had other problems on their mind, and that's where it ended.

Ritchie: Now it's not that way?

Riddick: No, I've heard some say that the members of the Senate are getting more like the members of the House! They are very engaging in conversation. If you know them at all they delight in sitting and chatting with you about different problems. There's not that image that they used to carry. The senators used to feel, in my opinion, that there was no one be- tween them and God except their con- stituency.

Ritchie: Having established then that you have seen considerable change in the Senate in the years since 1947, why do you think this change has taken place? What accounts for it?

Riddick: Personally, my field in the Senate has been procedure. Now, I don't think procedure has been as responsible for these changes as other

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things. I don't think they've been great; I think they've been rather minor as far as actual image of the Senate is concerned, or their effect on the image of the Senate. They still insist, procedure-wise, on the things that have made the Senate a different legislative body from most others in the world.

I think, perhaps, the change of the election system from the state legislatures electing the senators to the popular election of senators has had a great effect upon the image of the Senate, because there's certainly a tendency for people to elect candidates who have gained notorious reputations -- well, that's not the word -- senators who have gained popularity, say they've been to the moon, they've become great football heroes, they've won a reputation in some field so that their name is on the tongues of everybody. They have a greater chance of getting elected

than other candidates as contrasted to the system that was used by the state legislatures, because it's now popular election, and anything that can get their names before the public often enough will give them an advantage over other candidates.

Like the old saying goes: "Repetition makes reputation." If you keep calling that name over and over, it's publicized over and over -- it's in the front of the public constantly for a long period of time -- he's got a much better chance to get elected to the Senate than a scholar or a lawyer who has not handled popular-type cases, so to speak. The one that's been a real scholar, say he's been a great judge in a state, or a federal judge, in the court of appeal or the district court, like Senator Ervin of North Carolina who had been a judge, they might merit becoming a senator, but if they are not popular, if they have

not had their names before the public long enough, they're not likely to have a chance to get elected over a more popular hero.

Then the press, the press plays a great role in who is going to be elected senator by popularizing that person. There are so many features in our modern society. TV? Good gracious, one of the great things that puts the candidate in your livingroom almost. All of these things in my opinion have had a great effect on the nature of people or the kind of people you're electing to the Senate, and these personalities have a great affect on the image that the Senate is going to have. I don't think that the procedure has any comparison with the effect that these other things have had on the image of the Senate.

Ritchie: Television among other things has turned a lot of senators into presidential contenders. John Kennedy was the first president to be elected

directly out of the Senate in some forty years, and now senators are taken for granted as presidential candidates. Has this changed their interests inside the Senate, and the type of senators they are?

Riddick: I don't know what is an exact answer to any question of that nature. I think the senators have always been candidates. Certainly, go all the way back, Andrew Jackson was a senator before he became President of the United States. The thing that television and the communicators have done is to give them a

vehicle through which they can appeal to the country for the presidency, as contrasted to their former role. Hardly anybody reads the *Record*, and that is where the record of a senator is made as a senator, not as a candidate for president, of course. But if a senator is gracious, a good speaker, a good PR man, and the press is impressed by him, TV is impressed

by him, he's picked up into national prominence, not just state prominence, very quickly.

Ritchie: So, as I interpret this, you say that a lot of the modern trends are emphasizing the wrong qualities in the people who are running for election to the Senate?

Riddick: Well, I don't know that it's the wrong qualities. It's caused a different Senate. I'm no judge as to who should serve. Maybe we need fewer lawyers; maybe we need fewer of the kind of senators that we had before. Maybe the man-on-the-street type of person is what we need to represent the people, I don't know. My only statement to that effect is that it has given you a different kind of an image, or a different kind of a Senate, or should I say different kind of senators.

Ritchie: There's a distinction here. The institution of the Senate is really made up of a hundred individuals.

Riddick: Right.

Ritchie: And the institution can change with the individuals. That seems to have been a trend through much of our discussion here, how the rules have changed, the interpretation of the rules have changed, the precedents have changed, because the individuals, who were involved had changed. That makes studying the institution all the more difficult.

Riddick: Yes, I've often questioned if the Senate ever developed into the institution that our forefathers in drafting the Constitution expected it to develop into. As I get it, from reading the Constitutional history and the records of the Senate, our forefathers anticipated the Senate to be a counsel to the President of the United States as well as a legislative body. It was sort of anticipated that it would stay in twelve months of the year, as opposed to just being a legislative body primarily to initiate legislation.

And I'm often inclined to think if it hadn't been for the experience at the beginning of our Senate that we might have developed that way as opposed to being just a co-equal branch of the Congress, to just write legislation.

You know, when Washington came up with his Indian treaty to counsel with the Senate, I think he anticipated that the Senate would be sitting at all times, and that when he had major problems he could come in and consult with them to see if "now boys, do you think the President is right in going in this direction?" But when they referred the treaty to a committee, Washington was alleged to have said, he'd be damned if he ever expected to come up here again to present his problems to the Senate. I think right then we began to depart from the concept of a counsel to the President, and we developed in an entirely different way from what we

would have, had the Senate accorded Washington by advising him on the spot, and let him go on and resolve his treaty.

Ritchie: Do you think the Senate could ever fill that advice role?

Riddick: Not anymore, I don't. I think with such institutions, it's rather difficult to change overnight in any direction, and if you build an institution and it develops a long history, it would be hard to turn from that direction to another direction. You'll move gradually one way or the other, but I doubt that there would be a chance of it ever moving as a counsel to the president. The Senate does still counsel in the case of treaties, but it almost works independently of the president in that regard; and the Senate no more so than the House tries to work with the president in enacting the kind of a legislative program that he wants.

Ritchie: I just read an article that set as a maxim that a President of the United States should advise with his party

leaders in Congress on every issue, "especially when he doesn't want to."

Riddick: That might be a good point! I don't know that the country would be any better off, it's hard to say. It's amazing the direction an institution takes over a long period of time in the absence of a completely detailed design on a drawing board as to what you expect of it. And when the Constitution as it was drafted, so vague and general, that within that framework the legislature could go in most

any direction. It's true that we are taught that we were conceived to have three independent arms of the government, but there's no defined-detailed separation of power, and I doubt that if you could have ever drafted anything that would have worked. I've watched this in the field of general parliamentary law, working with dif- ferent institutions when they draw up a constitution and by-laws; they can't anticipate what all is expected

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of them to begin with, because they have never had any experience, and then they begin to amend their constitution and by-laws and move in various directions which are often completely different, in my opinion, from that which the founding fathers of that particular institution anticipated when they created that organization.

Ritchie: Well, one thing that we have definitely established is that the Senate is a complex machinery . . .

Riddick: Oh, you can bet your boots!

Ritchie: . . . and I would think that you have certainly contributed quite a bit toward making that machinery work, for some thirty years or so.

Riddick: Well, I've done my best. I just met former Senator [Frank] Lausche in the Senate wing of the Capitol the other day, and he told me: "You certainly had a whole lot of influence on what we did and how we did it in the Senate." He said: "I'm amazed that you were able

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to make these decisions and the Senate almost always invariably agreed with you!" And so I thanked him for his compliments. I've told you before, I feel that the Senate had been very good to me. Through the long period that I've been here only once did they vote to overrule the decision of the advice that I'd given to the Chair.

[End of interview #12]