

Cokie Roberts
Congressional Correspondent and
Daughter of Representatives Hale and Lindy Boggs of Louisiana

Oral History Interviews
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Abstract

Growing up in and around the U.S. Capitol shaped Cokie Roberts' future as a nationally recognized congressional reporter. The daughter of prominent U.S. Representatives Hale and Lindy Boggs, who represented a New Orleans-centered district for half a century, Roberts recalled riding the old Senate subway, with its wicker seats; accompanying her father on the House Floor on the Opening Day of Congress in the late 1940s; prodding her father to speak out on the floor in support of the Voting Rights Act of 1965; and listening to prominent dinner guests such as Speaker Sam Rayburn of Texas. In this far-ranging pair of interviews, Roberts also discussed lesser-known aspects of the House, such as the Radio-TV Gallery and the executive committee that oversees journalists' accreditation, as well as her unique position as a congressional journalist in the 1980s while her mother was a leading Member of the House. Roberts' recollections explain how the culture of congressional bipartisanship that was forged during World War II developed into today's sharp partisan distinctions and obligatory emphasis on fundraising and campaigning.

Biography

Born Mary Martha Corinne Morrison Claiborne Boggs on December 27, 1943, in New Orleans, Louisiana, "Cokie" Roberts is the youngest of the three children of Thomas Hale Boggs, Sr., and Lindy Boggs. Roberts' brother, Tommy, invented her nickname when, as a child, he could not pronounce her given name Corinne.

Cokie attended private Catholic schools—the Academy of the Sacred Heart in New Orleans and Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart in Bethesda, Maryland. In 1964, she graduated from Wellesley College with a degree in political science. She married *New York Times* correspondent Steven V. Roberts in 1966; they raised two children, Lee and Rebecca. The couple lived in New York, Los Angeles, and Europe for 11 years before returning to Washington, D.C.

Cokie Roberts came of age in the shadow of the Capitol. Her father, Hale Boggs, first won election to a term in the U.S. House in 1940 but lost re-nomination in 1942. After serving in the Naval Reserve during World War II, Boggs was re-elected to the House in 1946. He served from January 1947 until October 1972, when his plane disappeared while he was on a campaign trip to Alaska, and he was presumed dead. During his final decade in the House, Hale Boggs became a powerful member of the leadership, serving as Majority Whip (87th–91st Congresses) and Majority Leader (92nd Congress). Lindy Boggs succeeded her husband in a special election in March 1973, shortly after his seat was declared vacant. A member of the powerful Appropriations Committee, she became an advocate for women's economic rights, serving until her retirement in January 1991.

Roberts began her radio career as a foreign correspondent for CBS in the 1970s and started covering Capitol Hill for National Public Radio (NPR) in 1978, reporting on the Panama Canal Treaty. Beginning in the early 1980s, she was assigned to Capitol Hill full-time serving as the network's

congressional correspondent for more than a decade. Roberts co-anchored ABC's "This Week" with Sam Donaldson from 1996 through 2002.

A senior news analyst for NPR and a political commentator for ABC News, Roberts has won three Emmy Awards and was president of the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association from 1981 to 1982. She is the best-selling author of *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters* (1998), *Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation* (2004), and *Ladies of Liberty: The Women Who Shaped Our Nation* (2008), and in 2000 she and her husband co-authored a book on marriage, *From This Day Forward*. Roberts and her husband reside in Bethesda, Maryland.

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress* at <http://bioguide.congress.gov> and the "People Search" section of the History, Art & Archives website, <http://history.house.gov>.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:

“Cokie Roberts Oral History Interview,” Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, [date of interview].

Interviewer Biography

Kathleen Johnson is a senior historical editor for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. in history from Columbia University and holds two master’s degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of Members and staff. She co-authored two books: *Women in Congress: 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006) and *Black Americans in Congress: 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008).

— COKIE ROBERTS —
INTERVIEW ONE

JOHNSON: This is Kathleen Johnson interviewing Cokie Roberts, journalist for NPR [National Public Radio] and ABC News and the daughter of Hale [Thomas] Bogg, [Sr.], and Lindy [Corinne Claiborne] Boggs, both former Members of the U.S. House. The date is August 28, 2007, and the interview is taking place in the office of Cokie Roberts in the District of Columbia.

Today I would like to start off with some biographical information. To begin with, where and when were you born?

ROBERTS: I was born December 27, 1943, in New Orleans, Louisiana.

JOHNSON: What schools did you attend before going to Wellesley?

ROBERTS: I went to Sacred Heart, it's called the—I think it's called the Academy of the Sacred Heart in New Orleans—the Rosary and Sacred Heart here, Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart [Bethesda, Maryland]. And we went to school half year in each place during the—we went to school here during the congressional session and there when Congress was not in session until—I did that through third grade. My father ran for governor when I was in third grade and lost. And at that point, we moved pretty much up here during the school year. And so from fourth grade on I went to Stone Ridge.

JOHNSON: At that point, where did you live when your father was serving in the House?

ROBERTS: When we were little, before the governor's race, we lived—the part of the year that we lived here—we lived in Northwest Washington in Chevy Chase, D.C., 2911 Stevenson Place. And in New Orleans we lived in the Garden District at 1304 First Street. And then when we started spending the whole school year here, we moved to Bethesda to [address redacted], which is where I still live.

JOHNSON: Generally speaking, how would you describe your life as a child of a Member of Congress?

ROBERTS: My life as a child of a Member of Congress was wonderful. It was totally interesting and a lot of fun. And my father ran for Congress when he was 26 years old; and my mother was pregnant with my brother, Tommy; my sister, Barbara, was a baby; and she [my mother] was 24. So they pretty much understood that their family life and their political life were one and that there was no separating them. And if they did, either the family wouldn't be involved in anything and never see them, or the political life would suffer, so we pretty much did everything. We went on campaign trips, we made speeches, we went to the blessing of the fleet or the opening of the headquarters. We certainly went out on Election Day and went to all the polling places and we handed out literature and we put up signs, and we tore down other people's signs. {laughter} I mean it was very, very much an active involvement.

And when we were here, in Washington, we spent a great deal of time in the Capitol building, and we went to debates, and we knew all of the key players. They were regular people at our dinner tables. And our parents did not have the children go away when the grown-ups came. In retrospect, I've

sometimes wondered, “What did those people think to have all these children around all the time?” But we were around, and it was great for us.

JOHNSON: What do you recall about your father’s office, his congressional office in D.C.?

ROBERTS: The office—the first office that my father had that I remember, maybe there was one in Cannon before my memory—but it was in Longworth. At that point, they were not called Cannon and Longworth. It was the Old House Office Building and the New House Office Building. {cell phone rings} I’m sorry.

BRIEF INTERRUPTION

JOHNSON: You were talking about your father’s office.

ROBERTS: Longworth, right. So, as I say, at that point they were not called Cannon, Longworth; there was no Rayburn. So it was the Old House Office Building and the New House Office Building, which wasn’t so bad on the House side. On the Senate side it was a problem because all the towels said “S.O.B.” {laughter} But the House side had “H.O.B.,” it was all right. And I remember the office—what I remember is kind of two big rooms. One filled with people; one, his desk. And a lot of the women who worked in my father’s office were always—and it was women—were always very attractive New Orleanians. And so it was fun. You’d come in and have a cup of coffee. I was too little to have coffee, but they always offered coffee with chicory to people. And it was, of course, a place where people worked, but it was also always a lot of fun.

JOHNSON: Did you assist your father in any way in the office?

ROBERTS: I would go every so often to the office and pretend to be helping, but I don't think I ever did any real work in the office. But, unlike some other kids, I also didn't ask anybody in the office to do any of my work. They later said that they were constantly hearing from other staff members that kids were asking to have papers typed and things like that. We didn't do that. When my father was—when I was older, my father was in Congress pretty much—well, my father was elected in '40 and then defeated in '42. So when I was born, he was in the Navy, it was World War II. And then he was re-elected in '46. So, really, all of my life my father was in—all of my conscious life—my father was in Congress [while I was] growing up, so we're talking about different stages of my life. By the time I was in high school, I would occasionally go in and really be of some help.

JOHNSON: You mentioned earlier that you spent a lot of time at the Capitol, so this would be during the 1940s and 1950s; what kind of access did you have at that point?

ROBERTS: In the Capitol in the '40s and '50s you had complete and total access, particularly before the Puerto Rican shootings. That was the first kind of terror attack—of course, the first terror attack was the British in 1814—but the first modern-day terror attack. And up until that point, there was no security at all, and you had complete free run of the place, which was great. I mean, you could run around, and there were stairs that went nowhere and places that you would find that were just complete surprises and delights. The space above the old chamber, Statuary Hall now, that is one of the most

interesting places on earth. And a little kid could get up those ladders a lot more easily. The subway to the Senate—and of course there was only one—well, in fact, there was only one Senate Office Building [Russell] when I was a little kid. And the subway was this darling little wicker number; I think they still have one on display. And I would ride it for hours. The guys would babysit me {laughter}. I felt the Capitol was completely this building that was my playground.

JOHNSON: Did you have a favorite room or a favorite area?

ROBERTS: Well, the Ways and Means Committee had a room at that time that was right off of the—no, no, the Ways and Means Committee took it over, excuse me. Danny [Daniel David] Rostenkowski took over that room. There was a room called the Members' Family Room that was on the second floor, right off of the House Gallery. And that was a great room because it was basically a bathroom, but it had, in addition to stalls, it had a big living room area that had couches and desks and places where you really could make yourself at home for the day. And there was always an attendant in there who was a nice person, and that was the place that I would consider sort of the hang-out place. And other kids would be there, too. I mean, if there was a big piece of legislation, other kids would be there too, so you would see each other and get to know each other on days like that.

JOHNSON: Were there any sort of organized activities for the children of Members or staff?

ROBERTS: Every so often the delegation would have a party, something like that. And the state societies would have things because the state societies started as

home away from home for the people who were here from various parts of the country. So those would be somewhat organized. But I think most of our contact was *ad hoc*.

JOHNSON: And you mentioned that at times there would be a group of you, a group of children.

ROBERTS: At times there'd be a bunch of us because there'd be something our parents thought was significant. Or it was a late night session, and it was fun to come down and have dinner in the [Members'] Dining Room all together and hang out. And the older kids would watch the session or not, and the little kids would run around.

JOHNSON: Were there any children in particular or families that you remember spending time with?

ROBERTS: Well, we spent a lot of time, as I say, with the Louisiana delegation. So we knew Pam and Kay Long [daughters of Senator Russell [Billiu] Long of Louisiana] and then Dawn Hébert, Eddie [Felix Edward] Hébert's daughter. And those were sort of, you know, in the delegation. And then we always knew the Gores, we always knew the Johnsons. Those were kids we always knew growing up. My sister and Nancy Gore [daughter of Albert Arnold Gore] were about the same age. Chris [Christopher John] Dodd [son of Thomas Joseph Dodd] I got to know quite well in high school. He was the best friend of my boyfriend's little brother {laughter}. He's now—he is exactly, to the day, five months younger than me. And I know this because he and my sister shared a birthday. He has children the ages of my

grandchildren, which just cracks me up. Some of them younger than my grandchildren.

JOHNSON: Did you get to know any of the Pages that were in the House at the time?

ROBERTS: I didn't get to know Pages as a little kid. When I was in high school I got to know Pages. And then as we hung around, we certainly got to know my father's Pages. The only one I really remember is Jan. But I'm sure that if I met others, I would remember them.

JOHNSON: Even though there was a gender restriction at the time, up until the 1970s, was this something that you were interested in, becoming a Page?

ROBERTS: Never occurred to me to become a Page any more than it would've occurred to me to become a priest. I mean, it was just totally off limits to girls. My son was a Page and met his wife—she was a Page. That's how they met. But the notion of girls being Pages was so off-the-charts that when we first came back from Greece, and it was the first time I had lived in Washington in 11 years, one of the first magazine pieces that Steve [Roberts] and I wrote together was for *Seventeen* about female Pages. It was newsworthy.

JOHNSON: So that was in the 1970s?

ROBERTS: That would've been '77-'78.

JOHNSON: One thing that we've noticed that some families did together or Members did annually was the Congressional Baseball Game. Did you attend this?

ROBERTS: I don't remember the Congressional Baseball Game. There were picnics. There were picnics we went to. The Cherry Blossom Festival—often the various girls from the states would be princesses in the Cherry Blossom Festival. And, as now, various lobbying groups, which were not as organized then as they are now, but would have some event like having Members to the circus, that kind of thing.

JOHNSON: Building on the idea of the open access in the Capitol, how would you describe the atmosphere or the culture of the House during the 1940s and 1950s?

ROBERTS: You mean of the Members or of the building?

JOHNSON: The Members—and just in general, the Members. And also the building.

ROBERTS: Well, of course, the culture of the Members in the mid-to late 1940s was very different from earlier in the decade. We had these two enormous—this is not my memory now; now I'm talking about what I know as a journalist—but we had these two enormous classes of '46 and '48. Huge freshmen classes—118—one a Republican class, one a Democratic class. But what made them so different was that they were World War II veterans, and they were very conscious World War II veterans. Self-conscious. They ran as the men who went, not the men who sent. And that made for a very forward-looking, patriotic, bipartisan, yeasty sort of place. The country could do anything. And that was very different from the Congress before the war, which was still suffering in the Depression and feeling depressed about the country. But I have firmly come to believe in the years since the '80s, '90s, on, as we have come to decry the partisanship, which I do decry, I have firmly come to

believe that that period of the late '40s, '50s, into the '60s was aberrant rather than normal. I've now read enough and written enough American history to see it that way because we have been a very partisan nation over our history, and I think that period was deeply affected by everyone going to war together. And they had all served together; they had all had the same experience. The country had all suffered and sacrificed together, and I think that we were all on the same side. And there was a sense that the true enemy was some dictator abroad, not the guy across the aisle. And so I think that that was—that brought people together and that that commonality of purpose also made it possible for people to get things done in a way that has been more difficult in years since then.

JOHNSON: You mentioned a while back that you sat in the gallery and listened to some of the speeches. Were there any in particular that you remember, especially about your father or a speech that he might have made?

ROBERTS: Well, my father was a somewhat famed orator. And, of course, we don't really have orators anymore, which has got its pluses and minuses. {laughter} But when he would speak, of course nothing was broadcast, so you'd have to come to the chamber to hear somebody, and it would kind of circulate through the office buildings—"Boggs is up." So people would come to the galleries to listen because he was such a fine orator. And, of course, the speech that was his absolute—the speech that sort of was the capstone of his career in some way—was the speech on voting rights in 1965, which he had no intention of giving. The night before, we had been sitting on the patio at the house in Bethesda where I live, and we were just driving him completely nuts telling him that he had to speak. And he was essentially saying, "Give me a break. I'm going to vote for it, okay? I'm going to put my political

career on the line and vote for this.” He was Majority Whip at the time. And my then boyfriend, now husband, and my mother and I were just giving him unshirted grief. And the next day, he was in the chamber and a fellow Louisianan, Joe [Joseph David] Waggoner, [Jr.], was up and saying there was no prejudice in Louisiana, and he [my father] just couldn’t stand it. {laughter} And so he got up and made one of the best speeches of his life. But we weren’t there for it because he had said he wasn’t going to do it. {laughter}

JOHNSON: I read about that in your mother’s memoirs, and she had said that you in particular were asking him to take a stand.

ROBERTS: My mother has all this about all these relatives being there. But we were there.

JOHNSON: Did you attend any special events at the Capitol? State of the Union addresses or. . .

ROBERTS: Yes. Yes. But my earliest memory of the Capitol, I mean firm memory, was Opening Day. And I love Opening Day. I still love Opening Day. There are all these little kids on the floor in their Christmas velvets. And there is always—I mean, watch for it from here on out, you’ll never be able to go without seeing this now—there’s always some baby in the arms of a man that that baby has never seen before in its life, right? That man has been running for Congress through that baby’s life. {laughter} And the baby will be sort of happy for a minute and then look up and realize that it is in the arms of a stranger and let out a wail, a mighty wail. It is so funny, and it is invariable. And either there’s an older sister on the floor that takes over, or the young

Member particularly will look up to his wife in the gallery going {distressed groan}. And she will come down to the Speaker's Lobby and grab the baby.

But I remember that day very well, and I must've been—it must've been 1949 because in December of 1946, which would've been right after my father had been re-elected, my mother had a baby who died three days later. So we did not come up in January of 1947. My mother was ill, and we stayed in New Orleans for a while. So, it had to be two years after that. So I would've just turned five, and I remember it vividly. I mean, I was standing—sitting or standing—on the floor, and they called the roll for Speaker. And everybody stood up and said, “Mr. [Samuel Taliaferro] Rayburn, Mr. [Joseph William] Martin, [Jr.]. Mr. Rayburn, Mr. Martin.” And I thought they were calling the roll of Members. Remember, I had just turned five like a week before. {laughter} This is an odd childhood. And I turned to my father, and I said, “There are an awful lot of Mr. Rayburns and Mr. Martins.” I guess they said, “Rayburn, Martin;” they wouldn't have said, “Mr.,” but I said, “Mr. Rayburn, Mr. Martin.” And it took him a minute to catch on to what my confusion was, and then he explained what was going on. And I always remembered it and then when Mr. Sam died, I remember writing to my father and saying I was wrong, there weren't . . .

But then, 1,000 years later, I was covering the State of the Union, and I was standing in Statuary Hall, and there was a new shot—a new camera angle that we had never used before—and it was down the center aisle at knee height. And I had this incredible qualm because it all just came rushing back. That was my earliest memory of the chamber, and there it was at the right height for me to see it.

But I still have moments in the Capitol where I will turn a corner, and something will just come rushing back. And I'm 63 years old. And there'll be times when I'll turn a corner and sort of half expect to see my father. So it's a very—a place redolent with memories, to put it mildly.

JOHNSON: I came across a story that mentioned that you had—I think it was several birthday parties in the Capitol.

ROBERTS: In the Speaker's Dining Room.

JOHNSON: Can you describe one of those parties?

ROBERTS: Well, you know, your friends would—it was just a fun place to have a party. People could come, and of course the staff was always so sweet to everybody. And a lot of the waiters in the House Restaurant would also do parties at our house in later years. So we really got to know them very well. In fact, when I moved back to Washington and started—and I resisted covering Congress, but then it sort of became ridiculous—and so I started covering Congress, and I discovered that Walter Little was the—whatever they called him, the clerk or something of the Ways and Means Committee. And he would sit on the door of the Ways and Means Committee. And he turned out to be just an absolutely invaluable source because all those tax bills were happening in the [Ronald W.] Reagan administration, and he knew everything that was happening and when it was happening and all that. And nobody knew where I was getting all this stuff.

Well, the reason Walter and I were thick as thieves was because once we had committed a crime together, which was that my parents had—this is now

high school—but my parents had this annual, enormous garden party. And it had started as an 80th birthday party for Tom [Thomas Joseph] O'Brien, the ranking Democratic Member of the Ways and Means Committee; [Wilbur Daigh] Mills was chairman. Tom O'Brien was called “Blind Tom” O'Brien because he was Sheriff of Cook County during Al Capone's heyday. And people didn't understand why he was called “Blind Tom,” and they would write things like, “Oh, it's so wonderful that a man with your handicap has gone so far.” {laughter} “Blind Tom” loved the races. And we had this enormous cake that had a racetrack on it. And it was in a box, Walter and I thought, and we each picked up an end of the box to move the cake so he could set the bar. And it turned out to not have a middle. So we dropped the cake. {laughter} So then we had to quickly repair the cake. I mean, the party's about to begin; he's setting up the bar. So my job was to—I remember exactly what I was wearing—it was a green and white check dress that had a big skirt. It was that era. And my job was to sort of hold out my skirt and hide the cake while he got a glass of hot water and a knife and patched up the racetrack. And we got away with it.

JOHNSON: No one noticed?

ROBERTS: No one noticed, and he and I were sworn to secrecy for life. And who knew that 15 years later it would pay off?

And Ernest Petinaud, who was the headwaiter at the House Restaurant and was a really wonderful man. He was a vaudevillian, literally, and had a wonderful singing voice but was also just knowledgeable beyond belief—knew everything about the workings of Congress, knew every Member, knew all their families, all of that. That's why the Members' Dining Room is

named for him. But it was interesting, at his funeral—he died during a recess—and he had retired many years before, so it wasn't like he was still up and serving. But it was interesting to see who was there. Tip [Thomas Philip] O'Neill, [Jr.], Bob [Robert Joseph] Dole, Bud [Clarence J.] Brown, [Jr.], who's a congressional brat, and me, and then his contemporaries. But it was—it tells you something about someone. Told me a lot about Bob Dole and Tip O'Neill that they were there.

JOHNSON: So did you spend a lot of time in the [Members'] Dining Room?

ROBERTS: Spent a lot of time in the [Members'] Dining Room.

JOHNSON: Did you have access to the cloakrooms?

ROBERTS: No. No; I did not have access to the cloakrooms. When I was grown and covering Congress, I was in the Speaker's Lobby, but never had access. My Page kids had access to the cloakroom and were very useful {laughter}. That was a good summer.

JOHNSON: What year was that?

ROBERTS: Let's see—the summer before his junior year of high school because by then they had regularized it all. He graduated in '86—so '85—must've been '84.

JOHNSON: Did you have the opportunity to get to know any of the reporters who covered Congress before?

ROBERTS: Again, the Louisiana people. Edgar Allen Poe, who was here forever, and before—oh, shoot. Paul—again, this would be in my mother’s book—Paul Tipton. I think that’s right. It was the [New Orleans] *Times* and the *Picayune* at that point, it was not . . . But then again, later, when I was older and my father was Whip, D. B. Hardeman, who had come from Mr. Sam’s office to the Whip’s office, he had a regular seminar in the evenings after work. And he had reporters and aides and a lot of people who went on to become scholars of Congress or great reporters were there. One of them was Bob Novak, who was at the *Wall Street Journal* at the time. Oh, gosh, names—but I have them because a lot of them went on to do this *Encyclopedia of Congress*.¹ Don Bacon. I have to look—I’ll look at the list. But so at that point, yes. I mean, when I was in college.

JOHNSON: Did you spend any time in the press galleries?

ROBERTS: No. We would walk through the press galleries because it was a handy way across. And you always had a sense of the press galleries because there was only—I guess there was the radio gallery by then, but the only one I had consciousness of was the print gallery. And you certainly had a sense of it; there they all were. And it was such a different-looking part of the chamber.

And one of the big things was when I—again, this is a totally weird story—my big thing on my seventh birthday . . . I remember waking up, and I was in New Orleans because it was Christmastime and getting up and saying, “I’m seven, now I can go into the public gallery.” Because until then, you were only allowed in the family gallery, which I thought was just insulting. And I was conducting tours of the Capitol at that point for people, and I wasn’t allowed in the public gallery, which I just—I’m still kind of irritated

about. {laughter} So, my big excitement at turning seven was that I was allowed into the public gallery.

JOHNSON: Who did you conduct tours for, constituents of your father's?

ROBERTS: Constituents. You know, coming up here was a big deal. To make the trip to Washington—this is before there was regular air travel—people would either drive or take a train. It was a very big deal to get here. So when constituents would come up, they would come to the house for dinner, or sometimes they would stay with us. That wasn't great because that would involve me moving out of my room. {laughter} But, yes, we'd show them around, and often it was I who showed them around. I knew the place well, and I didn't mind.

JOHNSON: A colleague of mine mentioned a story he had heard from your mother that at one point she was giving a tour in the Rotunda, and you pointed out Pocahontas in a painting.

ROBERTS: Oh, right, this has to do with this—you know, in the Rotunda there's that awful painting of the arrival of the Mayflower. And my mother would grandly say that we were descended from this sickly, horrible little boy in that awful painting. And nearby, there's that painting of the baptism of Pocahontas, where she's all in white and gorgeous and all that. And apparently I said, "I don't want anything to do with him. I want to be descended from her—she's the one I want." And it must've had a tremendous impact on me because her baptismal name was Rebecca, and I became bound and determined to name my first girl Rebecca and would

interview dates on the subject. And my daughter is named Rebecca.
{laughter}

JOHNSON: When you mentioned being home for Christmas, that made me think of a story I came across in an oral history done with your father back in the '60s, and it was a Christmas Eve session in 1963, so it was shortly after President [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy's assassination. And Lyndon [Baines] Johnson, President Johnson, called the Members back to the House for a vote, and your father was talking about this, and he also said that he [President Johnson] threw a party for the Members because it was Christmas Eve. So you would've been in college at the time—I didn't know if you remembered this—if your father talked about this event because it certainly was unusual.

ROBERTS: Yeah. I'm surprised it was Christmas Eve, but I remember—I've listened to the Johnson tapes on this, so I know what you're talking about. I don't remember being here for Christmas until my first child was one or like two. We would always go down for Christmas, but maybe that year was an exception; I just don't remember. But my father—we were often here when other families weren't because they didn't move here or something. So we did entertain Members all the time—stray Members.

BRIEF INTERRUPTION

JOHNSON: Okay, we're back on tape now.

ROBERTS: So my parents would often have people over, and that, again, that was totally bipartisan. There was never any sense that “Oh, just the Democrats are coming over.”

JOHNSON: You mentioned Mr. Sam—Speaker Sam Rayburn—several times, and your mother in her memoirs and in other sources has said that he was a frequent guest at your house. Do you remember any of these dinners specifically? What do you recall about Rayburn?

ROBERTS: Oh, yeah. Mr. Sam was around all the time. He was really a surrogate grandfather. And he would call at the last minute and ask to be invited to dinner. And that was fine. I mean, there was always enough food. And he was, again, one of those people that I guess just didn't mind us being around because we were certainly around.

I remember one time coming in, as I alluded to earlier, this was the era of hoop skirts or crinolines and all that. And I must've been about 11 years old, and I came into the den and he said, "How many?" And I said, "What?" He said, "How many?" I said, "Excuse me, Mr. Sam, how many what?" He said, "How many petticoats do you have on?" Then I started counting, and he said, "Well, my great-nieces wouldn't go out of the house with fewer than 16." But he was always around and always very gentle. I know that his reputation is somewhat gruff, but that was not my experience with him. And my mother tells a true story about him presiding over the burial of my chicken, which he graciously did when my brother was being a jerk, {laughter} as brothers are wont to be.

JOHNSON: What do you recall about some of the dinner conversations?

ROBERTS: The dinner conversations with the—when the Members were there, the other Members were there—were political, but I don't remember us getting into

mega-arguments with our parents when they were there. Maybe we did, though. But I don't remember any knockdown drag-outs when other Members of Congress were there. I think we probably saved those for {laughter} *entre famille*. But we always talked politics, and we totally expressed our opinions. I mean, there was no question about that. And there were—I mean, I obviously don't remember the '48 debates on medical care, but I certainly remember quite well—I was out of school by then—the Medicare debate. We were always in the middle of it. In '57, the Southern Manifesto, we were all in the middle of all that stuff. And I just remember them being very political conversations.

The only kind of embarrassing moment that I apparently inflicted on my parents, which I do have some memory of, was I was about nine and someone had given me a Bible for my confirmation. And at least I prefaced this question—and at this point, we weren't at the table because there were too many people, there wasn't enough room. And I had already gone upstairs, and I came downstairs, and they were all at the table. And I did preface the question by saying, "I've been reading the Bible," which was good, because my question was, "What's a concubine?" {laughter} And these men are just losing it, right.

JOHNSON: Who was there; do you remember?

ROBERTS: No, no. I don't, but they were—they all looked the same to me. {laughter} Here were a whole bunch of red-faced, heavy men who just were waiting to see how my father was going to deal with this one.

JOHNSON: Besides Speaker Rayburn, who were some of the other frequent guests?

ROBERTS: Regulars? Again, anybody from Louisiana. Jamie [Lloyd] Whitten from Mississippi. There was a bunch of people who—I'd have to actually look at some directories to remember their names—but there were some regulars, and they tended to be people whose families weren't here [in Washington, D.C.].

JOHNSON: Okay. Was Lyndon Johnson a typical guest?

ROBERTS: Oh, they were. The Johnson family would come, absolutely. I mean, the families knew each other quite well.

JOHNSON: Going back to Speaker Rayburn for a minute—do you have a favorite story about him? One that might not be published, something personal that you remember.

ROBERTS: Well, I mean, the ones that I've just told you. I just have a sense of him as being a warm and constant presence. But the story my mother tells that I just love of after the lights came back on after the war is so significant because I remember this during the first Persian Gulf War, the lights going off. And it's a terrible moment when the lights go off at the Capitol. And the lights coming back on was just something that was really significant at the end of the war, and him [Speaker Rayburn] walking out and seeing her standing there looking up at the dome and saying, "I know, darling, it really is a special thing." And that's something I feel very strongly. Looking, particularly at sort of that blue time at night when the dome is all lit up, it still gives me goosebumps, and that's a good thing. And if that fourth plane had hit the dome on September 11, 2001, that would've been a terrible thing.

JOHNSON: In one of your books—since we’re talking more about your mother at this point—*We Are Our Mothers’ Daughters*, you wrote about your mother’s active role that she played in your father’s congressional career. Can you provide a few examples of some of the things that she did?

ROBERTS: Yeah. She worked in his office, both offices, so she really pretty much ran constituent services. And because Louisiana—up until the ’60s really, or really even beyond that—was a one-party state, the factions inside the Democratic Party were numerous, and at various times Daddy would be supported by all of them, thankfully, so you couldn’t choose a campaign manager from one faction or another. So Mamma was his campaign manager, which also turned out to be the wise thing to do. And she really knew, by the time she was elected to Congress, she really knew the district better than he did. She knew the growth in the district and the neighborhoods in the district and all that because, by then, he had gone into the leadership and was focusing a lot of his energies on the leadership. Of course, it was the era of civil rights and the Great Society and all that; there was a lot to do. And so her taking over the district basically is what happened.

JOHNSON: Did you and your brother and sister—you did mention a while ago that you worked on campaigns—what kinds of things did you do?

ROBERTS: Stuffed envelopes. All that stuffing envelopes. We had a big dining room table in New Orleans, which is now at my sister’s house, and we would sit around that table and stuff envelopes. Fold first—you had to fold and then stuff and then seal. {laughter} And that was great because that was a great way to learn politics. And that was a lot of women, and they had different

views and you would hear their points of view, too, which was also very useful. And there were a lot of very smart women in New Orleans at that time who were really pushing the men into a more progressive view of civil rights.

JOHNSON: Your mother was a big part in the organization of the whistle-stop tour of Lady Bird Johnson. Did you play any part in this? Did you help organize it?

ROBERTS: No. No, by then—well, I was in college at the beginning and then graduated and went to work. But my mother, before that, she was involved in all those campaigns. In 1956 she headed up a big voter registration drive for young people. It was called something like “Operation Crossroads,” where she went all over the country registering people to vote. And we were still in high school at that point. That was great. All three of us were in high school. And my parents were—my father was Adlai [Ewing] Stevenson, [III]’s, Southern state campaign manager and my mother was doing this voter registration drive. They were gone {laughter}. And then they got home and went on an interparliamentary union trip to Asia, Bangkok, so they were still gone. That was a good fall {laughter}. We had a good time.

JOHNSON: A little sibling bonding.

ROBERTS: Barbara was a senior, Tommy was a junior, and I was a freshman. But then by ’60, we were all in college. So they were completely on the trail. And then by ’64 there was this need to deal with the South and so Mamma—Mamma and a bunch of women were “Ladies for Lyndon.” A bunch of other “Ladies for Lyndon” came up to us at Lady Bird’s funeral recently and they had to wear these ridiculous outfits that would shrink in the rain and all that.

But when they organized the whistle stop—that was no kidding around. I mean, that was really dangerous. They were a bunch of brave people. But Mamma was very, very involved with that.

JOHNSON: Did you get to know Lady Bird Johnson?

ROBERTS: Yes, very well. I was a huge admirer of Lady Bird Johnson. Talking about having people over, I mean Bill Moyers talked about at her funeral about how on Sunday brunch—Sunday is a lonely time for people without families—and that they would have sort of a regular brunch for Richard [Brevard] Russell, [Jr.], and Sam Rayburn and J. Edgar Hoover, and that when he came up as a kid he got invited over and realized what this was, and Lady Bird giving him all kinds of sage advice. But she and I stayed quite friendly, and I saw her right up until her last years.

JOHNSON: How did the political activism of women like your mother and Lady Bird Johnson influence your life?

ROBERTS: I was very well aware of the influence of these women. I saw what they did. They were very busy, and they were always doing everything. And they were always doing it for the good. They were running goodwill industries, or they were working in family and child services here in the district. And they were working with African-American women to try to make the lives of native Washingtonians better. Dorothy Height and my mother were very good friends. They were doing that while still being incredibly wonderful mothers and deeply dedicated wives and gracious hostesses and running everything. So I very much grew up with a sense, from them, that women could do anything, and that they could sort of do a whole lot of things at the same

time, and that they were very influential behind the scenes. And it had everything to do with my writing history.

JOHNSON: Did you ever consider a career in politics based on your family history?

ROBERTS: I certainly would have. And when I first came back and started covering Congress, I had a very hard time {laughing} not just wanting to get in the middle of it and knock a few heads together. But some of that is just being a mother. “I don’t care who started it, I’m stopping it.” {laughter} But my husband, I met when I was 18 years old. He was always going to be a journalist, and it would’ve been awfully hard on him if I had gone into politics. My only foray at all was once in 1972 when we lived in California. I went—the Democrats were having these crazy neighborhood caucuses. CD—congressional district by congressional district caucuses to elect delegates. And I went to the [Edmund Sixtus] Muskie one just to see what was going on, just out of curiosity. I mean, I went with a friend, and we had her five-year-old with us, that’s how serious we were. But these people got up, and they were just awful, and they made these stupid speeches. So I decided, “What the hell?” and ran {laughter} and got elected. But then Muskie didn’t win.

JOHNSON: So that was the end of your political career?

ROBERTS: That was the end of it. They were very angry with me for getting elected. This was a riot, actually, because it was fixed. Jerry Brown was running and Paul Ziffren, who was the head of the state committee, and a couple of other people. Those were the people who were supposed to get elected. So they started moaning and saying, “This is a ridiculous system; somebody like you

can just walk in here and make a good speech.” I moved their smile muscles for the first time in hours. {laughter} “And this shouldn’t be.” They were right, it shouldn’t be, but they were the people who created the dumb system, it wasn’t me. {laughter} So that was it. That was my only foray.

JOHNSON: In retrospect, how do you think the time that you spent at the Capitol and the House of Representatives affected your life?

ROBERTS: I became—because I spent time in the Capitol and particularly in the House of Representatives—I became deeply committed to the American system. And as close up and as personally as I saw it and saw all of the flaws, I understood all of the glories of it. And that’s really not too grand a word. I mean it is just remarkable that this country exists. Here we are, so different from each other, with no common history or religion or ethnicity or even language these days, and what brings us together is the Constitution and the institutions that it created. And the first among those is Congress. The very word means coming together. And the fact that messily and humorously and all of that, it happens—it doesn’t happen all the time, and it doesn’t always happen well, but it happens—is a miracle.

And I think I came to a real appreciation of that by growing up there. I also learned to hate the Senate. {laughter} My sister used to always say that we were never raised with any racial or religious or ethnic prejudices, that we were raised with two prejudices—against Republicans and Senators. {laughter} And that is true; the Senate was considered the enemy. I have had to come to appreciate both Republicans and Senators in recent years at various times, which was a learning experience. But I think just the beauty of the building helps inspire you to a sense of its mission.

Also, you know, there's some wonderful hidden places that most people never see that are so wonderful, and when I was regularly broadcasting out of the Capitol on State of the Union day or something like that, I usually did it from the Appropriations Committee Room that's right off of the—right on the first floor that's sort of against the West Front. And that's the room that [Constantino] Brumidi tried out in. It was his portfolio. He tried everything in there to show that he could do still lifes, and he could do *trompe l'oeil* and he could do portraits and all of that. So that's a fabulous room all just by itself, and most people never see it. And the other thing that I love about the Capitol as a building is the sense of incompleteness. I love the fact that there are empty ovals waiting for a future stateswoman to fill them. I think that that sense that it's living history is very important.

JOHNSON: One final question that I had for you was if you had a favorite personal anecdote about your father. There are so many that have been written, but if there was something that was just a little bit more personal for you.

ROBERTS: You mean my father as a Member of Congress? Well, he had tremendous respect for the institution and its people while being very clear-eyed about their frailties. {laughter} I mean, he didn't suffer fools easily. But I think that he never got over the fact that a boy from his background could be in Congress, that he was a poor kid who ended up in the halls of Congress. Now, he was not self-deprecating, to put it mildly, but he really did think that if the system worked for him, it could work for anybody. I used to tease him because when the housing bill came up biannually, they would all get up and tell their log cabin stories. {laughter} No running water, all that. And he always presided over that one. It had as much to do with parliamentary

knowledge as anything, but I always joked that they'd put him in the chair for that one because they had heard his story enough. {laughter} Enough with Boggs' story. But I do think that that was fundamental to his sense of the place, that all things were possible in this country if he could be a Member of Congress and rise to a leadership position in Congress. I think he genuinely loved the institution too, loved the yeastiness of it and just the ferment.

JOHNSON: Was there anything else you wanted to add today?

ROBERTS: Well, I kept sort of things in the back of my mind as we were talking, let me see if I look at this list and if there's something . . . Well, you have, "average Member during the '50s, how's this changed?" Obviously the change of—it was all white men. It was not only all white men. They were old because there was no pension. And that was key. You have people now complaining about the congressional pension, and they might have a point, but it gets them out of there. I mean they were these poor, doddering souls, {laughter} but they couldn't leave because they couldn't eat. And even into the '80s, there were some of those people sort of still drifting around, not necessarily in Congress but sort of around Congress. There was one guy named Carter Manasco who had been in Congress, and he was from West Virginia I think, maybe, and he was a lobbyist for the railroads or the coal industry or something. And he would come sit in the [House] Radio-TV Gallery and the [House] Press Gallery and sort of spill cigars all over himself. But it was three squares. He could get dinner in the restaurant cheap, I'm serious, and live and have a community and all that. And I think there was much more of that then, both in good ways and bad ways. People who shouldn't be there anymore, but also a kindness that it's become much too professional to allow for anymore.

JOHNSON: Did it seem like it was, just from what you're saying and from what's been written, a much more laidback atmosphere—that people could take their time, get to know each other, and get to know each other's families?

ROBERTS: Certainly. Everybody knew each other, and that is a huge change from now. Because transportation was such that we were here, and we would all be here for a period of time. Members were not going home on weekends. And fundraising wasn't what it is, and so you didn't have—I don't mean to imply that there was no money in politics, of course that's not the case—but there were not these nightly fundraisers where you had to go meet and greet and all of that. People played bridge. People did get to know each other. And there was that sense that after the sun goes down, we're all friends. You'd see each other at church; you'd see each other at school events.

One of my very best friends growing up was Libby Miller, whose father was Bill [William Edward] Miller, who was a Republican from New York. And he became head of the RNC and then Barry [Morris] Goldwater's running mate. Our fathers could not have been more different politically—Northern/Southern, Republican/Democrat, all of that—and we were best friends. That was normal. In fact, she and I are still very good friends. There was that sense of everybody not just being in it together for the country, but we were all here together; you'd run into each other. Moms were in the PTAs together and as I said earlier, doing a lot of charitable work together. Now, you still can get Members of Congress to show up at a charity dinner. But, what happens is, because everything's become so much more professional and dollar driven, the charities want to get the businesses to buy tables. And the way you do that is to promise the head of the oil company

that he's going to sit next to the chairman of the Energy Committee. So those aren't familial events; that's all just a part of the working week. So a lot of that has just unhappily disappeared.

And then Debbie Dingell and Marianne Gingrich tried to sort of paste some of it together, and they created the Civility Caucus. {laughter} I mean, the mere fact that you had to do such a thing and have a family retreat. And they all went off to Hershey, Pennsylvania, and the Members just hated it. The only thing they liked was the chocolate. They were miserable. And finally it just fell apart.

I have been on the board of the Children's Inn at NIH [National Institutes of Health] from pretty much its inception, and that is one of the rare places in Washington where you still have congressional families involved in a bipartisan fashion. And they really are. I think it would be more true if people were here, but people just aren't here. You heard it during the [William Jefferson (Bill)] Clinton impeachment when the Senate was all locked up with each other, they all said, "We have never spent this much time together. There are actually some interesting people in the Senate." And it was just so different. That was just so different. And interestingly, the exception—somewhat—the exception to that is the women because the women of the Senate do get together just to be in a testosterone-free zone from time to time. And the women in the House less so, but still so. Still do have the caucus and do come together on issues of importance to women, children, and families. So they are the—I also think, and actually there's a good deal of data to support this—women tend to be more practical politically than ideological. And so they will get together to get something done. But they're the exception. We'll see if there's others here.

JOHNSON: Well, I know there are a lot of topics that I wrote out, and if at some point you are free in the future maybe we could finish up because there are more things I wanted to ask you about your mother's career and then also with your coverage of Congress.

ROBERTS: About my TV work. Well, we can do that.

JOHNSON: Great.

— COKIE ROBERTS —
INTERVIEW TWO

JOHNSON: This is Kathleen Johnson interviewing Cokie Roberts, journalist for NPR [National Public Radio] and ABC News and the daughter of Hale and Lindy Boggs, both former Members of the House of Representatives. This is the second interview with Cokie Roberts, and it is taking place in her ABC office in Washington, D.C. The date is July 11, 2008.

In your first interview, I asked you a lot about your father's career, and today I wanted to focus on your mother's career and also your career as a correspondent.

ROBERTS: Great.

JOHNSON: What was the response of your family when your mother decided to run for your father's vacant seat [in the House]?

ROBERTS: You know, she never even made the decision, as she herself says. It just was kind of—it just basically happened. Everyone assumed she'd do it. She had run my father's offices when he went into the leadership. She ran his congressional office. She had always been his campaign manager because at that point there wasn't really a Republican Party. By the time he died there was, but when they first started in politics . . . and so there were so many Democratic factions that if he had picked a campaign manager from any one of those factions, it would have alienated the others and they all supported him. So she was always his campaign manager and she's very, very good at it. So she basically really knew the district better than he did, so it just didn't

occur to any of us that she would not run. She says that it was just like the old firehorse. The bell rang and, without her ever realizing it, she was out of the gate.

JOHNSON: Did you help your mother during this transitional period?

ROBERTS: No, I was not. I lived in California and had little-bitty children. But my sister and brother and sister-in-law all came—went to New Orleans—and did campaign for her. And there was a lot of rumor that she was holding the seat for my brother. My brother had run for Congress in Maryland in 1970 and this was March of '73, I guess. You know, what was that? {laughter} He didn't live there [in Louisiana], all of that. And so she brought around his daughter, my niece—who was, I guess if it was '73 and she was born in '62, so whatever that is, so she was not quite—she was 10 at the time. She brought Elizabeth around and said, “Actually, I'm holding the seat for her. So get used to it!” {laughter}

JOHNSON: Do you think she had any difficulty moving from a behind-the-scenes role?

ROBERTS: Sure. Absolutely she did. My sister, who was in politics, said to her, “You know, Mom, the hardest part for you is going to be voting because there's no ‘Maybe’ button. You're going to have to say, ‘Yes’ or ‘No,’ and when you do that, you're going to alienate some people.” And Mamma was not used to alienating anybody. And so that did turn out to be the hardest part. Because what her role had been for Daddy had been to make everybody think that he was with them and then to soothe the people after it was clear he wasn't. It became hard for her to be in a more straightforward role.

Also, when she decided to run, or declared or whatever, Mrs. Johnson called her—Lady Bird called her—and said, “Lindy, I think it’s a great idea, but how are you going to do it without a wife?” Because they had been so active in their husbands’ political lives that the idea of trying to run an office and run a campaign and run your social life without a partner doing that for you just seemed daunting. And it was daunting because she still felt that she needed to do the wifely things—participate with the women and the wives and do the things they were doing.

JOHNSON: At the time, did you view your mother as a trailblazer?

ROBERTS: No, but that was wrong. And I think she didn’t view herself as a trailblazer, although she was well aware that she was the first woman elected [to the House] from Louisiana. But what happened to her, as well as most other women who went to Congress in those early days, was that they found themselves representing not just the Second Congressional District of Louisiana, but the women of America, as was true for African Americans, and there were a tiny number of Hispanics at the time, Asian Americans. And women from all over the country would approach women in Congress—my mother certainly included—and tell them of their difficulties and particularly of problems that specifically affected women. And so she did become a trailblazer for women’s equality, particularly economic equality.

JOHNSON: Did she welcome that role?

ROBERTS: Yes. In the end, she did. I think she understood how terribly important it was. She was very proud of her relationships with the women business owners and the American Association of University Women. Women’s

groups who came to her and then individual women who came to her. I mean, I still hear all over the country when I'm traveling from women who say, you know, "Your mother just made such an enormous difference in my life." And that's a wonderful feeling.

But she had always been on the forefront of civil rights, and that had been the sort of trailblazing or politically dangerous role that she and my father had played. And she had always been more adamant about it than he—she wasn't running. {laughter} But the women's rights and equality role came as something of a surprise but also a delight.

JOHNSON: Your mother . . . Let me just read a quote from her memoirs that I found. She said, "Almost all women's issues are economic issues, a stunning idea to those persons who want to hear about great women's issues and expect us to be preoccupied with the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] or abortion or sexual harassment or whatever is being hotly debated at the moment." Did her decision to focus on economic issues cause any friction with other Members of Congress, other women at the time?

ROBERTS: No, because the Congressional Caucus on Women's Issues—which, at the time, was called the Congresswomen's Caucus and then all the rules changed—they couldn't raise enough outside money to continue to be the Congresswomen's Caucus, so they had to let men in. The way they came together was on economic issues because they did differ so much. Not on ERA so much, but on abortion. And abortion was such a hot issue at the time—it was the time of all the fights on the Hyde Amendments and all that. And so they just, in order to get anything done for women and children and

families, they basically just had to agree to put that aside and to focus on the economic issues.

And they did it very self-consciously. They would say, “You’re on Ways and Means. You’re on Banking. You’re on HEW [Health, Education and Welfare]. You need to carry this bill. You need to carry this bill.” And they did, every session, a Women’s Economic Equity Act, which was a big omnibus piece of legislation that did involve lots of different committees, and of course there were so few of them that they weren’t even on every committee. But it was a way that they came together across the aisle and were able to get some things done. The place where the abortion issue became controversial for my mother was with the outside groups—with groups like NOW [National Organization for Women] and the National Women’s Political Caucus, groups like that.

JOHNSON: Since you brought up the [Congressional Women’s] caucus—how did your mother feel about that? Did she think it was useful organization?

ROBERTS: Absolutely. My mother was very committed to the Congressional [Women’s] Caucus and was a very, very useful member of it. In fact, when she left, it really sort of fell apart. Many of the Congresswomen told me that it was because of her absence—that she was always the person who could bring people together and soothe them and basically make them behave. They couldn’t have those kinds of fights in front of her.

JOHNSON: Your mother represented a diverse congressional district.

ROBERTS: To put it mildly.

JOHNSON: How do you think she maintained her popularity and her strong connection with her constituents for such a long period of time?

ROBERTS: She's really a nice person. And she really loves people, and she really works her heart out for people. And she worked tirelessly, all the time, for her constituents. Her phone number was always listed. She was always doing constituent services. So much so that the neighboring Members' of Congress staff got kind of ticked off about it because they would say—when somebody would call and say, “Well, my garbage isn't getting collected—” and they'd say, “That's really the city's problem, not ours.” And they'd say, “Well, when people call Lindy Boggs' office, that's not what she says!” And that's true. Her staff would call the city and tell the city to fix it. So she was very, very committed to constituent services. But not out of a desire to get re-elected—her re-election rates were humongous. It was because that's really where she was.

And even after she left office, she kept doing it. And it was ridiculous. Her phone would be ringing day and night, and I'd say to her, “Mamma, you know, stop! Why don't you have an unlisted phone number? There's a good idea.” And she said, “Because then I couldn't help people.” I mean, she really wanted to do it. And the great, wonderful thing about my mother is that she absolutely does not treat people any differently from each other. She genuinely looks at every person as God's creature, and when they present themselves to her, they are all absolutely equal unless they do something outrageous to change that view. So for her it was really—in some ways, even though in some ways it was very, very hard work—it was easy because she was genuinely there. It wasn't any kind of fake.

JOHNSON: Well, it sounds like she had taken her behind-the-scenes role that she had worked on with your father and then was able to modify that to when she was serving in Congress herself.

ROBERTS: Right, although, she hated people criticizing her. She was never good at that. And when she'd vote, she'd get critics.

JOHNSON: What challenges did the reapportionment in her district pose?

ROBERTS: Well, it was a huge challenge because, of course, it was redistricted to be a majority-minority district, and, at that point, I think she and Peter [Wallace] Rodino, [Jr.], and Wyche Fowler, [Jr.], maybe, were the only three whites representing majority- black districts. Wyche, then, ran for the Senate, and John [R.] Lewis took that seat, and, I guess, [Donald Milford] Payne must have Rodino's seat. So they were the last. And so she did have—I mean she had an election [1984], sort of-kind of—she felt she had an election. {laughter} And Israel Augustine, who ran against her . . . again, it sort of hurt her feelings because he had been a friend and my father had gotten him appointed a judge, and, again, she's not good at criticism. As long as everybody loves her, she's great. {laughter} And most of the time, everybody does love her, but, you know, a political campaign can be a little rough that way.

So that was a rough year, but it all came out fine. What had happened was not just that it was a majority-black district, but it was a majority-new district. So that there were a lot of people who had never been represented by either her or my father and didn't know her. She briefly had some out-of-town,

fancy political consultants who were giving her terrible advice, which was basically, “Suppress the black vote, heighten the white vote,” and she basically said, “You know, that goes against everything I’ve done my entire political career. Go away; you’re fired.” {laughter}

Some African-American women organized “100 Ladies for Lindy”—and then they became many more than 100—but they worked with her going through the new neighborhoods—I mean new-to-the-district neighborhoods. They were actually somewhat new neighborhoods. Some of them have pumped out . . . some of the neighborhoods have disappeared since [Hurricane] Katrina because they had been pumped out of the swamp. So, it was a tougher year than most, but I think she still got 60-some percent of the vote, if not more.

It was funny, though, the night before the election. By the time the night before the election came, it was fine. We knew it was fine. We knew she was going to be fine. But there had been some nail-biting moments up until then, and so, my sister and brother and I all went down to be with her for Election Day. She had this great big four-poster bed in her house on Bourbon Street and we’re all . . . It’s the middle of the night, and we’re all sitting on different corners of the bed, everybody reverting to childhood behavior, and so she says—we weren’t talking about the election—and finally she says, “You know, I’m nervous about tomorrow.” And we said, “Oh, don’t be ridiculous. It’s fine.” And it was fine. But she said, “So why are you all here?” {laughter} “If the doctor said the diagnosis is okay, why aren’t you home?”

JOHNSON: During her career, Lindy was an outspoken advocate for preserving the history of the House and of Congress. What do you think sparked her determination in this case?

ROBERTS: I think her own family. She had come from a family that had been in this country since Jamestown, and they had always talked about the importance of the history. I think that was really the basis of it. And you know, Southerners like history. And she loves beautiful things and lived in this historic city and old, beautiful houses and all that, so I think it was just natural.

JOHNSON: Were other Members reluctant?

ROBERTS: Sometimes, but the big advantage anytime Mamma would get involved in something, as they all say, is that they couldn't say no. Bob [Robert Linlithgow] Livingston, [Jr.], was always funny about that—"Nobody can say 'no' to Lindy." She would pick and choose the things to do. The Congressional Cemetery was a prime example of something [with which] she was able really to make a difference. But all those beautification grants and tax breaks and all that stuff. And some of that had been working with Lady Bird, and so it was still coming out of that relationship, too.

JOHNSON: What do you think would be her most enduring legacy on the historic front?

ROBERTS: I don't really know. I'm embarrassed to say that I'm not that aware of all the things she's done on it.

JOHNSON: What is your personal perspective on your mother's career in Congress? Both as her daughter and then also as a congressional correspondent?

ROBERTS: As a congressional correspondent, it was pretty much what I've said to you. She really was very, very effective. She was, actually—I remember Steny [Hamilton] Hoyer saying this at one point because he was on [the Committee on] Appropriations—she's the most powerful woman in Congress. And that was true, and nobody knew it, which was very interesting. I remember sitting in the gallery at one point—and she hardly ever made floor speeches but occasionally would when it was something she had to deal with because she continued to work behind the scenes—and some young woman sitting next to me, not knowing we were related, said, “That woman is such an anachronism.” Just having no notion of the power.

And I always felt bad for her that I was a correspondent because there were lots of pieces of legislation that I was covering that she should have gotten more credit for and couldn't because I was covering them. Now, when there were things that she was really front and center on, Linda Wertheimer would cover it.

And as her daughter, I was unabashedly proud of her. And it was also very nice for me because she was right there. So I could go down to the Speaker's Lobby, pull her off the [House] Floor and we could visit for 10 minutes; it was nice to catch up, and it wasn't Sunday dinner, you know? She was gone for Sunday dinner; she was always in the district.

JOHNSON: Do you have a favorite personal anecdote of your mother?

ROBERTS: In Congress?

JOHNSON: Yes.

ROBERTS: Well, she tells the story about equal credit, where she tells the story of just going into the back room and inserting “sex or marital status” and then just sort of saying, “I’m sure this was an omission,” which is a great story. But, as I say, it was much more sort of day-in and day-out behind the scenes.

I’ll give you an example. The Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families would not have been created without her, but she did not take the chairmanship because it was terribly important to [name redacted] that he have the chairmanship. And she did that kind of thing all the time. She loved being a Smithsonian regent. Leo [Joseph] Ryan, who was killed in Jonestown [Guyana]—was that his name? I think so—came to her and said, “It’s really important to my district that I have that. Will you give it to me?” And she would do it. I mean can you think of any other Member—any *male* Member—of Congress who would do either of those things? Her basic view was “get the job done.” And whatever it takes to get the job done, that’s what I’ll do.

JOHNSON: Who do you think had a greater impact on your ideas on politics? Your mother or your father?

ROBERTS: My sister used to always say, when I want to do things directly I look at my father as a model and when I want to do things indirectly, I look at mother. And there’s a lot of truth to that. I’m more indirect than my sister was, but

that's because I'm not a politician. I'm not in politics. She had to be more out there.

JOHNSON: You mentioned during your first interview that you initially resisted covering Congress. Can you explain your reasons for that reluctance?

ROBERTS: Because I had been here all my life and I had grown up in Congress, I resisted coming back to Washington. I wanted to stay abroad. I thought it was interesting; it was eye-opening. I was getting good at it. I thought coming back here was dying. I knew I'd never move again. I was really a pain in the neck about it. That's an understatement. {laughter} And so I sure as heck wasn't going to come back here and go up to the Capitol. And I was at a stage of life—my children were seven and nine—where I was very taken with what was going on in schools and what was going on for women's lives and all that, so that was the stuff I wanted to write about, and I had fun writing about that stuff.

But very soon, the Panama Canal treaties starting being debated—I mean really soon after I started working at NPR—and we were covering them live. For the first time, there was live coverage out of the Senate, and so it was all hands on deck, essentially. And so I started filling in there, and then the '78 campaign came, and Linda Wertheimer, who's really a very, very dear friend, said to the editors, "How about 'born-in-the-boiler-room over here?'" {laughter} And so I started doing stories on the campaign, and then it just sort of fell into place.

But I didn't go full time to the Hill until after the 1980 election, when WETA started putting on the television program, "The Lawmakers." Paul

Duke and Linda [Wertheimer] and I were co-anchoring it. And in order to do that, I had to be at the Hill full time. We, basically, at that point—Linda and I would go back and forth—but we basically divided it House and Senate, with me doing the House and her doing the Senate.

JOHNSON: Was the Panama Canal your first story as a correspondent?

ROBERTS: I don't think so, no, not as a correspondent.

JOHNSON: Do you remember what your first one was?

ROBERTS: You mean from the Hill?

JOHNSON: Yes.

ROBERTS: Oh, maybe it was. I don't know.

JOHNSON: You mentioned in the last interview why you didn't have a political career, but why did you choose journalism?

ROBERTS: I didn't. It just happened. I was just traveling around the country and the world after my husband, and it was easier to do journalism than anything else. And I had always written. I had always been a good writer and liked writing. It turned out, I was also a good reporter. I liked talking to people and learning what they had to say. But I didn't have some decision, some epiphany moment.

JOHNSON: How do you think your personal history and your connection with the institution assisted you in your job as a correspondent?

ROBERTS: Immensely. Absolutely immensely. I knew things I didn't know I knew. I also knew that people like the doormen knew a lot more than freshmen Members of Congress, so I had better sources than most people. I knew that the people in the carryout knew when the adjournment would be. There was the famous story of "When is Congress going to adjourn? When Mrs. McCormack [wife of Speaker John [William] McCormack of Massachusetts] packs her hats." I knew stuff like that. So I was able to get all kinds of information that nobody could figure out how I was getting. And it was because I grew up there.

And as I say, I knew things, like the vote on the previous question. I didn't even know I knew that, but I knew that. And normally you have to just sit down with someone and explain it. I mean, it's a ridiculous notion, the vote on the previous question. {laughter} Explaining it to America is always a treat. But I knew that. I had grown up with those words around the dinner table.

JOHNSON: Do you think this in any way served as a hindrance for you, the fact that you did have that connection?

ROBERTS: Sure. I think that there were Republicans that thought, initially, "How can she possibly be fair?" But they heard my work, and as soon as they heard my work they felt that I was fair. And Democrats thought that I was bending over backwards to be fair, all too fair! I remember one point, Barbara [Bailey] Kennelly said to me, "Are you a Democrat?" I said, "I'm a reporter." And she said, "Oh. . ." {laughter} You know? So, sure, it had problems.

But it also helped. There were people that understood that I cared about the institution and there were people . . . Tip O'Neill, was the Speaker when I started covering Congress, and I'd known him since I was a child, and he also felt somewhat beholden to my family for having become Majority Leader, so that was helpful. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Do you think you faced any unrealistic expectations because of your connection? That people thought that, "Well, Cokie will know. She'll know how to get an answer to this question."

ROBERTS: No. No, I think the main thing was the Republican thing. I think I did know how to get the answers to most of the questions. And the things that I couldn't get the answers to, nobody could have gotten the answer. I remember saying about some bill—and I can't even remember what it was—but saying to my editor, "I can't figure out what the truth is." And he said, "Boy, that's a high standard!" {laughter} But nobody could. It was one of those things where it was just a mess, one of those pieces of legislation where you couldn't tell who was doing what for political reasons and whether they really meant it. It was like that. I think that on procedural things, those were the kinds of things that people expected me to know. And if I didn't know, I knew how to find out.

JOHNSON: What was it like being a correspondent when your mother was such a big political player at the time?

ROBERTS: Well, it was great. As I said, I think it was harder on her, but since she was so willing not to take credit, it made it somewhat easier. It would have been very difficult if my father had been—I mean, I couldn't have done it if my

father had been alive and Majority Leader. But I think it was very nice. She was very available. She would never tell me anything. She was disgustingly discreet, so I never learned things from her. And that might have been an issue, too. Again, more for her than for me. Where people probably thought she was telling me things, and she wasn't. She was a terribly good secret-keeper, which really is annoying.

JOHNSON: Did you have to shy away from stories? You mentioned that Linda would have to take some.

ROBERTS: Yeah, there were times when there were stories in which it would have been inappropriate for me to do. Not just because Mamma was involved, but because of previous friendships. I don't think she was still in Congress at this point, but when Danny Rostenkowski got in trouble, I didn't go near that story. He was too old a friend.

JOHNSON: Well, besides the fact that your mother was there and what you just talked about, what other challenges did you face as a correspondent?

ROBERTS: Congressional kid? I think there were some other journalists who thought that I had undue access, which, again, was not true. So they were somewhat hostile. There was actually a funny story of one journalist who is still very much around, who said, "It's terrible. Steve Roberts of the *New York Times* is having an affair with that reporter from National Public Radio and they're both married." Did you catch on, our last names are both Roberts?
{laughter} So it wasn't just that Mamma was there. Steve was there, and his brother, Glenn, was working for Norm [Norman Yoshio] Mineta, and of course my brother was all over the place. And then our son was a Page, and

then our daughter worked for the Congressional Women's Caucus. I mean they were all over the place! {laughter}

JOHNSON: Did you face any obstacles, during the 1970s especially, but into the '80s because you were a woman working on the Hill?

ROBERTS: No. I certainly faced obstacles as a woman in journalism, but they were more obstacles in terms of getting hired and promoted rather than in terms of people that I was covering or interviewing. And I think that has everything to do with the fact that politicians will talk to anybody. I've always joked that if you walked in with a microphone, and you were polka-dotted with three heads, that they'd say, "Sit down, have a cup of coffee, or would you like three?" That that's what they cared about. They cared about the initials after your name—NPR, ABC, you know. They didn't care about your sex or anything else, really. I always joked that to walk around the Capitol with a microphone was like a weapon. "Down, boy! Down!" And there were all the jokes, you know. "What's the most dangerous place in the Capitol? Between Phil [William Philip] Gramm and a camera light." "What has two legs and is attracted to light? Newt [Newton Leroy] Gingrich."

JOHNSON: How has the reporting of Congress changed since you first started in the 1970s?

ROBERTS: I think that it is—with the exception of a couple of newspapers and NPR—it's deteriorated a lot. It was already on the way, but it is hardly ever covered as an institution. It is covered in opposition to the White House or when there's scandal. That's the only institutional thing that's ever covered. So just the day-in and day-out of legislation, by major media, is very rarely

covered. But there are now, as with the rest of American culture and politics, there are now specialty newspapers and magazines that do a wonderful job. And the Web. I mean I think *Politico* and *Roll Call* and *The Hill* and all that, the proliferation—and of course *Congressional Quarterly*—with the proliferation of all that, you really can find out what's going on in Congress.

JOHNSON: Why do you think this change has occurred, in your opinion, of deterioration?

ROBERTS: I think the coverage of government as a whole has lessened, and it has to do with focus groups that tell news executives that that's not what people want to know about. It was also easier in the days before graphics and the ability to set up a satellite any place you were and get live on the air. If you were looking for some way to fill a half hour of nightly news, you could go to a hearing on the Hill and there was a good three minutes. Now, first of all, any piece is about a minute fifteen, and, secondly, you can cover anything from anywhere in the world live, and you can fill in information that you don't have pictures to cover with graphics or historic footage.

People talk about the shrinking sound bite, but the truth is if you read a newspaper and time a quotation in the newspaper—which I have now done, many times, with a stopwatch—you'll find that most quotations take about nine to 11 seconds to read. And that is about what a sound bite is on television. And people bemoan that there's no longer the 30-second sound bite. Well, the 30-second sound bite was there because there was nothing else to put in that picture. Now, you can do a graphic that says—which is really much clearer—that will say, you know, 10 percent of the people will benefit from this, 30 percent of the people will have no impact, 10 percent of

the people will find themselves negatively affected by this. And that used to require somebody to say it because there was no other way for the journalist to convey it. So a lot of the changes have to do with the changes in technology.

JOHNSON: You've had the opportunity to work for NPR and ABC. How would you compare these two experiences?

ROBERTS: They're very similar. The big difference is time. People are always assuming there's some big difference in commercial versus non-commercial broadcasting, and there isn't. The big difference—I mean, not in terms of the stories you cover or how you cover—as I say, the big difference is time. My average piece from the Hill for NPR would be four and a half minutes, and my average piece for ABC would be a minute fifteen. That is a difference.

JOHNSON: What do you think the benefits are to having both public news outlets and then larger media corporations also covering Congress?

ROBERTS: I think the benefits are just to have Congress covered. I think the broadcast, the networks were the only people covering Congress for a very long time, and newspapers, and as I say, now having NPR—NPR is really the best place to get broadcast coverage of Congress by far. But I don't think that there's a difference, again, in terms of how you approach it. I just think it's a difference in how much coverage you have. I mean the broadcast—the people who are doing it for the broadcast networks—are doing a very good job. They're all good reporters, and they cover it constantly. I mean, I have e-mails all day long of what's going on on the Hill, and I know how it works.

They're at every committee, at every stakeout, you know, pulling Members off the floor and interviewing them. The actual reporting going on is very good. What makes it to the air is another question altogether. With the Web sites, though, it's better, because you can put much more up on the Web.

JOHNSON: So you think that's [the Web] made an improvement?

ROBERTS: Yes, I do.

JOHNSON: According to the *Congressional Directory*, you served on the Executive Committee of Correspondents for the House Radio-TV Gallery.

ROBERTS: Forever.

JOHNSON: Can you describe this committee and give some background for people that don't know what it does?

ROBERTS: The Congress and the press galleries—the print press, the radio-TV, and the periodical, and then the photographers—have this very odd relationship because we occupy space in the Capitol which obviously belongs to the Congress—well, belongs to the American people but good luck with that one—and the staff is paid for by the Congress, and yet it is this funny position because the Congress doesn't really want to be in the position of making the rules for the press or of hiring and firing the staff for the press. So it is this odd mixture of relationships where the staff officially works for the Clerk [of the House] or the Secretary of the Senate, but the Committee of Correspondents is elected by the correspondents, the accredited

correspondents to the Congress, and that committee is responsible for hiring and firing the staff and for accrediting members of the press. And it, by and large, works. There are times when it all falls apart. There are times when Congress says, “Not so fast.” That did happen with the *Voice of America*; there was a whole brouhaha about it because the rules of the radio and TV gallery say that you can’t be a government agent and paid by the government, or a lobbyist and all of that, and the *Voice of America* is obviously paid by the government and the Congress essentially said, “We don’t care what the rules say. You’re credentialing them.” So, occasionally, these things break down. But by and large, it works. The bigger problem these days is within the committees themselves and I, thankfully, have not had to do it for awhile. But deciding who’s a journalist is not easy with blogs and all that.

JOHNSON: Were you the first woman to chair the committee?

ROBERTS: I don’t know. I don’t think so, but I don’t know. It was terribly important—first of all, it was good citizenship, you know, within the industry, to do that. But it was also terribly important to NPR to have that voice because, at the time, we were a small news organization that was battling the big boys. That’s not the case anymore, but that was the case at the time, and so it was very important for us to have a seat at the table.

JOHNSON: How closely did you work with the House Radio-TV Gallery staff?

ROBERTS: Very, very closely. As I say, first of all, we hired and fired. Actually there was one hysterical moment where there was a woman on the House staff—just in terms of the hiring and firing—who we wanted to get a good raise to. He [House Officer who oversaw her position] thought it was too big a raise, and

he was saying, “I know all you TV people get big salaries, but that’s too big a raise.” And actually, the raise that I was promoting for her was more than I was making. And so there was this whole question of how did you deal with it? And she really did—and the steps and all that, it was right. She was right there and somebody had left and it was just . . . It was one of these, why am I having this fight? She’s going to make more than I am; it’s taking all this time; it’s awful! And so there was a very clear set of what you did under these circumstances, which is you appealed to the Speaker. And so we set up a meeting with Tip and Gary Hymel was his [administrative assistant] . . . Gary had worked for Daddy, and so we go in, and it’s [name redacted] and the superintendent of the gallery [Tina Tate] and Gary and Tip and me. Tip doesn’t say—there’s no conversation. There’s no conversation at all about the issue at hand. It’s just Tip saying, “So, [name redacted], you know, I used to babysit for Cokie, did you know that?” Which is of course total fiction, but he used to say it all the time. “You know that, [name redacted], right? Remember, Cokie, when your dad used to have those parties and oh, God, Eddie [Edward Patrick] Boland and I sat in the car, and we couldn’t get the car out because of the traffic, and we noticed that the help was stealing the booze, and we looked at each other and said, ‘Oh, what the hell, let’s go take the booze.’ Lobbyists are paying for it anyway!” So, message delivered. Problem solved. [Name redacted] got her raise. {laughter} Talk about indirection.

And so we worked constantly with the staff. Sometimes it would be difficult because the staff would be in a very difficult position because a committee chairman would be saying, “We’re not going to let cameras in there.” I mean it’s their playpen. Or “We’ll only let a pool camera in,” which now is common but, at the time, was a big deal. I mean, we’re talking before C-

SPAN and all of that, and so you would have to get in fights with people. Talk about no-win for me. I'd get in fights with people who I might be applying for jobs with, and it could be unpleasant. But you really did have to carry the water as a committee member and particularly as the president.

JOHNSON: What are your recollections of Tina Tate, the longtime director?²

ROBERTS: I actually hired Tina. I was the chairman who hired Tina. She actually called me on, I guess, the 20th anniversary and said, "Thanks!" She's wonderful. She's a very smart, very able, accommodating person who really tried desperately to make it all work for everybody, to make it work for the correspondents and to make it work for the Congress. Being in that position can be very tough because you really do have two sets of bosses. She walked that line much better than most. There were others, who will go nameless—this was truer on the Senate side—who really seemed to think that their job was to keep us from covering Congress.

JOHNSON: Were there other offices that you worked closely with as a correspondent?

ROBERTS: Yes, all the leadership offices. The Speaker's Office, the Minority Leader's Office—particularly when Bob [Robert Henry] Michel was Minority Leader—the Whip's Office, the Majority Leader's Office, and the Minority Whip's Office, absolutely. I used to make the rounds of those offices constantly. I knew exactly when the Persian Gulf War was going to break out, having done a little—I just sort of walked around those offices and I came back to the NPR booth and said, "I'm not leaving. This is happening tonight."

JOHNSON: Did it get more difficult, as time went on, to use some of the sources, even just the doormen you mentioned?

ROBERTS: They retired! It was rotten of them! But no. As long as they were there, it was fine.

JOHNSON: With the change and less people staying around Congress and the increase in partisanship—did that . . . ?

ROBERTS: Sure. I mean, that's when I left. I just couldn't stand it. I didn't want to do that.

JOHNSON: What other changes in the institution did you witness? Some of the more subtle changes that people on the outside might not be privy to?

ROBERTS: Well, the big change is that Members aren't here. Did I talk about that before when we met? When I was growing up, Congress was here, and then Congress was home. It took two days to get to New Orleans. So when they were here, everybody was together. So families spent a lot of time together. Parents were on PTAs together, and everybody went to church together. There were lots of sort of activities for congressional families and particularly even within state delegations. So there was a tremendous sense of camaraderie and closeness—a real family sense. That's just gone. There have been many political-science tomes on how people vote, but really, if it wasn't something important to your district or your party, the way you voted was your buddy asked you to. Not that there aren't that many things that aren't important to your district or your party, but there always are some. Your

buddy was likely to be the person who you saw at your kids' school, rather than somebody you just knew through politics.

JOHNSON: Based on your reporting on Congress and also your impressions of your mother, how do you think the role of women changed in Congress? Both Members and also support staff?

ROBERTS: Oh, enormously. Just enormously. I remember looking around one day at a—I think it was Social Security—during the Social Security fix that Dole and [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan finally put together at the end of the session in, what was it, '83, I guess, probably, but at any rate—looking around the table and behind every one of those men, literally standing behind, was a woman. All the experts were women. And that was a huge change. I actually tried to do a piece about it, and they wouldn't let me. The women wouldn't let me because it was no-win for them. If I said, "Carolyn Weaver is really Bob Dole on Social Security," that didn't work for her. But that change really started to happen in the '70s, and you saw it, and now it's enormous. And some of it has to do with education of women and all that. Some of it has to do with pay scale. You can get better women for those salaries than you can men. That is a huge part of it.

In terms of women in Congress, again, enormous difference because you've hit a critical mass. When Mamma went, I think there were 16 total, and now if you add in the Delegates, I think we hit 70, don't we?

JOHNSON: More than that.

ROBERTS: Are you counting Senate and House?

JOHNSON: Right, Senate and House.

ROBERTS: So that's huge. I kept trying to explain to people while I was out on book tour while Hillary [Rodham Clinton] was still viable, you know, having the Speaker of the House [Nancy Pelosi] as a woman is a very big deal. I mean, you understand this, but America doesn't really understand this is a coequal branch of government, and the head of it is a woman! It's a constitutional office. This is big. So it's an enormous difference. And there are some things that they continue to do—I'll separate the House and Senate here—self-consciously in the House. There are an enormous amount of things they continue to do self-consciously as women in the Senate. Going from two to 16 is big. They're well aware of it, and now that's going to be a big loss to lose Kay [Kathryn Ann Bailey] Hutchison because she was one of the best at this. Their ability to work across party lines, particularly on issues of economic interest to women, is basically *it* these days. I mean they're the bastion of bipartisanship. And part of it is that they just want to get together and get away from those men. The testosterone-free zone, please!

In the House, it's less true, but that's because the partisanship in the House is just so fierce that it's really hard to do it, but you still see some of it in the House. Again, losing somebody like Deborah [D.] Pryce will be a real loss because she was, again, somebody who was really good at it.

But I think that they still, and again we have data to support this—the Center on American Women in Politics at Rutgers has done this over the years now with women in state legislatures. They are less partisan and less ideological than the men are and will cross party lines on, again, mainly on

issues that affect women, children, and families, but on other issues as well. It was interesting, for instance—and they were never able to measure it at the national legislature [level] because there weren't enough women to make it scientifically sound, and I mean we can always report it and anecdotally talk about it and all that, but the first Congress when they were able to do it was after the '92 election, and you saw it immediately on the assault weapons ban, where you saw Republican women crossing to vote for the assault weapons ban, and, similarly, on welfare reform, Republican women insisting that child support enforcement be federalized. I don't care what the ideology is, the reality is that men go across state lines, and then their children don't get money. So it's that practicality that women bring to the table, much more so than men do. They just live different lives, you know?

JOHNSON: Were there any women in particular, besides your mother of course, that you admired?

ROBERTS: Oh, lots of them. Pat [Patricia Scott] Schroeder, certainly. Olympia [Jean] Snowe is somebody I admire a lot. Susan [Margaret] Collins, both of them [Maine Senators]. As I say, Kay Hutchison has been a world-class Senator. Barbara [Ann] Mikulski is a terrific Senator. Dianne Feinstein is a great Senator. Hillary Clinton is a very good Senator. I think Nancy Pelosi is doing a good job. I think she's doing quite a good job. Barbara Kennelly was a good Member of the House. I mean, lots of them. If I had a book in front of me, I could go down the list. You hate to name names because you leave people out, but [there are] lots of women I admire.

JOHNSON: What advice would you offer a new journalist that was starting a career covering Congress?

ROBERTS: To get to know people as casually as you can. My first advice would be, don't come in with some kind of anti-Congress attitude, which is what I think most people do. Most people think that Members of Congress are just out for their own personal gain, whether it be illegal or whether it be political, that everything they do, they just do to get re-elected. I think that attitude is pervasive among reporters, and I think it's very unfortunate and unfair. I think most Members of Congress, by and large, are good public servants trying to do what they think is right by their lights, for their country and their constituents. I think approaching it from that perspective is a much more useful way to understand what's going on and to cover it fairly. And to also understand that the Founders had a reason for creating this institution. It should be there. And so I think that that is also very useful.

But then just going down to the Speaker's Lobby or the President's Room and pulling people off during the vote and talking to them about what's going on. Don't try to do all your work through staff. A lot of people do that. I think that's a mistake because sometimes staff doesn't know. Sometimes they have their own agendas, and I think that, also, you can get it much more on the record from a Member of Congress, often on tape. I think that that's a very, very useful thing to do—just go down and get to know them. They will come talk to you. You are a reporter.

JOHNSON: Did you find it was more difficult to access Members themselves, though, because staff was increasing, especially on the House side, the hierarchy?

ROBERTS: Not when you just go to the floor. The staff isn't there. That's the joy of it. Speaker's Lobby—you're there and they're not. You just say to the doorman,

“Get me Congressman So-and-so.” I used to have what I called Speaker’s Lobby— whatever this thing is—part of your arm because Members would come through and politicians are so tactile that it’s just horrible. So that I’d stand at the door waiting to see who was there to get somebody off to talk about some piece of legislation or whatever, and they’d walk through the doors, and they’d each grab me right here (around my upper arm). They’d say, “Hi, Cokie. Hi, Cokie. Hi, Cokie!” And I’d have bruises, literally, around my arm. Speaker’s Lobby bruises.

JOHNSON: So rather than a handshake, you had a bruised arm.

ROBERTS: Right, because you know, they were just walking through. But that is the way to do it, is to not be shy about that. Just go in and talk to them. You know, when you’re doing that, while you’re waiting, you have conversations with the doorpeople, and sometimes you learn something there, too.

JOHNSON: Since you have the unusual circumstance of being the child of two former Members, if you were to offer advice to someone who was running for Congress, what would that be?

ROBERTS: You mean about serving in Congress or about winning the election?

JOHNSON: About serving in Congress.

ROBERTS: I guess it would be similar to what I would say to the reporter. Have some respect for the institution. Have respect for the institution, not just your party. And listen—there’s a concept. Stop talking and listen. {laughter} Listen to people . . . I mean, what’s been so detrimental with the drawing of

congressional districts to pick your own voters, is that people have no reason, politically, to talk to anybody other than people just like themselves, much less listen to anybody other than people just like themselves. And that is a real disservice, and it's why things get drawn out because eventually you're going to have to come to a compromise that serves the whole nation. You'd be better off if you sort of started out that way and started listening to people about what really would be of use to their districts or the people of their color or whatever it is. I think spending some time across the aisle listening would be a very useful thing.

JOHNSON: Is there anything else you want to add about either your parents' careers or your career that wasn't brought up today?

ROBERTS: I do think that business about districting is terribly important. I think that that's one of the great negative events of the last 20 years. And, of course, there's always been funny lines drawn. Before gerrymandering, even in the first congressional election, Patrick Henry drew the lines for James Madison, [Jr.]'s, seat to look like fingers of a hand, and in each finger were the people that were against the Constitution, the Anti-Federalists, were in each of these fingers. And James Monroe, who at that point was an Anti-Federalist—he later switched—was running against Madison. George Washington says to Madison, “You're going to lose. I've been down there. You're going to lose.” And Madison says, “What? The father of the Constitution?” And Washington says, “Yeah, that's your basic problem.” So Madison goes and discovers in fact he is going to lose. And so he promised a Bill of Rights, and he got elected, and the First Congress convenes, and he says, “Now we've got to do a Bill of Rights,” and everybody says, “Are you out of your mind? We've just gone through this ratification battle, and we've got all this other

stuff to do; we don't have a currency; we don't have anything." And he says, "I promised it! It's a campaign promise!" So districting problems do have good effects, but since then, they haven't been so good.

I think that what this business of picking your voters—first of all, is so anti-democratic—it does a few very, very bad things. It creates a far more partisan chamber because you only worry about getting attacked from the true believers of your own party in a primary rather than a general election. Look what just happened to Chris [Christopher B.] Cannon as a perfect example of that.

You do only represent people who are just like you, so that your desire or even ability to compromise is far less that it used to be.

I'll give you an example. Bob Livingston used to represent a district that was 30- percent black. So he voted for fair housing, he voted for Martin Luther King holiday, he voted for a variety of things that were not the things that people whose representative in the state legislature was David Duke expected him to do. But he could explain to the yahoos in his district that he had to do it because of the black constituency when it was actually stuff that he wanted to do. Then it was redistricted to be lily-white conservative Republicans, and, you know, it's almost impossible for that person—it was [David] Vitter, I don't know who it is now—to do that. You just have to be fighting your constituency all the time to do something that would be a sort of national interest thing to do. And that's true on both sides. It just makes legislating and governing much, much harder.

The President [George W. Bush], actually, was talking to me—I don't often get to say, "The President was talking to me about it," {laughter}—when I went with him to meet the Pope. We were talking about immigration, and he's, you know, he's basically just furious about immigration, about the failure of the bill, and he said, "It's all about the way districts are drawn." And it is fundamentally anti-democratic because the whole idea is you get to throw these people out. In 2006, I must say I was heartened, not for partisan reasons, but I thought they had drawn the districts so cleverly that you'd never be able to register that vote of no confidence, which an off-year election is—it's either a vote of confidence or no confidence—I was afraid that that had been taken away from the voters, which would really be different from what the Founders had in mind. So the fact that even with that, you were able to change parties and register that vote was heartening, but it's much harder than it should be.

JOHNSON: Is there anything else that you wanted to add?

ROBERTS: Were there questions on here that . . . Well, the technological changes are interesting. The first technological change that made a difference in the House was electronic roll calls because when it took 45 minutes to call the roll, they had far fewer roll calls and many more teller votes. By making it easier to call the roll, it opened the door for all of these interest groups to have votes just for the purpose of having a report card to go back to the district. Basically meaningless votes, but they're meaningful in terms of raising money and having these bogus report cards. So that was the first technological change. Particularly the vote on the *[House] Journal*. What an easy way to run against someone. "He was absent! He didn't vote on the *Journal!*" Please. But it works. So everybody has to show up for a *Journal*

vote which, from a reporter's perspective, was great because they were all right there. So that was the first technological change.

Then, C-SPAN covering the House was such a technological change that the Senate really couldn't withstand it. Mainly for ego reasons. I remember Bob [Robert Carlyle] Byrd saying, "The House is becoming more famous than we are! And we are the upper body." Then, with getting into every committee, that means that everything can be covered everywhere all the time. That has pluses and minuses from the perspective of being a correspondent because everybody expects you to be sort of riding herd on all of that, and, if you're not careful, it can make your reporting derivative. That you're so enmeshed in all the technological stuff of, you know, there's feeds coming in from here, there, and everywhere, and the internet is constantly updating with wire stories or whatever it is, and you're not actually down on the ground doing the reporting because there's so much other stuff you're having to feed back and all that.

Every time the technology changes, it sort of has an initial impact of being difficult and then you sort of figure it out, but it can be both a blessing and a curse any time it changes. Again, I haven't done daily reporting of Congress in a long time, so I don't know sort of how it's working now, but all those changes, initially, were very helpful and difficult.

JOHNSON: But it didn't change the access you were able to have with Members?

ROBERTS: No. No. No. I think one of the things that did change in terms of inside the institution—and you certainly heard about this quite explicitly—was, for instance, in leadership races, they started sort of discussing who was good on

TV. And, of course, that had never been true before the pervasiveness of television in the institution, and the Sunday talk shows just sort of exacerbated that and the, of course, now with cable. Everybody has to be good on TV.

There was something else I was thinking as I was talking, but I've forgotten it because I'm old and senile. {laughter} Let's see, what else is there? You know, the preserving the history of the House—aside from my mother's concern—I think it's wonderful what you all are doing because I remember writing a story one day about one day the electronic voting system broke down, and they did have to call the roll, and nobody knew how to call it, nobody knew how to answer it, all that. It was very funny. It was at the same time that they voted not to have a Historian of the House. Now that was for all kinds of political reasons. But it was sort of right there, the two things at the same time. When you don't have any historical, institutional memory, you really do condemn yourself to fight these same fights over again, and that was certainly true in the '80s—you kept seeing that because we kept having big classes on that and you'd just say, "Oh, God. We've been there, done that."

I can't think of anything. If you're writing something and think of something, just call me.

JOHNSON: Okay, well, thank you. Thank you very much.

ROBERTS: Okay. All right.

NOTES

¹ Reference to the four-volume set on the U.S. Congress edited by Donald C. Bacon, Roger H. Davidson, and Morton Keller; Cokie Roberts served on the editorial advisory board.

² Tina Tate served as the director of the House Radio-TV Gallery from 1981 to 2007. The Office of the Historian conducted four oral history interviews with Tina Tate (June 28, 2007; July 12, 2007; July 1, 2008; August, 28, 2008).

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