

The Honorable Elizabeth Holtzman
U.S. Representative of New York (1973–1981)

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

Behind Closed Doors

Representative Holtzman provides insight on the workings of the House Judiciary Committee during the investigation into the Watergate scandal.

Interview recorded March 10, 2016

The work involved, first looking at the Constitution—what does the Constitution require? What is a high crime and misdemeanor? What does impeachment really mean? So, we had to do a lot of research about that. Then what happened was that once we understood what the law was, what the Constitution said—and all the members of the Judiciary Committee at that time were lawyers—then we had to absorb the facts. What were all the facts? And every day—it seemed like every day, if it wasn't every day, it was a lot of days—the committee would meet behind closed doors, and the committee staff would present us with fact statements. They would read the statement of fact, and all the members of the committee got to bombard them with questions. “Oh, I don't agree with this,” or “What's the proof for that?”—and whatever. And the point of that was really smart because no member of that committee after we finished months of going through these fact statements could say, “I didn't know what was going on.” Everybody was in this room. Everybody had a chance to challenge the facts. Everybody had a chance to say, “No, this is not accurate, where's the backup?” Republicans and Democrats—of course, nobody understood what was going on, no one in the public really understood what was happening behind the closed the doors. And the press was getting very antsy. “What are they doing?” And we got, were attacked, and got seriously criticized for taking time but, of course, it did take time to get all the facts amassed. We had something like 27 notebooks of fact statements. I mean, it was huge.