

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

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript
March 10, 2016

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

“I said, ‘The agenda of what we need to do is so huge, we can’t possibly accomplish everything anyway. So let’s just focus on areas that we agree on. And first of all, it will make us stronger if all agree, and all agree to work on them.’ And that’s how we started. And also, it was critical, I think, to get people’s participation, the participation of women. Because I think since it was really early, there had been no caucus, to the best of my knowledge, before that. Women had not worked together. We were concerned about being ridiculed. We were concerned about negative press. We were concerned about how this was going to affect us in our district. I think we—this was a very important step to make people feel politically comfortable in joining with people of different political views. So, I think it worked. From my point of view, it worked.”

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Abstract

Elizabeth (Liz) Holtzman pulled off a major upset when she defeated longtime Representative and Judiciary Committee Chairman, Emanuel Celler, to win a seat in the 93rd Congress (1973–1975). The youngest woman ever elected to Congress at the time (31)—a record that would stand for more than four decades—Holtzman’s grassroots campaign in her New York City district centered on her opposition to the Vietnam War. In her interview, Holtzman, a Harvard Law School graduate, speaks of how the civil rights movement influenced her decision to seek political office as an avenue to work for social justice. After her election, she recalls her efforts to differentiate herself from her predecessor. Despite her request for a different assignment, she received a spot on the Judiciary Committee. Ironically, the assignment put her at the center of one of the defining political moments of her generation since the panel oversaw the impeachment hearings for President Richard M. Nixon in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal. Holtzman shares her memories of the tumultuous period, including the work of the Judiciary Committee, her questioning of President Gerald R. Ford, and the importance of having women on the panel.

A consistent and vocal supporter of women’s rights, Holtzman cofounded the Congresswomen’s Caucus in 1977. Holtzman describes the early years of the caucus as well as the intricate whip operation she and her women colleagues successfully organized to pass an extension of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1977. Known as a passionate and hard-working legislator, Holtzman’s interview provides a first-hand account of the changing role of women in Congress during the 1970s.

Biography

HOLTZMAN, Elizabeth, a Representative from New York; born in Brooklyn, N.Y., August 11, 1941; graduated from Abraham Lincoln High School, Brooklyn, N.Y., 1958; B.A., Radcliffe College, 1962; J.D., Harvard Law School, 1965; admitted to the New York bar in 1966 and commenced practice in New York City; Democratic State committeewoman and district leader 1970–1972; assistant to Mayor John V. Lindsay, 1969–1970; founder, Brooklyn Women’s Political Caucus; delegate to Democratic National Convention, 1972; elected as a Democrat to the Ninety-third and to the three succeeding Congresses (January 3, 1973–January 3, 1981); was not a candidate for reelection in 1980 but was an unsuccessful candidate for election to the United States Senate; faculty, New York University Law School and Graduate School of Public Administration, 1981–1982; district attorney, Kings County, Brooklyn, N.Y., 1982–1989; New York City comptroller, 1990–1993; unsuccessful candidate in 1992 for nomination to the United States Senate; resumed the practice of law; is a resident of Brooklyn, N.Y.

[Read full biography](#)

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 or redactions 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*, <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:

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Interviewer Biographies

Matt Wasniewski is the Historian of the U.S. House of Representatives, a position he has held since 2010. He has worked in the House as a historical editor and manager since 2002. Matt served as the editor-in-chief of *Women in Congress, 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006), *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008), and the *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–2012* (GPO, 2013). He helped to create the House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of current and former Members, longtime staff, and support personnel. He earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from the University of Maryland, College Park, in 2004. His prior work experience includes several years as the associate historian and communications director at the U.S. Capitol Historical Society, and, in the early 1990s, as the sports editor for a northern Virginia newspaper.

Kathleen Johnson is the Manager of Oral History for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. in history from Columbia University, where she also played basketball for four years, and holds two master’s degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create the 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). Before joining the Office of the Historian, she worked as a high school history teacher and social studies curriculum consultant.

— THE HONORABLE ELIZABETH HOLTZMAN OF NEW YORK —

A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

JOHNSON: My name is Kathleen Johnson. I'm with the House Historian, Matt Wasniewski. Today's date is March 10th, 2016, and we are in the House Recording Studio in the Rayburn House Office Building. And today, joining us, we have former Representative [Elizabeth] Liz Holtzman from New York. Thank you so much for joining us today.

HOLTZMAN: I'm very glad to be here. Thank you for having me.

WASNIEWSKI: Thank you.

JOHNSON: This interview is part of a larger project that we're doing to recognize and to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the election of Jeannette Rankin, the first woman elected to Congress. And we have many, many questions to ask you today. First off, though, we wanted to know when you were young if you had any female role models.

HOLTZMAN: Well, I would say my mom and my grandmother. My mother was a professor and a very well-educated woman. And she always taught me that I could be anything I wanted. And my grandmother had wanted to be a doctor, but it wasn't acceptable for a woman to be a doctor in her era. So, I guess some of that angst came down through the genes or something to me. But in any case, my grandfather and my father were very supportive of the idea that a woman could do anything. And so I felt I was in a very encouraging environment and had role models, at least from the point of view of my mom, a woman who had a professional career.

JOHNSON: When you were young, what did you want to be when you grew up?

HOLTZMAN: Oh, I think I started wanting to be an artist. I had absolutely no artistic talent. And then I might have wanted to be a scientist, and I had, of course, no scientific talent. And I only decided that I was interested in politics from a career point of view when I was invited to come and be an assistant to the mayor of New York City, John [Vliet] Lindsay. And I had never seen elected officials up close; I thought there was some kind of special charisma, special quality. When I got up close to them and saw them up close, I said, “You know something? If they can do it, I can do it.” So, I had lots of role models in city hall in New York City.

JOHNSON: Was there someone in particular that may have served as a political inspiration or a mentor when you were younger?

HOLTZMAN: Not really. My family was very interested in politics and government. Dinner table conversation was almost always about politics and government. But there was no one in particular that I felt was an inspiration. I had actually no blueprint, no path at all drawn for me. I had to do it myself.

WASNIEWSKI: What was it that motivated you to run for Congress? Were you recruited?

HOLTZMAN: No. {laughter} No, quite the contrary. I was a thorn in the side of the machine in Brooklyn and of everybody else. No, I wasn't recruited. I ran for office because Congress—before that, two years before that—I decided I wanted to run for public office, but I didn't have the residency requirements. So I ran for a Democratic Party position. In order to win that party position, I had to challenge the Brooklyn machine. I was a reformer, antiwar candidate, not part of a corrupt political machine. I was fighting it. And that was not an easy battle because the law in New York was that incumbents were first on the ballot, and I never could have won if that law remained in effect. But I had a friend from Harvard Law School, a classmate of mine who

said, “Let’s challenge this law.” So, one of my favorite lawsuits is entitled “Holtzman against Power,” and Power lost. {laughter} Holtzman won. So, we got the law declared unconstitutional in New York state, and I was able to run and win that position.

And my opponent, the incumbent Congressman [Emanuel Celler], was the Congressman in my district. And, of course, nobody talked about him, and he was never there. He didn’t have an office in the district; you had to go to his law office in Manhattan. He never was present in any community meetings. He was not involved in anything going on in the district. And I realized that he was vulnerable, so I decided to challenge him. I thought I could raise the money; I thought I could put together the operation to win. But, of course, I couldn’t raise the money. We raised—I know this sounds crazy—we raised \$32,000 and borrowed \$4,000 and won a primary election. Today, that race would cost at least \$2 to \$4 million. And I never would have been able to run. But in those days, I substituted shoe leather for dollars. We had no TV commercials, we had no radio commercials, we had no polling. No one took us seriously, but we still won.

But I really want to answer your question in a deeper way, which is not just the superficial incentives or inspirations to run. But, basically, what happened to me was I was involved in the civil rights movement in the early ’60s, and I was in the South during the early days of the protests against segregation and Jim Crow. And I saw with my own eyes a system where the police used cattle prods and dogs and violence to stop blacks from just the basic right to vote, the basic right to walk on the street, the basic right to go into a swimming pool, the basic right to go into a library. I saw this with my own eyes. And I saw that system crumble. And I said to myself, if people really try hard, we can bring about a society with justice.

So, that was a very deep inspiration for me because I felt that there was—if I worked hard enough, there was some way I could contribute to making this country a better country. My parents, my grandparents, my whole family came as immigrants to the United States. I was the first person in my family to be born in America. And I really wanted to give back in some way to this country that had provided a refuge.

WASNIEWSKI: In that first campaign, as you said, you were an outsider pushing against the machine. Did you get advice from anybody? Did you seek advice? Did you get any good advice?

HOLTZMAN: Oh, yes. Well, I had a little bit of advice. I wouldn't say from . . . well, in the law firm that I was working at—which was a very prominent law firm—there was somebody in that firm who was a very experienced political figure. He also challenged the machine, but in Manhattan, he was wise person. And I went to see him. I said, “Well, I'll just ask what he thinks about this.” And because mostly, people would say, “Liz, you don't have a chance.” And I went to see him, and I talked to him about the race. He said, “Liz, I think you could do it.” So, there were only about three people in the world who thought I could do it: my dad—not my mom—my dad, this guy called Eddie Costikyan, maybe my campaign manager, and I. We were the four in the world. Everybody else was kind of humoring me.

WASNIEWSKI: Your opponent, of course, was Emanuel Celler, longtime Judiciary Committee chairman. Were there any key moments in the campaign where you thought, “I've turned the corner, I'm competitive now in this race.”

HOLTZMAN: Well, I knew from having represented a part of that district that he was a nonfactor. People—he was a nonpresence—people never said, “Oh, let's talk to Celler. Let's talk to him, let's find out what he thinks. Let's enlist his

support. Let's get his help." He was just a nonpresence. So, I knew there wasn't really a strong feeling for him. But as I campaigned around the district—which I had to do personally because we didn't have money for media—we went to subway stops. We drove around the district. We saw people standing anywhere, we got out of the car. We did movie lines, bowling lines, bingo lines. You name it, we found people anywhere. But the response was really very good. And this also was during the time of the Vietnam War, and I ran as an antiwar candidate. He had been a big supporter of the war, and that was a big . . . it made a big difference in my race. People who were against the war, who were against the Brooklyn machine, who wanted a different kind of politics, well, they were supporting me.

JOHNSON: How important of an issue was gender in that campaign?

HOLTZMAN: Well, I don't really know because we didn't do any polling. But let me just say this, that the Brooklyn machine knew he was in trouble. We didn't know that because we didn't do any polling, but they knew he was in big trouble. So they put up a third candidate in the race, who was also part of the machine. Celler was part of the Brooklyn machine. And they put up another machine candidate to siphon off an anti-Celler vote that wouldn't go to me, and I still won with a third-party candidate in the race. Gives you an idea of how little we knew about what was really going to happen.

But I would say gender—I think, actually, it was helpful in that race. Why was it helpful? One, people remembered meeting me. Because how many women were campaigning on streets for Congress? Nobody had ever met Congresswomen. I still meet today—this is more than 40 years later—people who said, “Liz, don't you remember meeting me at the Avenue M subway

stop? Don't you remember me? I met you at the Avenue J subway stop." So, that was a big deal for people. They remembered that. And I'm not sure as a man, I would have stood out.

The second thing is that I was talking about a different kind of politics: honest politics, clean politics, antimachine politics. And I think women weren't associated with the backroom, cigar-smoking kind of politics that I was fighting. So, I think that was helpful. I also think that when it comes to a position like Congress—because I've served in and run for other positions—there's not as much of a gender issue there because Congress, people don't really 100 percent understand it, but they know it involves talking. They figure a woman could do that, too. So, I had a much harder time when I ran for DA [district attorney], winning that job. But this was, this was much easier. And I think I would say on the whole, gender was an advantage.

JOHNSON: What about your age? Because you also were very, very young.

HOLTZMAN: Well, the comparison was very helpful, I would say. My opponent was 84 years old, and we did not present him as too old. But we did present him as too tired, and he was. He didn't show up in the district, he didn't have an office in the district. He had the worst absentee record in the New York delegation. So, this was not a man of high-energy level out there fighting every minute. At least it wasn't public what he was doing about that. So, I think that was a factor.

WASNIEWSKI: Afterwards, the press, *Time* magazine, for one, dubbed you "Liz, the Lion Killer" after you won the primary. I know you said you were one of four people who thought you could win. But were you surprised by the outcome, or no?

HOLTZMAN:

Not really. By the end, the response on the streets was really great. It was really great. I was very encouraged by that. But, of course, we had no way of putting that in context. And the press called me “Lion Killer,” but I still remember we had people calling in from the polls that night. And the first, one of the first, calls we got was someone who was in Crown Heights—that’s the district we lost by, I don’t know, hundreds of votes. And the person called up and was crying. We just had to wait until the last returns came in.

And actually, what happened was that one New York reporter was now dubbed the expert on me. Why? Because she’d come out to cover the race. Every newspaper and every TV station had to cover all the races. They just did it dutifully. There were a number of other quote, unquote “more important” races in New York. So, I was the last one on the list. I was low person on the totem pole. And when she came out to interview me and sort of talked to people around while I was campaigning, she met people at the subway stops. And they were saying, “Oh, I’m voting for Liz. Oh, I’m voting for Liz.” So, she wrote an article, and when she said, “Liz Holtzman has a fighting chance of winning”—nobody else had written an article about me. But the editor said, “You have to be out of your mind.” So, now {laughter} it’s taken out of the story. But by the time I won, no one else—because no one had written at all about me—she was now the expert. And I think she felt pretty good about having said {laughter} that, even though it was taken out of the story.

So, as I said, nobody gave me a chance of winning. And we had no support from anybody except in the district because there were other races. Bella [Savitzky] Abzug was running. So, women’s groups were supporting Bella, and peace groups were supporting Bella. And Allard [Kenneth] Lowenstein was running, and so peace groups were supporting him. Women’s groups

were supporting him, and reform groups were supporting him. And nobody gave me a chance. It was only the people in the district who cared about good government and were anti the Vietnam War that supported me. But it was enough to win.

WASNIEWSKI: That's actually a good segue. We've been asking everybody that we've interviewed to just describe your district for us, both physically and geographically, your constituency.

HOLTZMAN: Well, my district was in what I would call the southern part of Brooklyn. I probably missed most of the big landmarks in Brooklyn: I didn't have the Atlantic Ocean; I didn't have the East River; I didn't have downtown Brooklyn. I guess Brooklyn College might have been—was in my district. That might have been the biggest institution. It was a working-class district, not a rich district. It was diverse. It had a Jewish population, Irish population, black population. Black population's probably about 10 percent of the district; Irish population, maybe 30 percent, 40 percent; small Italian part of the district; but mostly working-class people. That was pretty much it. And my opponent had the first choice of drawing the district line, so he tried to draw lines that would help him. But because it was a reapportionment year, there were a lot of people who had had no experience with him. And a lot of people who were put off by the age.

I'll tell you a funny story. Since we didn't have enough money to do what is normally done in a campaign, which is you send people out door-to-door, and they identify your people who support you, and then you call those people. Well, we had no money to do that, and we didn't have enough volunteers to do that. So we just decided in the new parts of the district we would just call everybody because they had no experience with him. So, we

just were crossing our fingers and hoping. And this one woman answered the phone—this was a story that was reported to me. Remember, he’s 84 years old. People called and said, “Will you vote for Liz Holtzman?” And she said, “Darling, I’m 84 years old. If he feels the way I feel, he’s got no business being in Congress. Of course, I’m voting for Holtzman.”

So, I would say it was a wonderful district in the sense that my constituents were very respectful and open. They would disagree with me. I had town meetings. I had meetings in libraries all over the district. I had open office hours for anybody to come to see me on Sunday morning. So, I had an opportunity to interact with a lot of people, and I felt very privileged to represent them. I had no special interests in my district. They were just middle-class, lower-middle-class, working-class people. And they cared a lot about good government. And so I was really fortunate to represent them, and they gave me a lot of leeway.

JOHNSON:

An important aspect about campaigning that you’ve touched upon is the campaign materials. We’ve been asking people about buttons that they might have had, slogans that they used. And next to you on that table over there is a button that’s in the House Collection. And we didn’t know if you had a special memory or something that comes to mind based on that particular button.

HOLTZMAN:

This probably was not my first campaign, but . . . because this is probably when I ran for office the second time—for Congress the second time. I had some very wonderful photographs of me that were taken for that campaign. I remember a photographer who’s . . . did a lot of work on women running for office, including a Houston convention in, I think, 1976.¹ She did the photographs of me. And I remember we went on the Brooklyn Bridge to get

the photographs taken because it's iconic: the Brooklyn Bridge for a Brooklyn candidate. And I think that might have been the first time, actually, that I'd walked on the bridge. But it was really thrilling to be up there so high, and such a beautiful view. And the photograph, with the grid behind me, with the cables behind me, was just a great photo. That's what I remember a lot.

And I remember, also, helping to write the first—might have been the only piece of campaign literature we had—with a college classmate of mine. We sat in the basement of my parents' house typing it out on a typewriter—trying to be very concise—but preparing the first piece of literature. It was very good. It was effective, so it worked. We gave out lots of it. And I probably could never have won without the help of people from my college class—classmates of mine—and classmates of mine from law school who were really helpful. And actually, a law school classmate of mine came down from Philadelphia, brought someone else to help run the campaign and to do the Election Day—the last 10 days to organize things more effectively. And, yes, so I could never have done it without them.

WASNIEWSKI: Let's move on to the House.

JOHNSON: Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: So, at the beginning of the 93rd Congress [1973–1975], your first, you were one of 14 women serving in the House on Opening Day. Cardiss Collins and Lindy [Corinne Claiborne] Boggs would join a little bit later that Congress. Did you find that because you were such a small group of women at that point that the women Members gravitated towards each other?

HOLTZMAN:

I wouldn't say that, really. A little bit later, Congresswoman [Margaret M.] Heckler, a Republican, and I worked together to create the Congresswomen's Caucus, which formally brought Congresswomen together.² And then I think there was a much richer relationship because it was focused on issues, and we worked together on a number of issues. And we got to know each other better, and so forth. So, I think that that helped us cement that relationship.

But I knew the other Members of Congress. Two of those women of the 14 were from New York City, Bella Abzug and Shirley [Anita] Chisholm. Shirley was in the next district to mine, so we got to know each other pretty well. But I would say that it was after Watergate and my being on the House Judiciary Committee, and the fact that the Judiciary Committee handled the impeachment process in a way that brought such great public respect for the Congress—that after that, I felt that I had more respect myself. It was easier for me to get things done and to win at least the attention of my colleagues.

Although I must say—and I've told this story before—when I was elected, I did not want to be on the House Judiciary Committee because my predecessor had been on it for 50 years. And my advisors and I in our brilliance decided that I should strike out for a new territory and try to get on a different committee. And so I went down to Washington in the late fall of 1972 to try to get my colleagues to support my effort to be on some committee other than the House Judiciary Committee. And I remember meeting with one of the top members of the Ways and Means Committee, he was from Georgia. And he said to me, “Now, Ms. Holtzman, you don't really have to worry just because you're a Jew and a woman.” And I said, “Well, I guess I'm in real trouble now.” {laughter} But in the end, neither one of those things turned out to be an impediment. But it was really shocking, my first introduction to the House that I would get a comment

like that both on my gender and my religion. But I never found that again. I would say for the most part—maybe one or two exceptions.

JOHNSON: In the early 1970s, there was a group of younger women that were elected, you and Pat [Patricia Scott] Schroeder are two standouts. But you also served in the final Congress for some of the veteran women that we wanted to ask you about: Martha [Wright] Griffiths, Edith [Starrett] Green, Julia [Butler] Hansen. How would you compare that older generation of women who had served with the younger women that came in?

HOLTZMAN: Great. I would say the women were really amazing—took a lot to run as a woman for Congress and to serve, and to serve effectively. And Martha Griffiths, in particular, was somebody I really respected, and she was highly respected in the House, too. I wasn't the only one who held her in high regard. I didn't know Julia Hansen that well, but she was also highly regarded. Not as much, I think, as Martha Griffiths. And who was the other woman you mentioned?

JOHNSON: Edith Green.

HOLTZMAN: I had the same . . . I didn't know Edith Green very well.

JOHNSON: Did Martha Griffiths offer you any advice? Or did any of these veteran women offer advice or serve as a mentor?

HOLTZMAN: I don't think so. No. And anyway, we were pretty soon thrust into the impeachment process, so there was no mentoring for that one. That was, you had to have been {laughter} there during the Andrew Johnson impeachment, and I don't think there was anyone around from that 100 years before.

WASNIEWSKI: Before we get too far away from it, you mentioned not wanting to get on Judiciary to begin with. Just a two-part follow-up question: What committee did you want to get on? And then, was there anyone who was giving you advice, other than your local advisors, about committee selection?

HOLTZMAN: No. Nobody was giving me any advice about committee selection, aside from my team. And then, the committee I wanted to be on, I sat and looked at the committee jurisdiction, and Energy and Commerce seemed like it had some very interesting areas of jurisdiction.

See, the point is that in November 1972, no one had any idea that Richard [Milhous] Nixon was going to be subject to impeachment proceedings and that the House Judiciary Committee would be in the middle of history. You can be sure if anybody had the vaguest idea that that would be the case, I never would have been put on the House Judiciary Committee—forget it—and probably not some of the other Members, new Members who were put on that committee. So, nobody had any idea, and it was just very convenient. I was a lawyer, my predecessor was not on the committee any longer, so there was a vacancy. Why not put me on that committee?

And I had nobody really advocating for me in the House. Remember, I came as someone who was fighting the Brooklyn machine. So, anybody who was connected to the machine in Brooklyn had no interest in helping me. I had nobody who was going to be fighting for me—just me, myself, and I. I mean, I was very disappointed when I was put on the House Judiciary Committee. I said, “This is not a good beginning to my tenure in the House of Representatives.” And then, who knew? I was in the middle of history, so it turned out to be great.

JOHNSON: How would you describe the welcome that you received on that committee, given that you had beaten the chairman and a longtime Member?

HOLTZMAN: That was no problem. I mean, people treated me with respect, and I had no problem on that committee. And I got to be very good friends with my colleagues on the committee because we were thrust into this historical role. None of us asked for it. We didn't even know we were going to be in that situation. So, no, I got to be good friends with the other members of the committee as a result of that service.

It was a very special time because it was a lot of hard work. I had to grapple with the impeachment clause in the Constitution. What is a "high crime and misdemeanor?" Those are very obscure terms; we don't use them today. And actually, they refer back to ancient British legal history. So, you had to go and study ancient British legal history. First of all, we didn't study the impeachment clause of the Constitution in law school—forget that. So had to learn that. What did the framers mean by it? And then go back and study British history, legal history. This is pretty arcane stuff, and it's heavy-duty. Then, of course, we had to—once we tried to master and did master the constitutional principles, then we had to master all the facts that were adduced about Richard Nixon. And that was also a lengthy process. So it brought members of the committee together because we were working very, very hard. And the hard work on the committee was, of course, only part of our duties. We had to do all the rest of the work of a Member of Congress at the same time. We didn't get time off for this.

WASNIEWSKI: We've got a lot of questions about your time on the committee, but before we get away from your coming to Congress, at the time—and this came up in the discussion about the campaign—until very recently, you were the

youngest woman ever to serve in Congress. And we're wondering if your age was a barrier for you in coming to the institution. Did that affect your reception at all?

HOLTZMAN: No. At least I didn't feel that way, and I actually didn't even know I was the youngest woman ever elected until some time after I got here. And, no, I didn't feel that that was any factor. And, as I said, after having been on the Judiciary Committee during Watergate, that was a big help in terms of winning my colleagues' respect and, at least, willingness to listen to me. I had a lot of friends in the House of Representatives. Although I was more liberal than a lot of people, I think they respected me. I was able to get a lot done.

JOHNSON: Were there any parts of the institution that were difficult for you to access because you were a woman Member?

HOLTZMAN: Oh, sure. The gym was closed, let's start with that. It was ridiculous. We decided when we formed the Congresswomen's Caucus that we would not take that on as a first issue, although it was blatantly discriminatory, because we figured we'd let the public get used to the idea that women were working together, and this would help the public. And the gym didn't seem to be high on the public's agenda, so we worked more on issues like domestic violence and the Equal Rights Amendment and so forth. Later, we got to the gym. And later, the gym was desegregated.

JOHNSON: But a lot of the deals that are made in Congress and the important policy discussions took place in the gym, or during poker games, or golf games—things that were typically reserved for men. So, how did you overcome that kind of barrier?

HOLTZMAN: You know, just being open, and respectful, and friendly, and sitting on the floor of the House, buttonholing people on the House Floor and near the House Floor, or in committee hearings. I was able to get lots of legislation through. I didn't feel that the fact that I wasn't in the gym or playing poker with anybody as something that was going to affect me.

I guess I made up for that by trying to do my homework, have reasonable proposals, and, also, being very honest with people. I never tried to trick anybody to support anything I was asking for support for. And that goes a long way. When you ask people for support, and you're explaining something, they don't say, "Oh, well—really there's some secret stuff here that's going to get me in trouble." I never had that reputation, and so I was able to get a lot of things done.

We got the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] extension passed in the House of Representatives. That was a very tough haul to get that bill through. All the Congresswomen worked on a Republican and a Democrat. But how did we get it done? Because we had friends—the guys who said, "Okay, you know, maybe I can't help on this part of the bill, but I can help you on that part of the bill." People wanted to be helpful. So, they figured out a way to be helpful. Those friendships, and winning the respect of people, and getting them to want to support you, that's not only what happens in the gym. It can happen through just being a nice person, and a good person, and an honest person, and an honorable person. That goes a long way, or at least it used to. I can't speak for what's going on now.

WASNIEWSKI: One more question about your arrival here: Was there any transition for you all of a sudden having to deal with so much press attention about your age,

about the circumstances of your election, and then when you got on Judiciary?

HOLTZMAN:

Well, let me just say, I didn't really understand the press when I got here because we didn't have any media budget in my campaign. So, I was not an expert on the press. I really didn't understand it. I read newspapers, I watched TV and the news on TV, but I didn't really understand it. It took my being on the Judiciary Committee during Watergate, and then I had to deal with the press all the time. And I got to know the reporters and the TV people and all that stuff. And I got to see the impact because the hearings were televised. And they were only televised because the new Members, and particularly a freshman Member from Utah, [Douglas] Wayne Owens, said, "We need to televise these hearings." But the chair was completely opposed to it. And the older members of the committee were completely opposed to it. They said, "Oh, this is just going to be grandstanding." And he and the other younger Members, including yours truly, said, "No, no, no. We really need to have a public understanding for what we're doing." And we ultimately won out. And it was as a result of those televised hearings and seeing the impact that had on the public that I became much more sensitized, let's put it that way, to the impact of the press and [began to] understand the press.

So, no, I started as a complete neophyte. I don't think anybody started in Congress with as little background in terms of dealing with the media as I had. Because we couldn't afford it, I never—they showed up, the media, on the day that I won, the day after I won the primary, on that primary evening. But then they didn't show up for a very long time. So, it took me a while to grasp the nuances. I did learn, though, I think. Maybe not as well as some people, but certainly more than when I started out.

JOHNSON: Did anyone try to take you under their wing with something like that, or did you just have to learn on your own?

HOLTZMAN: Well, there was . . . I didn't nestle under any wings as I recall. {laughter} Nobody offered a big wing, either, or a small one.

JOHNSON: We wanted to switch our focus now to the Women's Caucus. You and Margaret Heckler were the cofounders of the caucus. Where did the idea come from, and what was the response of your women colleagues at the time?

HOLTZMAN: You know, I can't really remember the genesis. We might have been talking about it for some time before that, before we started. But I guess Congresswoman Heckler and I got to know each other, maybe because—I don't even really know how that happened. And how we decided that we were going to work together on this . . . but I think it was a really good idea to make it bipartisan from the get-go, and also, to try to involve all the Congresswomen. And there was a lot of reluctance. I think all the Congresswomen at that point—when we first talked about it, or when we first formed it—really wanted to be part of that caucus because they understood how much of an agenda there was to try to improve the status of women. They understood—everybody understood that. But they were concerned about whether we'd be ridiculed in the press, whether the public would understand that working together on women's issues would be acceptable.

And they were also very concerned because the women went the gamut from very conservative to very liberal—whether they would somehow be tainted by the political views of the other women on the caucus. And so we worked out a *modus vivendi* for this, which is basically, we said the caucus would only vote on issues if there was unanimity. So that would protect anybody who

was afraid that they'd be stuck with a position if it was a majority position that didn't agree with their constituency, or with what their own views were.

So we bent over backwards to be as respectful of people's differences, and to try to make it easy for women of different points of view to join in this caucus, so that we could focus together on issues of importance to women. And it worked. As a result of that, every single woman—conservative, liberal, Republican, Democratic—in the House joined the Congresswomen's Caucus, which was great. It was great for a lot of reasons. Number one, we got to know each other better. Two, knowing each other better made it easier to work together on issues—not necessarily as a whole group; we might get to know one other Congresswoman better, and work with her on some issue . . . but it made it a whole lot easier. And, actually, in one respect from the House I think it was . . . and it's still with us today. Well, the work isn't over, unfortunately, of creating gender equality, but there have been a lot of strides.

And the Congresswomen's Caucus has basically retained some of the same structure, which is bipartisan, because these issues are really not partisan issues about improving the status of women. So, I think that I feel very proud of the fact that I was involved in that. And I'm very grateful for Congresswoman Heckler's joining with me, or letting me join with her; I don't want to put one of us in front of the other. But it was a good partnership, and it was good for the Congresswomen, and it was good for the House of Representatives, and it was good for the country.

JOHNSON: Did you meet informally before this—before you had your caucus in—for dinners or lunches, or as a group?

HOLTZMAN: No. We might have had lunch, or we might have sat together on the House Floor or had coffee or something together. But I don't recall any informal kind of sessions. Not really.

WASNIEWSKI: You had already started to answer one of the follow-up questions that we had, which was, what was the response of the full House to the formation of the caucus, and in particular, the male Members' reaction to women meeting?

HOLTZMAN: I don't recall any negative reaction. And I think the proof was in the pudding when we decided that we were all going to support the Equal Rights Amendment. And, remember, any Congresswoman could have stopped the caucus from supporting that. Everyone was in favor of it. The fact that we all divvied up the House—there were not that many of us—and we all identified Members of the body that were friends of ours, and we all were responsible—we were assigned . . . It was pretty serious. We were all assigned people we had to lobby. And the fact that this was happening—and I think Members of the House saw it, the male Members. And they were—and we got it through. So, the proof was in the pudding. I don't think it provoked—I can't remember any hostile reaction to it. And I think this was one of the early efforts, and it was a successful effort. And also was important because we got the leadership behind it—Tip [Thomas Philip] O'Neill [Jr.] supported us in this. That was really very useful.

And the other thing we did, it wasn't—yes, I guess the caucus was somehow involved. It wasn't formally a caucus issue, but we took a trip as Congresswomen to Cambodia. We took a humanitarian mission to Cambodia because there were refugees on the . . . thousands and tens of thousands of refugees on the border who were not being fed. You saw

children with matchstick bodies, and it was really horrible. I thought, and some other Congresswomen thought, that if we went as a women's mission, just humanitarian, that maybe we could appeal to the Cambodian government to allow food to come in and to allow the refugees to be fed. And it worked amazingly. I don't think all the Congresswomen went, but a lot—it was a bipartisan group. And we met with the then-foreign minister of Cambodia, who was about 19. {laughter} He said, "What do you want?" And we said, "We want food to come into the country." That was, like, his first question: "What do you want?" We explained it to him. And he said, "Oh, no problem." And then people started to talk to him, and some of us were kicking other people under the table to say, "Well, we've gotten our answer. We've gotten what we want. We want to get out of here." {laughter}

But that was a very important mission. And we invited women from other countries to join with us. And, actually, two women from Australia from two different parties joined with us on this mission. So, that was another thing that was accomplished. We did things domestically, and we did things abroad. We were successful, and it created a very good, strong foundation for the future.

JOHNSON: You mentioned that issues that you worked on together had to be unanimous. But what about other issues that were important to women where their—

HOLTZMAN: Well, then we didn't . . . then the caucus didn't address them. What we said—and it was my view—I guess people changed their view about that later. I said, "The agenda of what we need to do is so huge, we can't possibly accomplish everything anyway. So let's just focus on areas that we agree on. And first of all, it will make us stronger if all agree, and all agree to work on

them.” And that’s how we started. And also, it was critical, I think, to get people’s participation, the participation of women. Because I think since it was really early, there had been no caucus, to the best of my knowledge, before that. Women had not worked together. We were concerned about being ridiculed. We were concerned about negative press. We were concerned about how this was going to affect us in our district. I think we—this was a very important step to make people feel politically comfortable in joining with people of different political views. So, I think it worked. From my point of view, it worked.

Yes, I mean, there were issues that were controversial and people couldn’t agree on, for example, choice. Congresswoman Heckler had a very different view about abortion from my view. But that didn’t mean we couldn’t work on the Equal Rights Amendment. That didn’t mean we couldn’t work on domestic violence. That didn’t mean we couldn’t work on issues of credit opportunity. It didn’t mean we couldn’t work on issues of rape and sexual violence, employment opportunities, pension rights. There were a whole host of other things that we could work on. If we could work on them together, great. And so, yes, that one issue, we couldn’t. But that didn’t mean that those issues were ignored; they were not ignored. It didn’t mean to ignore them, it just meant that we were going to create a caucus that was going to—these were the fledgling days. We were trying to make sure that this small bird was going to fly, and it did.

JOHNSON:

The decade of the ’70s, of course, was really an important one for women’s reproductive rights, and the pro-choice/pro-life debate. And the original Hyde Amendment was passed in 1976.³ Was this something that you and other women Members expected as a legislative response, or were you taken aback by it?

HOLTZMAN: Oh, I can't remember what my . . . I mean, I was horrified by it [the Hyde Amendment] because I remember before I was elected to Congress, working on a brief—I was asked to work on a brief in the New York state's highest court on the constitutionality of the antiabortion laws. So, it's something I had fought a long time. And to be faced with it in Congress, I was really appalled. What was really [more] appalling, even, was that the first effort was not the Hyde Amendment as we know it. The first effort was to ban contraception as well as abortion, and that did not fly. Even then, that did not fly. So the first form of the Hyde Amendment was anticontraception and antichoice. Then they decided to sever the anticontraception part from what we know as the Hyde Amendment today, from the choice issue. And then it passed, but the first time it did not pass.

Well, it just showed to me what the real objection and objective here was, which was to really inhibit families from making decisions about how they were . . . when and how many children they were going to have. And who had a right to tell them that? But we're still having that fight today.

WASNIEWSKI: How closely did the caucus work with outside women's groups in the early years?

HOLTZMAN: Well, in the Equal Rights Amendment, it worked very closely. The suggestion for that came from some women's groups, and they had done some of the legal research. Of course, we did our own research. And we worked with a lot of groups in getting that legislation passed, not just women's groups, because it was too big an effort. We worked with labor unions. We worked with a whole variety of groups to support the Equal Rights Amendment. Unfortunately, even though we got it through the House and the Senate, we could never get the other three states to ratify it,

which is sad to think about it—the 100th anniversary of Jeannette Rankin’s election to Congress, and women are still not fully in the Constitution. That’s a nettlesome point and a sad point.

JOHNSON: What do you think, looking back, was the larger role of the caucus in the institution, beyond its founding, and as it’s progressed over time?

HOLTZMAN: Well, to help educate women Members—and I guess they have now men, male Members—about issues affecting women and make proposals to help educate them on how to solve these issues. And as a result, to help improve the status of women, which improves our whole country.

Congresswoman Heckler and I received an award on behalf of the caucus. For example, I’ll give you one of my favorite examples of what difference the caucus made with regard to drug protocols. Used to be that drug companies could test for new drugs just by testing them on men, not on women. Well, hello, we have a big population of women. Do the drugs work the same way? The biology is not exactly the same—a lot the same, but not exactly the same. And there was no requirement that it had to be tested on women in order to be used on women. Well, then—Congresswoman [Barbara Ann] Mikulski, now Senator, she took up the cudgels on this. Well, this is a huge . . . and the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] changed its protocols, and now you can’t do that anymore. Well, this is something that affects—deeply affects—the health of women, which also affects the health of children, the health of families. It’s vital. So that’s what the Congresswomen’s Caucus does: It helps to elucidate these issues. It’s a way of organizing women to work on these issues. Educating them about the issues—and men who associate themselves with these causes—and figuring out ways of resolving them. So, I think it’s really important.

END OF PART ONE ~ BEGINNING OF PART TWO

JOHNSON: You've mentioned the Equal Rights Amendment for women a few times, and we certainly wanted to ask you some more-specific questions. In 1977, you sponsored a resolution to extend the deadline for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. Can you just explain the rationale behind that?

HOLTZMAN: Well, the 14th Amendment of the Constitution talks about equal protection of the laws, and talks about all persons. But the Supreme Court had never decided that women were fully persons under the 14th Amendment, and that discrimination against women was not entitled to this heightened degree of scrutiny. Very tough test to pass, as you do have with regard to racial discrimination. And so it was thought . . . I guess many years ago, Alice Paul had initially recommended that there be an Equal Rights Amendment so it was clear in the Constitution of the United States that discrimination on the basis of gender or sex was not permissible.⁴

Martha Griffiths proposed the Equal Rights Amendment. My predecessor [Emanuel Celler] opposed the Equal Rights Amendment. She [Griffiths] finally got it passed through the House in 1972. And for some reason, they put a seven-year deadline on it. And the amendment was not going to be ratified, it was quite clear.

And so people came to me—some women's groups came to me—actually, Ellie Smeal came to me, very wonderful woman leader and brilliant strategist.⁵ And she said, "We need to get the Equal Rights Amendment adopted. And the amendment will not be adopted in the time frame of the seven years, so we need to get an extension." And I did my own research—they gave me some research, but it wasn't—I had to do my own research. I'm

not proposing a constitutional amendment without being satisfied in my own mind that that's acceptable. And so I did.

And I thought that . . . and I guess Ellie Smeal approached me because I was on the House Judiciary Committee, and constitutional amendments go through the House Judiciary Committee. I knew that if it was just me sponsoring this, given the fact that Barbara [Charline] Jordan was also on that committee, that a lot of eyebrows would be raised. So I said, "We've got to get Barbara on board on this." And I went to her and talked to her about this, and she immediately agreed. So the two of us were backing it on the House Judiciary Committee. We went to Peter [Wallace] Rodino [Jr.], he was the chair of the committee. We knew we needed his support. It was a lot easier going to him with the two of us, the only women on the committee. He's not going to turn us down, we knew that. So he agreed to it.

And then we went to see—or, I can't remember if Barbara came with me, but I went to see Tip O'Neill, and he agreed as well. And then, of course, we had to get the Congresswomen's Caucus behind us. And we had to divvy up the responsibilities and develop a legislative campaign, and it was a huge campaign. I had never done anything like this before because we needed—we didn't initially have enough Members supporting it. And so what we needed to do was get our allies working at the grassroots level to put pressure on Members of Congress to support this. And we did. We got enough Members to support it and pass the House, and had a much easier time getting past the Senate. That was just the beginning of the opposition of the right wing to women's rights, but they started their campaign against us. We won despite their efforts.

But we couldn't get it ratified in the states, unfortunately, in the time frame. We also put seven years because it had been seven years before, and who would have ever imagined that it wouldn't be adopted? But it wasn't, and it's still not adopted, and we still do not have the Supreme Court basically saying that women are fully protected under the U.S. Constitution. In fact, the late [Supreme Court] Justice [Antonin] Scalia said that women are not in the Constitution. He explicitly said that in an interview. So, here we are. I don't know how the U.S. can hold its head up high among nations of the world when we're not fully recognizing the citizenship and the rights of women in this country.

JOHNSON: When you were able to win that extension and the hard-fought battle that you just described, did you think at that point that you would be able to get it ratified?

HOLTZMAN: Oh, yes. I think everybody thought that was going to happen. I think if for one minute we thought there was going to be any difficulty, we wouldn't have had the seven years in that extension. But it didn't happen because of the opposition to women's equality. It's interesting the Republican Presidents that we had up through 1980 had all supported the Equal Rights Amendment—Nixon and President [Gerald Rudolph] Ford [Jr.]. But starting with Ronald Reagan, women's rights were off the agenda. I mean, that's when the—what I called “the ayatollahs” came in and started to dictate U.S. policy on women's rights. Fundamentalist religious figures, in other words.

But the ERA never would have gotten through the House if it hadn't been for the wonderful work of the Congresswomen—Republican Congresswomen, Democratic Congresswomen, conservative, liberal, going to

their friends, organizing this carefully. I mean, we actually built a computer program. I had summer interns and others who helped develop that. It was a very well-structured and organized campaign. And we were lucky to have a lot of allies, such as labor unions and other liberal groups, supporting us on this.

JOHNSON: Do you think you built a lot of credibility because you were able to work as an organization and to accomplish that?

HOLTZMAN: Oh, yes. Well, yes. Plus, we were able to develop this strong organization so that everybody had an assigned role. We were honchoing how and monitoring how well everybody was doing. Everybody had a list of people in the House that they were responsible for getting to support some part of this bill. And so we kept track of that, and then we kept track of people who were totally recalcitrant. And we had to do the grassroots effort with regard to them, and it worked out, though. It was very well organized, but the Congresswomen were great.

It was great because I think it was very impressive for Members of the House to see that the whole spectrum of Congresswomen—conservative, liberal—were saying, “Listen, this is about our belonging in the Constitution, and you can’t keep us out of it.” And, of course, it made an impact. It opened people’s eyes. I said, “Well, it’s really important to all of them. It’s not just a liberal cause. It’s not just a conservative cause.” So, I think that was very important.

WASNIEWSKI: Sounds like you developed a formidable whip operation.

HOLTZMAN: Oh, yes, we definitely did.

WASNIEWSKI: How did you—just out of curiosity—how did you break down the groups that you were going to be individually responsible to lobby? Was that regional?

HOLTZMAN: You don't mean groups, you mean the Members of Congress.

WASNIEWSKI: Members, yes.

HOLTZMAN: Oh, because, well, we sat around the table—Congresswomen—and we said—we had the list of Members of Congress. And “Who do you know? And, “Who's going to take this one? Who's going to take that one?” And, yes, absolutely.

That's how it worked. And there were some people that nobody had on that list. And then we figured out other ways of approaching them, and that's how it worked. Yes, it was a very formidable whip operation. And we had the numbers down almost to a tee. I won't say 100 percent, but very close. It was a very good operation. I had never been involved in that. I'd never been part of a whipping operation in the House, but we figured it out. {laughter} We were all very smart women, the Congresswomen. Everybody knew, and there were high stakes here.

And the interesting thing is, since this was the first time that an extension resolution had been adopted, nobody was quite sure of the legalities of it. Not that it wasn't legal, but did the President have to sign it? Because the President doesn't normally sign constitutional amendments when they're passed by the House and the Senate. But nobody knew what kind of breed this extension was. Was it really a statute, which the President has to sign? Was it a constitutional amendment, which the President doesn't have to sign? So we got the White House involved in this. And we said, “We don't know

what the rules really are, but you sign it just in case it has to be signed.”
{laughter} And so Jimmy Carter actually issued a signing statement saying, “Not sure that I really have to sign this, but in case I do, I’m signing it.” So there were a lot of very interesting wrinkles with regard to this that had to be overcome. But the Congresswomen were just great. All of them were just great. It couldn’t have been done without their support.

JOHNSON: One of the most significant and memorable parts of your career, of course, is serving on the Judiciary Committee during the time period that you did. So, you were on Judiciary when the committee was considering the impeachment of President Nixon. What was it like serving on that panel during such a critical point in U.S. history?

HOLTZMAN: Well, I’ve described the feeling in the past, and I’ll describe it again. 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, but 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 facts, 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 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. It was huge.

At some point in this process, I really felt as though I were in quicksand, that even though I disagreed strongly with Richard Nixon’s policies, it was just overwhelming to know all of the details of his misconduct. And it wasn’t just the break-in, and it wasn’t just the subornation of perjury, and it wasn’t just getting the CIA to stop an FBI investigation, and it wasn’t just the enemies list, and it wasn’t just the wiretapping, and it wasn’t just the illegal bombing of Cambodia, and it wasn’t just the secret bombing of Cambodia. You couldn’t come up with a list that was big enough. It was just more and more and more, and you just felt as though you were sinking and there was no bottom. No end of the misconduct; no end to the violation of the law; no end to the criminality; no end to the conspiracy; no end to the conniving. No end to how they were just trying to put their own political and personal survival over the good of the country. That’s the feeling I had, and it was just overwhelming. I never expected to see that. It was very sobering.

Nobody took any pleasure [in the investigation]. I know the Republicans didn’t, but nobody that I know. No Democrat on the committee took any pleasure from seeing what we had to see and dealing with what we had to deal with. And having to vote for the impeachment of Richard Nixon was

one of the most sobering, somber things I ever had to do in my life. I did not want to have to do it. I would have wished a thousand times that he hadn't acted in the way he had so that I would not have to sit in judgment on him. Word is that Peter Rodino, after the first vote, went back to his office and cried. Nobody took any pleasure in this.

It was a very sad day to see a President of the United States behave as we saw Richard Nixon behave up close. Listening to the tapes, reading all the documents, day after day having these facts read to us. Challenging the facts, understanding the facts, it was a very sobering process. But, in the end—I know it's not usually seen this way, but I see Watergate not just as a way of exposing and dealing with presidential misconduct, but what to me is more important than the presidential misconduct is how the system, our system of government, responded to it. After all, the framers of the Constitution understood—because it had an impeachment clause, they knew Presidents would do bad things in office. That's why they had it there. They said, we have this impeachment clause, you're going to get rid of Presidents who do these bad things: high crimes and misdemeanors, and treason, and bribery. So they knew. They didn't know what the name of that President was going to be or when it was going to happen. But they anticipated that somebody could act this way. So they understood it, and they created a framework for a response to that. But who knew whether the framework would work?

So you had the Judiciary, that did its job, and Judge [John Joseph] Sirica, a very conservative Republican judge, who smelled something fishy. And threw this very tough sentence on the burglars and got one of them to crack and say, "Yeah, higher-ups were involved."⁶ You had the Supreme Court voting for unanimously requiring the Nixon tapes to be turned over, including people who had been appointed by Richard Nixon and who were

Republicans. You had the House Judiciary Committee with new Members and a brand-new committee chair—warts and all, no select committee. Just being taken out of the regular order being used, rising to the occasion, doing what had to be done, winning the respect of the American people. You had the Senate acting in a bipartisan way: the Senate select committee. Howard [Henry] Baker [Jr.] saying, “What did the President know, and when did he know it?” That was going to be a question to show that the President didn’t know it, but it turned out to be the question that showed the President did know it. You had the press: two young reporters doing an amazing job, but also many other reporters doing an amazing job.⁷

So you had a President out of control, engaging in criminal conduct, abusing the powers of his office, but the rest of the system of government responding in a constitutional way as a check on the abuses. And I think that was something that is the more important lesson: that the system worked at that time, and nobody knew whether it would work, and it did. And I was very amazed to be part of that process, having not even sought to be on the committee—tried hard not to be on it—but I think the process worked, and the committee actually won the respect of the American people for the fairness, the thoroughness, the responsibility with which it behaved.

Rodino was very astute and wise in making the decision that basically, if the President wanted something in terms of how the committee was going to deal with him, he would get it. The President had a lawyer present at all the secret meetings. The President wanted to submit a brief, fine. The President wanted to question witnesses, fine. We never put a procedural barrier in the way of the President. So nobody could say, “Oh, well, it wasn’t fair. You didn’t let him write or file this brief. You didn’t let him ask his questions.” The committee bent over backwards to give the President the full

opportunity to be heard in the process. We were kind of feeling our way here. I mean, there was no real precedent for this.

So that was wise. And the decision that was made by the Speaker of House Carl [Bert] Albert not to have a select committee, but to pick the members of the House Judiciary Committee—warts and all—brand-new members. There were 10 of us new members, I think, both on the Republican side and Democratic side. And a brand-new committee chair. Nobody knew how they would behave. But if there was going to be impeachment, and there had been a special select committee, nobody would have trusted it.

So, I think there were people who made some very wise decisions in the House about how to proceed, and the country respected it, and that was really important. Congress hasn't always won the respect of the country for its operations, but this was one of the instances in which it did.

WASNIEWSKI: One of the high-water marks.

HOLTZMAN: Right.

WASNIEWSKI: One of those new members on the committee was Barbara Jordan, who gained a lot of respect for her role in that impeachment inquiry. And we're wondering, what were your impressions of her? And then also, as the only two women on the committee suddenly in the spotlight, did you spend time together, and was that a kind of a bonding period for you?

HOLTZMAN: Well, Barbara Jordan was in little bit of a different situation than I was because when she came to the House, I think she had been—protégé may be too strong a word, I don't really know—but President Lyndon [Baines] Johnson admired her, for good reason, definitely for good reason. And she was a known and highly regarded factor in Texas. I came as a total outsider

without—forget President, I didn't have anybody backing me up. But Barbara was a very wise person and a great orator. And I had such enormous respect for her for that night. We each had an opportunity to make a statement. And she talked about what it meant as a black person to be excluded from the Constitution and now to be sitting in judgment of a President—working with the Constitution and using the Constitution. It was really an amazing moment for the committee, for the country. And it was a great privilege to serve with her. And yes, we got to—I wouldn't say we were best of friends—but we got to know each other, which is really important because she was so helpful when it came to the Equal Rights Amendment extension, and was really a very important collaborator in that, and colleague in that effort.

JOHNSON: You had mentioned that you were the only two women on the committee. How important do you think it was to have a woman's perspective on the committee, especially during this time period?

HOLTZMAN: You know, I'm not sure that either one of us had a different perspective from our colleagues, at least for most of our colleagues who supported the impeachment. But I think being on there was really important for the country because for the first time, you saw women participating in a matter of constitutional import and great gravity to the United States of America. And women's voices were being heard in that. So, I think it was great. And I can't tell you how many people have come up to me over the years and said, "I decided to become a lawyer when I saw you on the committee. I never thought that women could play this kind of a role." So, it opened up the eyes of women to what their possibility could be. It also showed men that women could participate, and had the intelligence and the responsibility to sit in judgment of the President of the United States. I think these were—it was a

very, very important educational experience for the country. And I think it was also important that there were not just women, but there were blacks on the committee as well. So, I think—and young people on the committee—so, I think the committee reflected a lot of the country, and it was good that it did. That also, I think, helped people to feel that the committee's recommendations were fair, and solid, and properly grounded.

WASNIEWSKI: The committee voted on five articles of impeachment, and we were wondering if you could talk about one in particular, which was the article on Cambodia that you had drafted. And were you surprised that this wasn't adopted by the committee?

HOLTZMAN: No, I wasn't surprised that the Cambodia article wasn't adopted because I think there had been basically a decision made—understandable decision—that in order to get bipartisan support for the basic articles of impeachment, those were going to be the only articles. And therefore, the committee did no investigation of the issue of whether President Nixon committed impeachable offenses with regard to the secret bombing of Cambodia. And the committee basically didn't examine that point in its deliberations. And the committee didn't support—for the most part, most of the members of the committee did not support—including Democrats—did not support that article of impeachment as part of a general understanding with the Republican members on that committee who were supporting the impeachment, that this would not be taken up.

I think the view at that time was that the Vietnam War was seen as something political. And the Republican members—I can't really speak for them—but I think those of them who were supporting the impeachment, that took a lot of courage to do. And I think they felt—or may have felt—

that doing something on the war would have been seen as so political that it could have tainted how people looked at their vote on the basic articles of impeachment. I'm not sure that they were right, and I think that it was, in a way, a mistake that boundaries were not set on the presidential misuse of war-making powers because we're living with those problems today, and they weren't fully fleshed out.

What we found was that in the bombing of Cambodia, President Nixon directly ordered that the bombing be kept secret from Congress. And there were two sets of books. And when people came to testify before the Congress about bombing that took place in Southeast Asia, they said, "Oh no, none of this bombing took place in Cambodia. It took place in Vietnam, or it took place in Laos, or someplace else." And so the President was authorizing people to lie to the Congress. And how can Congress exercise its constitutional responsibility of war-making if it's been lied to? And we can just fast-forward to the Iraq War, where Congress was given this information about a lot of things. And its war-making powers were subverted because it wasn't told the truth. So it wasn't given the opportunity to support something knowing all the facts.

And the framers—having gone through Watergate having to study the Constitution—the framers really believed in checks and balances because they understood there was always going to be an abuse of power. And the checks and balances weren't only because they said someone's going to abuse the power, but also because two heads are better than one. So on war-making, when they deeply distrusted presidential war-making powers, they said, "Well, this is such a big decision. It involves spending of a lot of money. It involves risking American lives. It has long-term consequences for the country. It's probably better to have the Congress participate and the

President participate because it's easy to make a mistake." And you don't want to make a mistake of something that's as grave and serious as the war-making powers.

So, when you have a President who carries out bombing in secret and lies to the Congress to cover that up, that's a subversion—that's as serious an abuse of power as you can think of because it stops Congress from saying, "Hey, no, we don't agree with this. We're going to cut off the money for it." Or "Yes, Mr. President, you're doing exactly the right thing." Or questioning him, and saying, "Well, you're bombing Cambodia, but maybe you should be bombing this way, not that way. Have you thought about this problem? Have you thought about that problem?" So that the process could have been more thoughtful. I'm not saying that it would have been, but these are options. And to foreclose that is to put us in a position where you have the imperial President making war-making decisions that have huge consequences for us. The secret bombing of Cambodia was not secret to the Cambodians; they were being bombed, they all knew about it. It was the American Congress and the American public that didn't know about it.

And just to show what the committee didn't do, the claim was by the President's people that some Members of Congress had been informed. Well, coincidentally, some of them were dead. So, you couldn't really prove that they hadn't been informed. But there were some that were still alive, and the committee staff refused to question them. Refused to have any hearing, refused to find out whether in fact they had been told. So, that was a big disappointment to me. And still is a disappointment to me, because I see that we live with the consequences of the failure to set boundaries or to try to set boundaries when you have abuse of presidential war-making powers. And it doesn't matter whether it's a Democrat or Republican. We've had

Republicans abuse that power. We've had Democrats abuse that power. And for Congress to sit back and say, "See no evil, hear no evil," it's wrong. It takes a lot of courage for Congress to look at these issues because they're very delicate and sensitive, and national security's involved. But that's particularly why Congress can't abdicate its responsibility.

So, I did draft an article, making it very narrow. It wasn't attacking the President on the Vietnam War. It focused solely on the bombing of Cambodia, where it had been kept secret from the Congress and where Congress had been lied to. And I got some support for it, but not total support. And I gave the resolution for the article to John Conyers [Jr.], who was much more senior on the committee, because I thought, well, you know, this is a really serious issue. And I'm just a young whippersnapper, and I'll give it to someone more senior on the committee. So, he introduced the resolution.

JOHNSON: Did you work closely with Father [Robert Frederick] Drinan on that issue as well because he certainly was a vocal opponent?

HOLTZMAN: No, actually, I worked most closely with Wayne Owens, Congressman Wayne Owens from Utah, because initially he didn't support it. And I had to frame the resolution in order to win over his support. So, I wouldn't say he worked with me in the sense of drafting it. But he did—his questions and his initial opposition were very helpful in helping me understand what needed to be done about it.

JOHNSON: A few months later, you had the opportunity to question President Ford when he came to testify before the Judiciary Committee—the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice. How would describe this experience? And then also,

what went into your decision-making process about how to question a sitting President?

HOLTZMAN:

Well, it hadn't been that many years before that I'd been in a very prominent law firm in New York as a litigator. And I knew exactly what you had to do when you were trying to uncover facts. Here it was, President Ford issued a pardon. He said he wasn't going to issue a pardon. And we had what's called resolutions of inquiry, which were asking facts about how the pardon came into being—all kind of focused in the end—although maybe they weren't explicitly on this point—as to whether there was a deal. And so I remember going to the first Democratic Caucus of the subcommittee and saying, “Well, obviously, we need to do a proper investigation before the President comes.” I think he'd already indicated he was going to come. I said, “We need to ask for all the documents relative to the issuance of the pardon. We need to get a list of the witnesses who were involved in the carrying-out of this pardon and question them. And so we can be ready for when the President comes to know what questions to ask him.” That seemed to me just normal. It wasn't anything surprising or earth-shattering, it's just normal litigation process. They all said to me, the chair of the subcommittee and the staff and the other members, “Oh, Liz, this is just a great idea, just a fantastic idea. Of course, we should ask for the documents; of course, we should ask for the witnesses—of course, of course, of course.” And they “yessed” me to death. I didn't know they weren't telling the truth.

A few weeks went by, no documents were requested. No witnesses were asked to appear. And I asked again, “What's happening?” And they said, “Oh, yeah, it's a great idea. We're going to do it. We're going to do it.” But they never did it. And so I realized they weren't interested in any serious way in finding out what happened about the pardon. So, I said, “Well, I guess I'm going to

have to ask about the pardon.” And I was sure . . . because I was low person on the totem pole, I might have been the last person to ask a question. I’m not 100 percent sure, but if I wasn’t the last, I was the next to last, certainly the last Democrat. And I anticipated that someone would ask questions before I did. I wrote out the questions I wanted to ask. And I knew that this was going to be a little bit of a heavy lift because I’m asking a President of the United States whether he’s made a deal over a pardon, which is potentially even a crime. But I knew I had to ask the questions, and I prepared them, and I tried to be very respectful about it. And I was sure somebody was going to ask those questions. There were probably 10 people ahead of me. And I said, “Well, I hope I have—I could just tear them up and won’t have to ask them, somebody else will ask the questions.” But it didn’t happen.

Everybody said, “Oh, Mr. President, how wonderful it is that you’re here, and a sign of candor, and honesty, and sincerity, and honorableness, and you’re so wonderful in coming to talk to Congress.” That’s all they said. There were no questions, basically. And I’m getting more and more nervous because I see it’s going down the row of committee members, and it’s going to come to me. And nobody’s asking any questions. So, I was glad I wrote them out because I don’t know that I would have been able to wing it at that moment.

But I did what I had to do: I asked him the questions. And by this time—going back to the point you raised earlier about media—I knew that there would be media attention about this, but I didn’t know what the reaction was going to be. I had no idea whether people would attack me back home, whether they would agree with what I had done. I had no idea. I knew this was a big risk, but I did what I thought was right. Going back to the civil rights movement, and just did what was in my conscience. And so the next

day, of course, I got attacked by one of the New York newspapers for not calling President Ford “President Ford.” I called him once “Mr. Ford.” I didn’t mean to be disrespectful. But when I started—when I got home that weekend and was walking on the streets, people came up and hugged me. So, I knew that I hadn’t lost my seat in Congress, but I thought about that. I said, “You know, maybe I’m risking everything here,” but I said I just had to do it. That was it.

So, that’s the experience, and I was very actually saddened by, again, the failure of Congress to do its job, which was to find out about what happened. We had these resolutions of inquiry. What actually happened? And so the story about the pardon has never fully been told—what kinds of arrangements had been worked out beforehand. Remember, President Ford, when he was making the arrangements about the pardon, was also giving President Nixon all the papers to be . . . which President Nixon could have destroyed. So a lot of the evidence about Watergate would have been destroyed as well. We forget about that. There were a lot of nefarious things going on in connection with this pardon. So, anyway, that’s . . . Congress did a great job during Watergate. It didn’t do such a great job with regard to the pardon. Didn’t do such a great job with regard to the Cambodia bombing and all aspects of presidential misconduct. But it still would get an A for what it did on Watergate if I were giving the Congress a grade.

WASNIEWSKI: While Watergate was going on, there was at that time in Congress . . . when Watergate kind of amplified a push for openness, reform, access. We’re just wondering if you can kind of put that into context with the Watergate experience as well. What were the long-term effects on the institution?

HOLTZMAN:

Well, there were a lot of efforts made to quote unquote “clean up government” in connection with Watergate reforms. One of those reforms that I was deeply involved in had to do with the special prosecutor legislation. I helped to draft that and was a strong proponent of it. And in my judgment, it’s too bad that the Congress has let that legislation lapse. Because we have no way now, really, of doing an independent investigation or ensuring that there’s an independent investigation of misconduct by a President or top aides to a President. And it’s clear nobody’s going to investigate themselves, so it’s not a good situation.

So, the Congress passed a variety of very important rules. It passed the special prosecutor legislation. It passed campaign finance reform—which it ultimately took a few years for people to figure out how to get around those rules, but those rules did work for some period of time. It passed ethics reforms for the judiciary. It passed other kinds of ethics reforms, I think also for the Congress, but I’m not 100 percent sure about that. So, there were a lot of things that Congress tried to do. The Presidential Records Act [1978], so that the presidential papers became public. So there was a lot that Congress tried to do in the wake of Watergate. And actually, legislation on governmental surveillance also, and checks on the CIA. And the government intelligence agencies came about not directly from Watergate, but Watergate was part of the impetus for legislative changes.

So, there were a huge number of changes that came about—and the War Powers Act [1973]. The War Powers Act was a way of trying to check presidential war-making powers. And so that was one, I would say, post-Watergate, post-Vietnam reform that was enacted. Of course, it’s being disregarded now. But the War Powers Act is another effort. So, Congress did a lot of, I would say, cleanup. Whether those measures were all as effective as

they could have been—I think Congress tried to make them effective. You know, sometimes people with the best of intentions don't always get the legislation right. But I think there was a lot of effort to try to improve, clean up, make sure that government was much more honest as a result.

JOHNSON: We don't have a lot of time left, so we're going to jump ahead to a few retrospective questions that we had. But before that, we wanted to ask about why you decided to run for the Senate in 1980 and to leave the House.

HOLTZMAN: Well, I loved being in the House, and I thought I could do more in the Senate. I was a very active legislator. I got a lot of legislation passed. One of my favorite awards was being named "Workhorse of the Year." So I said, "Well, listen, maybe I can parlay this into even more effectiveness." Unfortunately, I wound up being in a three-way race. I wound up being in the time when Carter was running against Ronald Reagan, and there wasn't a lot of enthusiasm for him among Democrats. And it was raining in New York City that day and a beautiful day in upstate New York, which is Republican territory. So, everything was stacked against me in that race, but that's why I ran. It's a very hard decision to give up being in the House. It was really a great privilege for me, and I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to try to help serve my country.

WASNIEWSKI: We've asked you a lot of retrospective questions today. Now we want to get you to prognosticate, maybe. There are now 108 women in Congress. There are 88 in the House, 20 in the Senate, and we're doing these interviews for the Rankin centennial. But we want to know—we've asked everybody so far—in 2067 for the sesquicentennial of Rankin's first election and swearing-in, how many women do you think we'll have in Congress, and how will we get there?

HOLTZMAN: Well, maybe we'll have more than half of the Members will be women. I won't say for sure, because I've always kind of been more optimistic about what was going to happen with regard to women's rights, and that didn't turn out to be the case. But in another 100 years . . . we have over 100 women now, we can have over 200. I think it's possible that we'll have more than half, that the number of women in the House will reflect the percentage of women in the country. It's not necessary that it be exactly that, but really, there need to be more women in the House and more women in the Senate. We're still a tiny percentage. And our voice needs to be heard at every table.

WASNIEWSKI: How will that happen? How will we get more women involved?

HOLTZMAN: Well, more women will seek office. The example of more women holding office encourages other women. There are groups that have been established to help train women. So, I think we'll just see that happen. Of course, the cost of running for office is a real deterrent.

END OF PART TWO ~ BEGINNING OF PART THREE

JOHNSON: We're back and we just have two questions for you. One of them is, what advice would you offer a woman that came to you and said that she was considering running for Congress?

HOLTZMAN: Well, I have to be humble about giving advice, having given some not-always-correct advice to people running. I think it's great if someone wants to run for Congress. We need people of energy, idealism, commitment,

responsibility, integrity running for sure—and more women running. The big issue today is, of course, how do you finance a campaign? The fact that my record lasted for 42 years as the youngest woman elected to Congress is an indictment of our campaign finance system. It's just that young women can't possibly raise the kind of money that's necessary to compete. So that system has to change.

However, I would encourage young women to run. And I know there's a very bad view that politics is dirty, and that it's corrupt, and what can you accomplish anyway? And my mom used to say to me, "Why do you want to be in politics? It's such a dirty business." I said, "Mom, you don't have to give up your principles. You don't have to be corrupt, and there's so much you can do." And I never realized that until I actually was in government—how much you can do to help people, and what a difference you can make in people's lives in ways that you just would never imagine. And so it's such a great opportunity to do good, and we need people who want to do good. My advice would be go for it if you can.

WASNIEWSKI: Reflecting on your career, as you have been doing with us today, what do you think your lasting legacy will be in terms of your House service?

HOLTZMAN: Well, there are a few big issues that I worked on. One was, of course, the Congresswomen's Caucus. I think that that remains an important legacy. It's not just mine, it's Congresswoman Heckler's as well. And then, of course, the women at the beginning who decided to brave all of the vituperation of the world and become a hardy band and set this organization up. So, I mean, I can't claim the credit for it, but I'm very glad to have been participating in that.

The other area that we haven't discussed at all is the work I did on uncovering the presence of Nazi war criminals in the United States, and bringing them to justice. I think that was another really important endeavor in terms of human rights, and in terms of accountability. Those are two of the areas I think I made some difference in. Of course, if the Equal Rights Amendment had passed, I would have definitely claimed credit for that, but unfortunately, it hasn't. But someday it will. Someday women will be fully part of the Constitution and full citizens of this country.

JOHNSON: That's all we have. We have many more questions we would like to ask, but we don't have time for it, unfortunately.

HOLTZMAN: Great.

JOHNSON: But thank you so much for coming in today.

WASNIEWSKI: Thank you so much.

HOLTZMAN: You're very welcome. Thank you.

NOTES

¹ The National Women's Conference took place in Houston, Texas, in November 1977. An outgrowth of the International Women's Year (1975), the conference addressed a series of women's issues, including equal credit, domestic violence, and the Equal Rights Amendment.

² Representatives Holtzman and Heckler cofounded the Congresswomen's Caucus in 1977.

³ Named for its sponsor, Representative Henry John Hyde, the Hyde Amendment prohibits federal funding for abortion, except in cases of rape, or incest, or to save the life of the mother.

⁴ A suffragist, feminist, and founder of the National Woman's Party, Alice Paul was an early leader in the movement for an Equal Rights Amendment for women.

⁵ Eleanor (Ellie) Smeal, former president of the National Organization for Women and current head of the Feminist Majority Foundation, is a national women's rights advocate.

⁶ Reference to the series of Watergate hearings and trials presided over by the chief judge of the U.S. District Court for Washington, D.C.

⁷ Reference to the two investigative journalists, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, who led the reporting of the Watergate scandal.