

**The Honorable Claudine Schneider**  
U.S. Representative of Rhode Island (1981–1991)

**Oral History Interview**  
**Final Edited Transcript**  
January 20, 2016

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

“Not until I came to Congress did I realize, ‘Wow, there are a lot of inequities.’ Not insofar as how I was treated, but more in terms of the laws themselves. ‘What about making sure that women have access to education, or scholarships, or health care? And what do you mean you want to tell a woman what she can do with her body? That’s not the role of government. That doesn’t belong here.’ So, yes, there were many things that opened my eyes as a young woman in a governing body that had dominion over this country.”

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## Abstract

During her decade in the U.S. House of Representatives, Claudine Schneider viewed herself as a problem solver, not a politician. Schneider surprised many experts when she overcame several perceived obstacles of the era—her young age and gender—as well as a lack of political experience to win one of Rhode Island’s two House seats. In her oral history, Schneider discusses her path to running for Congress in 1978 and 1980. Her grassroots campaigns included visits to local bowling alleys, hospitals, and grocery stores, contributing to her eventual defeat of the incumbent Edward Beard.

As a Congresswoman, Schneider had a reputation as coalition builder. A member of the “Gypsy Moths” (a group of moderate Republicans who represented New England and Midwestern districts) with allies on both sides of the aisle, she often found herself courted by the Republican Leadership and President Ronald Reagan. In her interview, Schneider explains her approach to politics which included a global perspective, independent thinking, and an emphasis on environmentalism. She also speaks of the evolving role of the Congresswomen’s Caucus which she credited with bringing attention to lesser-known, but significant issues affecting women. Schneider observes how it took her election to the House to realize the gender discrimination embedded in many laws. The Rhode Island Congresswoman reflects on some of the subtle differences she perceived between her male and female colleagues, such as the motivation to run for Congress and the attention paid to Members in committee or during floor proceedings based on gender. Rooted in her own political experience, Schneider emphasizes the importance of women running for Congress and being active within the institution.

## Biography

**SCHNEIDER, Claudine**, a Representative from Rhode Island; born Claudine Cmarada in Clairton, Pa., March 25, 1947; attended parochial schools; studied at the University of Barcelona, Spain, and Rosemont College (Pa.); B.A., Windham College (Vt.), 1969; attended University of Rhode Island School of Community Planning; founder, Rhode Island Committee on Energy, 1973; executive director, Conservation Law Foundation, 1974; federal coordinator, Rhode Island Coastal Zone Management Program, 1978; producer and host of public affairs television program, Providence, R.I., 1978–1979; elected as a Republican to the Ninety-seventh and to the four succeeding Congresses (January 3, 1981–January 3, 1991); was not a candidate for reelection in 1990 to the One Hundred Second Congress but was an unsuccessful nominee for the United States Senate; member of the faculty, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

**[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](mailto: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, forthcoming 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 CLAUDINE SCHNEIDER OF RHODE ISLAND —  
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

**JOHNSON:** My name is Kathleen Johnson. I'm with the Office of the Historian, and I'm with Matt Wasniewski, the Historian for the House. The date is January 20th, 2015. We're in the House Recording Studio in the Rayburn House Office Building, and we are with former Representative Claudine Schneider from Rhode Island. We are very happy to have you here today.

**SCHNEIDER:** Thank you. My pleasure.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Thanks for joining us.

**JOHNSON:** So this interview is part of a series that we're doing to recognize the 100th anniversary of the election and the swearing into Congress of the first woman, Jeannette Rankin. And to start with today, before we ask about your career in the House, we had a few more general questions that we wanted to ask. First off, when you were young, did you have any female role models?

**SCHNEIDER:** Well, I was surrounded by my mother and four aunts. And my mother worked side-by-side with my father in a retail men's clothing store. One aunt had a women's clothing store; another aunt had a children's clothing store. And so my female role models were all women who were in charge, very competent, and were businesswomen.

**JOHNSON:** And what specifically drew you to them, besides the fact that they were family members? What did you see from them that you might have used later on in your career?

**SCHNEIDER:** They were each responsible financially for themselves and for their families. Even though they all had husbands, they were equal partners, and they had

their own careers. So they were equal in every way that I could see as a young girl growing up.

**JOHNSON:** When you were young, what was the expectation of what you would be as a woman when you grew up?

**SCHNEIDER:** Well, the sad thing was, was that when I was a little girl, I thought first I wanted to be a nun, then I wanted to be a professional dancer, and then an artist. My parents said, “No, no, no.” And ultimately, I said, “Okay, I’d like to be a doctor.” And then my mother said, “No, no, no. You let your brother be a doctor. You can marry one.” So that was, needless to say, disconcerting.

Nonetheless, I studied chemistry and other pre-med courses in college, but it was just really tough for me. And my mother said, “Well, why don’t you do what you’re really good at doing, and that is languages. Because if you studied French”—and my mother spoke French at home—“or Spanish, or whatever,” she said, “you can always be a teacher.” And I thought to myself, “Teacher? I want to be an ambassador.” So I think the expectations were, to some degree, gender-specific and relatively low.

I also think that for some reason or other, I had this sense that I wanted to maximize my potential. The good thing was that my parents, other than those remarks, would always say, “Well, you can be and do whatever you want.” So on the other hand, I got mixed signals that I was limitless. So I guess {laughter} I chose to follow the limitless path. {laughter}

**JOHNSON:** Were there any women outside of your family that might have served as role models when you were thinking about careers that weren’t gender-specific at that time?

**SCHNEIDER:** No. There were not. I never saw a woman doctor. I never saw a woman elected official. They were just not in the small town where I grew up. And nothing really on television that inspired me as a gender-specific role model. So I didn't really have any.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Was politics a topic in your household growing up? What got you interested in politics to begin with?

**SCHNEIDER:** {laughter} Yes. Politics was a rare topic at my home. The bottom line was "all politicians are a bunch of crooks and bums." So that was the environment that I grew up in, and I took that on face value because as a young girl, I remember my parents talking about some of the corruption that was going on in the political arena. And I just thought nothing of it. So politics as a little girl—a young girl, even—was never something that interested me.

**WASNIEWSKI:** So what drew you to politics later in life as a young person?

**SCHNEIDER:** I was never drawn to politics. I am still not drawn to politics. I am drawn to governance. I have always been interested in problem solving and being a change agent and leaving the planet better than I found it. That has been my driving force.

But how did I first get into the political arena? It had not even been on my horizon up until I was 25 years old. And I was just about to get married, and the doctor said, "You have a 50–50 chance of dying." I had cancer of the lymph system. So that was a wake-up call at age 25, when suddenly I see my whole life before me. I'm about to get married, about to start a new life in a new place, and trying to figure out my next chapter, and then suddenly being told there may not be another chapter.

So I went internally to contemplate what I had been taught as a young girl, and that was that all of us are here for a purpose and that I realized I had no clarity about my purpose. I thought, “Well, I’ve been a pretty good student, I’ve been a pretty good daughter, pretty good sister, but why am I here?”

**[A 33-second segment of this interview has been redacted.]**

Well, my husband had been the director for the research laboratory for the Environmental Protection Agency for ocean pollution and was well-respected in our new community. One day he came home and said, “I think I’d like to run for governor.” And I, who was kind of dealing with my own sickness, said, “Well, great. I’ll be your right-hand woman. I’ll help organize the volunteers, and I’ll help raise the money for the campaign.” We went through the nominating process, I at his side each time, of course, asking, “Are you going to protect my man? Are you going to provide funding? Do you have a volunteer organization?”

And in the end he said, “You know what? I’m not going to run.” And I said, “Oh, okay.” And he said, “But I think you should run.” Well, I laughed. And laughed and laughed. {laughter} And I said, “Oh no, not me. I hate politics. I’m not interested.” I voted always. And then, continuing with my mantra, my prayers, I was very much aware of what was going on around me, and then a woman who lived down the street said to me, “You know what? You ought to run for Congress.” {laughter} I just laughed again. And I thought, “This is bizarre, coming out of left field.” And then I had a third person say to me, “You would be a great Congresswoman.”<sup>1</sup>

And I think part of the thing was that I’ve always been nationally and internationally concerned. I have always considered myself a global citizen. I have always felt that if you go to a foreign country, you should study their

culture before going. You should try to speak their language as much as possible.

And so after the third remark, I thought, “What? Is this what I’m supposed to be doing? Is this my purpose in life?” And I thought, “My goodness, my opponent [Edward Peter Beard] has an 80 percent approval rating. So winning, which is usually what is considered in political campaigns, may not be on the horizon for me, but at least I will be able to use this campaign as a soapbox to talk about the things that are important.” My intention was to do that but also to do the best job I possibly could, to have no regrets. And that’s exactly what I did.

I talked about, primarily, the environment, because at that time, this was the ’80s. The Environmental Protection Agency had just been started in the 1970s, so we had a lot of different environmental challenges at that time. And I talked about how when you throw your waste into Narragansett Bay, the fish eat it, we go fishing, we eat the fish, we become sick, that we are all one, we are all interconnected. So that was, in essence, my intention. Well, that’s a long answer to your question, {laughter} but that’s pretty much how I got into the political arena.

**JOHNSON:** That first campaign that you just talked about was in 1978.

**SCHNEIDER:** Correct.

**JOHNSON:** You surprised a lot of people because you didn’t win, but it was a closer race than the experts thought it was going to be.

**SCHNEIDER:** Exactly.

**JOHNSON:**

So why did you decide to run again? And then, also, what advice did you receive?

**SCHNEIDER:**

Well, the first time I ran and got 48 percent of the vote. What was interesting is that the night of the election in 1978, I remember going to the ballroom of the hotel where everybody was gathered, and I had to give a concession speech, and {laughter} that was fine. I had this equanimity about me that it is what it is. And so I remember all the cameras flashing and people cheering, and I said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. I lost." I said, "You know, it's okay. I thank all of you."

And what was interesting is that the next day in the newspaper, above the fold, there was a photograph of me just like this {smiling with hands raised}, and underneath it said, "The loser." {laughter} Below the fold was a picture of my opponent [Beard] sitting alone in a hotel room, sort of slumped over, looking at the returns on television, and it said, "The winner." Well, that photograph was worth a thousand words. And it was interesting to me.

But the other thing that was interesting is that after that election night, the next morning I went out, and I did a thank-you tour. So it was as though I were on automatic pilot. I went to the same factories I went to at 5:30 in the morning, and then I went to the hospitals to see the doctors and nurses arriving at seven in the morning, and then I went to the bank. And people, of course, first thought I was crazy, saying, "Hey, don't you know the election is over?" And I said, "No, I just wanted to thank you for your support."

Well, the next day after that, I happened to spot these bumper stickers that said, "Next time, Claudine." {laughter} And we had no idea—and to this day we have no idea—who put out the bumper stickers, but it did say, "Next time, Claudine." So between the joyful-faced newspaper photo and the all-

pervasive bumper stickers, I began to consider it. I said to my husband, “You know, if we do this again, there’s a good chance I’ll win.” And he said, “You should do it.” And I said, “Well, it’ll mean a completely different lifestyle for us. Is this something that we want to do?” And he said, “Yes, you should do it.” And I thought, “Well, this whole time I’ve been talking about the change that I would create. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if I could actually be in a position of power to make a difference and do the things I believe that need to be done?” And so that was why I ran for the second time.

**JOHNSON:** And you were successful in the second campaign, so what did you learn from that first run for Congress?

**SCHNEIDER:** Well, I learned that it is important to touch the voters, to listen to them, to see them, to hear their perceptions of what’s going on. So I did the same thing in the second race, even though I had more money to get out my message. The first time we did television ads, but we filmed them in our living room. {laughter} We had a volunteer crew to do it the first time. Yes, some money made it a little bit easier to buy television ads, which was another way to reach people.

But what I did in between the two elections I think was more significant. When I contemplated that the polling data said everybody knew my name—and as we know in the political arena, name-recognition is critical—that yet, they still didn’t know what I stood for. And how could they? Because we had limited resources to convey that. When I first ran for office, a lot of people never even heard of me before. So it was useful, I thought, to help people know who I really am. I need to demonstrate my breadth and depth of knowledge and concern for solving problems.

{laughter} And so, I thought, I'm going to call the three major networks and see if they would like to have me do a public-affairs show, and then I could talk about a lot of different issues, thereby enabling people to get to know me. So I get the phone number of ABC, CBS, and NBC and just thought, "Okay, get the courage up to do this." And just as I was about to pick up the phone to call NBC, the phone rang, and it was NBC calling me, saying, "How would you like to do a public-affairs show?" {laughter} So talk about magic!

It was pretty interesting because that gave me the opportunity to use some of the skills that I had that no one was aware of. And one of the things, in the end, having studied languages in college and being eager to help build bridges of understanding, I thought I'd demonstrate negotiating conflict. We had a lot of labor-union disputes in Rhode Island at the time. And so one of my first TV shows, I had someone from the business community and one of the labor leaders come together and talk about their frustrations, concerns, etc. I was rather disappointed because it was being aired at 6:30 in the morning. "Nobody's going to see this TV show." Well, {laughter} it turned out that all of the laborers got up at that hour of the morning, and they would put the TV on and listen to it, and the nurses, and doctors, and others. So, people did tune in and pay attention. And then NBC decided to repeat the show right before *Meet the Press*, so I had an even larger audience. That was one of the key things that I learned: voters need to know who you really are, to see you in action, and know what you're all about. Using the media to convey that was very important.

**WASNIEWSKI:** In that 1980 campaign, you ran against the incumbent again, and it was a presidential election year. Was there anything particularly, at any moment, that you saw as a turning-point moment in the campaign?

**SCHNEIDER:**

Yes, there was a significant turning-point as I saw it. In campaigns, they always say to the incumbents, “Ignore your opponent.” So I was obviously being ignored until one day I was at a Greek church festival.

I loved going to the church festivals where you could meet everybody and dance and have a good time. So I was out campaigning, and my opponent showed up, and he came over to me, and he said, “What are you doing here?” And I said, “Well, I’m working hard, so that I could be the next Congresswoman.” And he said, “Ah, forget about it. You ought to go home because pretty soon you’ll be scrubbing floors and washing dishes.”

Well, it just so happened that there was a reporter from the *Providence Journal* within earshot. He heard that, wrote the story, and the next day when I was campaigning at one of the large grocery stores—all of these blue-collar women who previously had ignored me saw me, and they said, “Right on, girl. You go, girl. Go get ’em.” And to me, it said, “All right, we may scrub floors, we may wash dishes, but we can do more than that.” And that clearly resonated with a lot of other women.

**JOHNSON:**

One of the questions we wanted to ask you is the importance of gender in the campaign. Beside that point, was this something that people were excited—and you were a young woman, as well, so age and gender—was that really important for you in the campaign?

**SCHNEIDER:**

The reporters told me that that was a detriment. {laughter} They said, “Look, you’re young, you’re a woman, you have no money, you have no name-recognition. How do you possibly expect to win?” And I just said, “Well, I’m going to do the best job I possibly can, and we’ll see what the voters have to say.” But for the most part, the reporters, I think, were uncomfortable in

bringing up the whole “Well, you’re a woman” kind of thing, except for the reporter from the *Providence Journal*, the main newspaper.

When I encountered constituents or voters on the campaign trail, it was always interesting to me that, more often than not, men would say to me, “Well, I’m going to vote for you because I think women are more honest than men.” Or they would say something like, “I’m going to vote for you. And I may not agree with you on all of your issues, but I trust you.” So, I think there was an inherent—at least among the men—attitude that “I think, since women seem to be more honest, we ought to go with this new idea of electing a woman.”

What was disconcerting to me about the women is that women voters were not inherently supportive. The majority of them were not. And I couldn’t quite understand it because I thought, “Well, I’m supportive of women. {laughter} Why aren’t they?” And we did some polling data on that, and it showed that many women questioned, “What makes her think that she’s better than me that she would run for office?” It was subliminal envy, I guess, that made women hesitate to vote for a woman. And I would like to think that today, in this day and age, we’re beyond that, but I’m not so sure.

**JOHNSON:** Were there any women’s groups that supported your campaign, either verbal support or financial?

**SCHNEIDER:** Yes. From the outset there were women’s organizations within the state, and then ultimately nationally, that supported me.

**JOHNSON:** And you had mentioned that you were able to raise more money in your second campaign. Was that because of name recognition? How did that come about?

**SCHNEIDER:**

Yes. I was able to raise more money the second time I ran, because, as one of the reporters said, “You know campaigns are like horse races.” I didn’t understand. “What? I’ve never bet on a horse. {laughter} What do I know?” And he said, “Well, win, place, or show, people want to put their money on a winner. So you already showed that you could win last time around, so they’re going to give you more money this time around.” I had gotten 48 percent of the vote on very little money. So that was one of the key reasons that I was able to raise more money the second time around within the state. Then from the national point of view, as a Republican, the National Republican Party declared, “You’ll never win, you’ll never win.” After I got 48 percent of the vote in the first election, then the national Republican organizations that had previously looked at Rhode Island as a black hole for the Republican Party now considered, “Well, we may have a winner here.” So they too were interested in giving me financial support.

**WASNIEWSKI:**

You’ve talked about some of the constituents in your district. Can you describe the district for us, geographically and demographically, too?

**SCHNEIDER:**

Well, geographically—first of all, {laughter} Rhode Island is a terrific state, love it dearly, a small state where we have two Congresspeople. And it’s shaped like a horseshoe. So the district line goes straight through the city of Providence. And the half of Providence that I had was the Italian section of Federal Hill. As a matter of fact, when I ran for Congress for the first time, I decided to take Italian lessons on Federal Hill. The western half of Rhode Island that I represented was along the Connecticut border. It included much of the blue-collar elements of the state, and some of the agricultural parts of the state, too. And one of the industrial areas—Electric Boat and General Dynamics manufactured the submarines. It’s a small state in geographic terms, but in demographics, vastly diverse: fishermen; blue-collar workers;

farmers; manufacturers; a lot of machine-tool, costume-jewelry, and textile manufacturing.

**JOHNSON:** And as you mentioned, Rhode Island was a Democratic-leaning state, and your district had a lot more Democratic voters. So as a candidate, how did you handle that?

**SCHNEIDER:** On the campaign trail people would say, “Oh my God, you’re a Republican!” And my response, “You know what, don’t judge me by a label. Vote for the person, not the party because I will do the best job I possibly can in representing your interests.” And when I said that, it resonated. I think that that was part of what encouraged people to vote for me.

The second thing that I said was—not only vote for the person, not the party—but I also said, “If you don’t like the job I’m doing, in two short years you can get rid of me and elect somebody different.” And so that was kind of a wake-up call for them. “Oh, yes, I guess we can.”

**WASNIEWSKI:** Do you want to go with the campaign button?

**JOHNSON:** Sure. We bring surprises to our interview.

**WASNIEWSKI:** So two images of campaign buttons, and these are both in the House Collection, by the way.

**SCHNEIDER:** Oh, they are. Okay.

**WASNIEWSKI:** They are. We’re wondering if there is any particular story to either one of them. You touched on the one below that, but do you have any stories about how you came up with the design?

**SCHNEIDER:**

You better believe it. {laughter} Well, Claudine is a friendly name. And Schneider was my married name. My maiden name is Cmarada. Sounds Italian, doesn't it? {laughter} But we didn't use Cmarada. Schneider was there because that's what was on the ballot. That was my legal name. But we wanted to make it more personal, more friendly, and so we just used the first name. I don't recall too many other candidates only using their first name. {laughter} People used to tease me about just using the first name. But it did make sense. Claudine Schneider is too long—"Claudine for Congress," much better. So that was the rationale behind that. "This time, Claudine," we copied from the bumper stickers that somebody had put out there. And we thought, "This sends a good message, and it's coming from the people themselves, so why not use that?"

Another button that we had when I first ran was called, "Claudine's 15s" because we were trying to figure out how to engage and to mobilize the voters. And so this friend of my husband's came up with the idea of "Claudine's 15s." What it meant was that you could get one of these special "15" buttons if you contributed \$15 to the campaign, if you volunteered for 15 hours, and if you spoke to 15 other people and told them about Claudine. So it was very much of a grassroots organization.

For example, I was informed that if you're going to go into the senior housing establishments, you have to cater those. I panicked, "Where are we going to get the money for catering?" And my volunteers said, "Oh, don't worry about it." One of them said, "I'll bake cookies." Another one said, "Well, I'll bring our coffee pot, and we'll make coffee." And another volunteer said, "Well, we should make some t-shirts or vests or something." So we had volunteers sew vests that said, "Claudine for Congress" on them. And all the volunteers walked in wearing my name, carrying little baskets of

cookies, and offering coffee to the surprised and delighted seniors. It was very much of a grassroots effort!

Being part of Claudine's 15s was more like being part of an exclusive club, as opposed to, "Well, I'm part of Claudine's campaign." It was a little bit more personal than that. So much so that I had different drivers all the time because people wanted to get closer to me and find out, "Well, who is she, and what is she all about?" They would volunteer to be a driver during the course of the day for my campaigning. Or actually, they usually got worn out after half a day, {laughter} so I would have different volunteers drive me in the morning, somebody else in the afternoon.

It was great fun because I learned about them, they learned about me, and some of them took care of me. I remember one woman, she brought some nice new-age music. She put {laughter} on the cassette—if anybody still remembers what that is—and she brought some carrot sticks and celery sticks, and she said, "Well, here, this will give you good nourishment." So it was pretty wonderful.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Were you always—in subsequent election cycles—very hands-on with campaign materials, the buttons, and everything?

**SCHNEIDER:** Oh, yes. Absolutely. And as a matter of fact, I had talked to my team as we went along, and they said, "Well, we need to spend X amount of money on polling." And I said, "Polling? We don't need to waste our money on polling. I know what my people are thinking. {laughter} I know my people." And so they always used to get upset with me because we would wrangle over whether or not we would do polling. One pollster declared, "Well, it looks like 99 percent of the people support Claudine." I would always respond,

“Well, where is that one percent? Let’s go find them. Let’s go get them.”

{laughter} I was pretty much hands-on during the whole process.

I have another hands-on story that I wanted to share with you because after I first declared that I was running for Congress, I had a momentary experience of freaking out. {laughter} I thought, “Oh my gosh, what have I done? How am I going to do this? I have no money to buy brochures or TV, no organization, no campaign manager!” And then I thought, “Okay, I’ve got it. I will use the media as a conduit to communicate my message.”

So I got a list of all the newspapers, and I decided—there were 22 local newspapers—“I’m going to go to each one, tell them why I’m running and what my vision is for the future.” So I went to the first newspaper, and I did just that. Then, after the first local coverage, my doorbell rang at my home, because I didn’t have an office or anything {laughter}—I was operating out of my home—a woman showed up at my door, and she said, “Hi. I’d like to volunteer for you. I read the article in the paper, and I believe in you.” And I said, “Well, great. You can be my campaign manager.” And she was my first campaign manager, and I will say, to this day, she is still my good friend. So that was pretty hands-on.

And doing the strategic planning for the campaign, I was pretty much involved going to each of the newspapers to share who I am, rather than wait for them to come to me. I had my new campaign manager get a list of all the factories in the state because that’s where you had the largest concentration of people. And I thought, “All right. This is my campaigning plan. I’m going to go where the highest concentrations of people happen to be.” And so we did that, and we had every moment of the day scheduled: factories at 5:30, 6:00 in the morning, then go to the hospitals, then 10:00 in the morning to the banks, and 12:00 lunch time to the eateries. At night I would end up at the

bowling alleys {laughter} because a lot of people went there. Eventually I became labeled as “Queen of the Bowling Alleys,” {laughter} because I was the only candidate that ever campaigned there.

One of my more interesting experiences was one day when it was pretty late, and I was driving along with my volunteer driver. I asked him, “Well, the day is not over yet. Where else should we go?” We were on the highway. “Look over there, there are a lot of cars. Let’s go over there and see what’s going on.” And he said, “Calm down, calm down, that’s a car dealership. It’s time to go home.” And so we did go home, both exhausted. {laughter}

**JOHNSON:** It sounds like this was an aspect of the job that you really enjoyed, though.

**SCHNEIDER:** Absolutely, yes.

**JOHNSON:** When you were elected to Congress—it was the 97th Congress in 1981, and you were one of 21 women serving in the House during that Congress—did you find, because there were so few of you, that women gravitated towards each other?

**SCHNEIDER:** Yes. Absolutely. And I was very grateful for the Congresswomen’s Caucus because it was an opportunity for us to put our heads together, to brainstorm, to identify the problems, and come up with solutions.

One of my more interesting experiences as a newly elected Congresswoman was when I was at home in the district office, and a woman who was in her 70s or so came to see me, and she said, “Congressman.” I said, “Congresswoman,” because that word really wasn’t common. She said, “Well, I came to see you because you are a woman, and I hope that you can please, please help me.” I said, “What’s the problem?” And she said, “My husband and I had always planned that if he should die before I do, that I

would be able to live on his benefits.” I said, “Yes?” And she said, “Well, now he died, and I’m not getting those benefits.” I said, “Well, there’s something wrong here. I’m sure you’re receiving bad information. Let me check into it.” So I had a staff person look at the situation, and he said, “No. There’s a loophole in the law.”

Then I went back to Washington and met with the women at one of our Congresswomen Caucus regular meetings, and I said, “Ladies, there’s a loophole here in the Social Security legislation. What is the story? How could this be?” And they said, “Well, Geraldine [Anne] Ferraro, led the charge on that before, and we didn’t get it solved.” I responded, “Well, why isn’t this on our agenda? It’s still a problem. Let’s go. Let’s make this happen.” And so we did.

It was critically important for the women to work together and to, as I said, identify the problems, come up with solutions, and be a force within the Congress. I will say that today, I am really discouraged that the Republican women have chosen not to work with the Democratic women. This partisanship does not help anybody. And, quite frankly, I find it despicable.

**JOHNSON:** Was it fairly common when you were a Member in the ’80s, then, for women to cross party lines and to find issues to work on together?

**SCHNEIDER:** Absolutely. Absolutely. There was some partisanship, but nothing like there is today. And, quite frankly, what I have observed, on the part of the difference between women and men in office, that . . . and not just in political office, but in the workplace, because, basically, I am somebody who works for change, and so I study the situation and the individuals, and I figure out what button can I push to get them to say, “Yes.” And competition is great with men. I’ve worked with a number of different corporations, and

if I tell Pfizer that Merck is doing this, or if I tell Boeing that General Dynamics is doing that, then there is this, “Oh, really? Okay, now I’m listening. Now, what is it you want from me?” With the women, it doesn’t seem to work that way because they seem to make decisions based on their values, what they believe to be important to change. So competition, as a motivator among women, I think, is much less.

**WASNIEWSKI:** There were three other new women elected to that 97th Congress in 1980: Lynn [Morley] Martin, Bobbi Fiedler, and Marge [Margaret Scafati] Roukema. Was there a close bond between the four of you?

**SCHNEIDER:** Yes. Oh, yes. It was pretty exciting to be elected with three other women at that time. And it was substantial, I guess, enough for a TV talk show to invite us. *The Donahue Show* had all four of us on and asked us a lot of different questions about being women in office. I felt very proud to stand with those women from New Jersey, California, the Midwest. So we were from all different parts of the United States, and that gave me hope, thinking, “Well, it wasn’t just little Rhode Island that saw the light. {laughter} It was other regions of the country. And so there is hope for greater equality, greater balance, among the decision makers in the U.S. Congress.”

I want to mention something else about the women in office, and that is I was very curious about what motivated the women to run for office because I knew my motivation was quite different than most. {laughter} I remember one day some of us were meeting, and I asked Bobbi Fiedler, “Why did you run for Congress?” And she said, “I was going nuts out in California. I was looking at what the transportation situation was. I really thought that there ought to be some federal involvement in changing this and that.” And I thought, “Mmm, that’s interesting.”

Then I asked Marge Roukema, “Marge, what about you?” And she said, “Well, I have some kids in school, and I’d always been involved in their education and paying attention to the school board and federal involvement in education. And I thought, ‘Wow, I could really do something about the education system in our country.’ So that’s what motivated me to run.” And I thought, “Well, that’s interesting.” And so it was woman after woman who identified a problem they wanted to solve—a specific problem.

And then I thought, “Well, that’s curious. I’m going to ask the guys.” So then I started asking some of my male friends, “Why did you run for Congress?” And one colleague said, “My family was always involved in politics, so it just seemed like the natural thing to do.” And I thought, “Okay.” Then I asked another guy, and he said, “When I was in college I thought, ‘Hmm, it would be interesting to run for mayor because I had already been the president of my class.’ And I thought, ‘Maybe I’ll run for mayor, and then I’ll run for Congress. Who knows? Maybe someday I’ll run for the Presidency.’”

So there was a distinction there. The women were motivated to solve problems; the men seemed to have been motivated to further a career, to satisfy the ego. And I thought, “This is very interesting.” With all due respect to all the men paying attention to this, {laughter} we love you greatly, but this was my experiential finding.

**JOHNSON:** When you had meetings with women, either informally or formally, was that something that you ever discussed?

**SCHNEIDER:** Elaborate on that.

**JOHNSON:** So you mentioned that you were asking questions about why you first got into office. But if you’re asking this, maybe other women noticed it as well.

Was this a motivation that you would talk about as a group? “Okay, if we want this one person to think about this issue, and he thinks differently, is this something that we can focus on?”

**SCHNEIDER:** Oh, yes. That was what I would refer to as strategizing. So yes, we would talk about “how do we get to Congressman so-and-so, or what is it that’s going to move him,” but not often because we all had our own strategies. The reality is you’re so busy when you’re in Congress that the women would get together and say, “All right, we’re going to move this legislation. I’ll take so-and-so and so-and-so, and you take these guys.” And we would divide up and decide who was going to enlist what other men into our effort. But we didn’t always talk strategy. We always had our own. Sometimes I would approach men, and after a while, they would just say, “Claudine, whatever you want, I’m with you.” It was like, “Wow, okay, good. We know we can count on him. {laughter} No heavy lifting there.”

**WASNIEWSKI:** Was there anyone early on, a female or male, who served as a mentor to you as a new Member of Congress?

**SCHNEIDER:** Yes, Stewart [Brett] McKinney, a Republican from Connecticut. I remember very distinctly him saying to me one day, when we were having a vote on a defense budget or a portion of the defense budget—and he represented Electric Boat, and I represented General Dynamic—and there was a substantial amount of money in the defense budget for those companies that were our constituents. I was feeling anxious about increasing the defense budget. It’s like, “Wait a minute, why are we inflating this defense budget when we are still experiencing the Cold War, and we need to be putting more money into diplomacy?” He said, “Claudine, I’m voting against it.”

He demonstrated the courage and integrity to vote against the party and against his constituents and to vote for what he thought was right. He was a Republican. We had a Republican President [Ronald Reagan]. It was a defense budget. He said, “You know, you have to vote your conscience.” I knew that because the first vote we cast was on the President’s budget, and there were only two of us Republicans that voted against Ronald Reagan’s budget.

When I received the mammoth budget, I said to my staff, “We’ve got to study this. You take this piece on Social Security, and you take this piece on defense, and education, environment, etc.” And we all split it up. “And tomorrow morning we’re going to come back and discuss what’s in this budget.” Well, we did that, and the bottom line was that we were taking money out of education and money out of the environment and putting it into the defense budget. And I thought, “I can’t do this. I can’t vote for this.” So I did vote against the President’s initial budget. And on individual votes, as I was saying, Stewart McKinney said, “You have to do what you think is right for the people.” And I thought, “Thank you for reaffirming what I believe to be true.”

In another encounter—I can’t say that she was a mentor because she pretty much stayed to herself—and that was Millicent [Hammond] Fenwick, a Congresswoman from New Jersey. I was the youngest woman {laughter} at that time, and I think she was the oldest. I remember her coming up to me once, and she said, “Well, I’m not going to be here forever, so I’m passing the baton to you. You better be the conscience of this body because Congress needs a conscience.” My stunned reaction was {laughter} “what? Oh. Okay.” {laughter} But that was rather intimidating and extremely thought-provoking because I thought, “Well, wait a second. That is the reason I am here anyway.

Not to play a game. Not to get some notches in my belt but to make a difference and try to bring some humanity to this body.” Those were two inspiring individuals that I encountered within the Congress.

**JOHNSON:**

When you were first elected to Congress—it was 1981 when you first started—what was the atmosphere like in the House? How would you describe it? Especially for being a woman Member, was it welcoming or were there a lot of obstacles that you had to face?

**SCHNEIDER:**

I would say that it was welcoming. We, four new women, were oddities, curiosities. So I think the men sort of took a wait-and-see attitude. And then I remember being appointed as a freshman to the first task force on campaign finance reform. And for the first meeting or two, I mostly listened rather than participated. I remember one of the guys on the committee coming up to me afterwards, and saying, “You know, the reality is that I pay a lot of attention to what you say because you had to do the same amount of campaigning, you had to raise as much money, you had to work as hard as I did to get here, so you are owed my respect.” Which I thought was pretty interesting for him to verbalize that. Some guys may have thought that, but for him to verbalize it was pretty wonderful.

But the other thing that was interesting is that in those meetings, one of the things I would observe is that sometimes I would offer up an idea, and then a couple of minutes later, one of the men would repeat the same thing I had said, and then everybody would say, “Well, yes, that’s a good idea, Joe. Let’s go with that.” And occasionally there would be a guy in the room that would say, “Wait a minute. Time out. Claudine said that 15 minutes ago.” I thought, “Yes. Thank you.” So it was a mix. For the most part, there was complete equality. Not the kind of partisanship and rancor that there is today.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Were there any groups or facilities when you first showed up in the House that you had to integrate as a woman?

**SCHNEIDER:** Yes. The men's gym. {laughter} We thought, "Hey, wait a second. I'm a runner. I would like to work out after being cerebral all day long. It would be nice to get the body moving." We women worked to make that happen. The other thing is there were no ladies' rooms that were easily accessible to the floor of the House. So that was something else we had to establish.

**JOHNSON:** You were the first, and still the only, woman elected to Congress from Rhode Island. And you were also the first Republican [from Rhode Island] elected in more than 40 years. What did those milestones mean to you, personally? And then also, what do you think it meant to Rhode Island and to your constituents?

**SCHNEIDER:** Well, I didn't focus on that until {laughter} after the fact. And what it meant . . . That translated very swiftly in my mind to, "I'm a leader." And then I thought, "Okay, that's a label that I have to live up to." So it was sort of natural, I felt, for me to blaze a trail on a number of different fronts.

**WASNIEWSKI:** You seem to have a very good feel for the media running as a candidate, but when you arrived in Washington, did you notice that you were treated differently? That there was a different kind of reception from the media, and was any of that based on gender?

**SCHNEIDER:** I would say, for the most part, other than something like *The Donahue Show*, unless you distinguished yourself on an issue, the media wasn't interested just because of gender. So one of the things that they did pay attention to was that I was, and am, a pro-choice Republican. Their interest was my not marching lockstep with the party on this issue. That was an unusual, and some would say courageous, position for me to take as a Catholic and as

someone who represented one of the most Catholic states. But to me it's ludicrous and insulting for essentially 435 men to tell women what to do with their bodies. Ultimately, women as well as men will have to answer to God for their actions.

**JOHNSON:** Earlier you had said that the media had mentioned that your young age, and the fact that you are a woman, was, they considered, a detriment. Do you think that was something that carried over to when you served in the House? Did you feel like you had to work even harder to prove that you should be there?

**SCHNEIDER:** I guess I didn't pay attention to that, if it was there. It wasn't so blatant that I felt like I had to put my hands on my hips and say, "Listen to me. I'm young," or, "I'm a woman." I just did my job, did what I thought was right. Despite my age and gender, I was invited to be a speaker at the National Press Club, selected to serve on a bipartisan Task Force on Campaign Finance Reform, and chosen to represent the Republican Party at an important business/higher education forum. So I did not feel neglected—and as for working harder, as a young woman, I always worked hard.

**WASNIEWSKI:** You've talked a little bit about the caucus. What are your general memories of the caucus, just in terms of how often it met, where it met, what the tone of the meetings were like?

**SCHNEIDER:** Well, it met frequently enough, I thought. I don't recall how frequently, but it always seemed like we had a good agenda. For the most part, all the women showed up, both Democrats and Republicans, and it was very convivial. We had focus. We talked about specific pieces of legislation coming up. There were often nay-sayers, and other times there were can-do kind of folks. But it was an opportunity for us to put our heads together and focus on the things

that are important not only to women, but to children, to men, to the country, for equality.

**WASNIEWSKI:** As you saw it when you arrived, who were some of the movers and shakers in the caucus at that point?

**SCHNEIDER:** Pat [Patricia Scott] Schroeder was the head of the caucus at the time. She and Geraldine Ferraro were two of the more active members. I will say that I felt a bit of partisanship on their part, but not that much. Not enough to make it detrimental to our overall mission.

**JOHNSON:** Margaret [M.] Heckler was there for one term while you were still there, and she was one of the co-founders. What do you remember about her role in the caucus?

**SCHNEIDER:** Well, I remember that she was a pretty determined Member and very adamant about pushing for legislation that would assure equality on a variety of different fronts.

**JOHNSON:** How did you as a group, as a caucus, decide on what issues that you were going to back together as an organization?

**SCHNEIDER:** Well, we would throw them all into the pot, *per se*, and then we would make an argument as to which were most compelling and important and which were possible to move. So we tackled them all. Even the ones that we thought were going to be extremely challenging, like the Equal Rights Amendment. Oh my gosh, I can't, in reflection now, get over how many times we met about pushing forward the Equal Rights Amendment. Even though we knew it was right, we knew it had to happen, but oh, wow, unbelievable that we could not pass it. Sadly, it was my party—the Republicans—that were most resistant.

Another issue that really bothered me that I ultimately brought before the Women's Caucus came from one of my interns. She said, "Congresswoman, one of the Senators is planning on dismantling Title IX to the Education Act." And I said, "Well, wait a second. Title IX. Doesn't that mean that women can get athletic scholarships that would enable them to go to college?" And she said, "Yes." And I thought, "What a foolish thing. Why?" "Well, to save money, to reduce the deficit." My response was that's ridiculous. So we looked into it, and we saw that Orrin [Grant] Hatch was working to eliminate Title IX.

When I met with additional staff from one of the research entities here in Congress, I learned this will have ramifications not only for women attempting to go to college, but all of the Civil Rights Act, including all minorities, the elderly, the disabled, etc. "Unbearable. We can't allow this to stand."

So I introduced some legislation—the Civil Rights Restoration Act—to stop Orrin Hatch in his tracks. And we succeeded on that. And in that case, all of the Congresswomen from the caucus, and some of those that were less engaged, jumped on board because they saw the importance of that piece of legislation. So it wasn't only being progressive and pushing for things like the Equal Rights Amendment, but it was also filling some of the holes in Social Security or stopping some of the proposed legislation that was about to be dismantled. We were both reactive and proactive.

**JOHNSON:**

With Title IX, did you find that you were able to get a lot of support? Obviously, you said the caucus backed this, but what about some other Members, and what did you try to say to convince them that this was really important legislation?

**SCHNEIDER:** Well, it depended. I believe in custom-fitting one's argument in order to be successful. {laughter} So to the minorities in Congress, I said, "Do you realize what this is going to do?" And they got it right away. Then I was aware that some of the older Members were responsive to older Americans, and disabled, etc., etc. So doing the cost-benefit was easy. And that's how all decisions had been made in Congress. What's the expense? What's the cost not only financially, but to the quality of life of these women, minorities, elderly, and disabled that would be affected? And I would usually frame my arguments in order to be effective.

**WASNIEWSKI:** How did you and the other members of the caucus handle the issue of women's reproductive rights? Was that ever a hindrance to the caucus? Did it hurt the caucus' effectiveness at any point, do you think?

**SCHNEIDER:** The Congresswomen's Caucus was primarily pro-choice. There were other Members who would come and go based on that issue alone. But I will say, one of the most horrifying things that I realized as a new Member of Congress was that constantly there was an effort to put an amendment to prohibit abortion under any circumstances on all different kinds of bills—defense bills, agriculture bills. I remember the first time I learned from a caucus staff member, who said, "Scrutinize every piece of legislation." I said, "This is obscene. You're trying to hide this. Be upfront about this anti-abortion amendment. And let's have an honest, truthful discussion of this, but don't try to slip it into all these different, irrelevant bills."

Now in the House, you're able to do non-germane amendments to bills; in the Senate, you can't get away with that. But I found that very disconcerting. It was time-consuming. It seemed dishonest. And really irritating when you're trying to move forward and make a difference, to constantly have

ideologues including amendments on important bills that would basically put a stick in the spokes of the wheels that were moving forward.

**JOHNSON:** How important was this issue to you personally, and also do you think to your career in the House because, as you mentioned, you were a Republican, so a lot of your party was not pro-choice?

**SCHNEIDER:** To the rest of the Members in Congress, members of my party, it was not a big deal at all. There was more of an attitude of “Live and let live. You’re entitled to your own positions; that’s fine. I still like you as a person. I’ll still support you on certain bills.” But it was not a reason to exclude me from anything.

Personally, it was important because I thought, “How is it that a bunch of men are making decisions about what women do with their bodies? How is it that you are so arrogant to legislate morality? Because isn’t our decision on this Earth ultimately judged by a higher power rather than by all of you? So don’t say, “Get the government off our backs,” and then hypocritically get on the backs of women. So my attitude, I think, is pretty clear. {laughter} That should not be a legislative topic. It’s a personal decision between a woman, God, and her husband, doctor, partner, whatever. But not something that should be legislated.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Stepping back, and looking at the caucus’ role, what role do you think it played in the institution of the House?

**SCHNEIDER:** I think it played a very important role because it was an opportunity for women to focus. Focus is everything, {laughter} and when you are able to have an information exchange to know what’s going on, that’s a vital role. I learned about many issues that are important to women that I didn’t know about until a caucus meeting. I think the Women’s Caucus was very valuable.

If I had just kept to myself, I would not have been successful. But when women learned of the inequality in some of our laws and worked together, we had a greater chance of success. So I think the caucus was incredibly important in bringing issues of inequality to our attention, providing a forum for strategizing, and enabling us to be a force for change.

**JOHNSON:** As Republican women, did you ever meet in a similar way as the caucus to gather and talk about issues that were important, but really just to your group as Republican women?

**SCHNEIDER:** Not really. Not really. We were almost always bipartisan. Sometimes two of us Republican women, or three, might get together just for lunch, but without the kind of agenda we would have in the Congresswomen's Caucus.

**WASNIEWSKI:** What about kind of working together with other women Representatives regionally, from New England? Did you have any special connections?

**SCHNEIDER:** No, because there were not enough of us. {laughter} And so the idea was that we work with the whole New England delegation, not just the women. And so that was more comprehensive, regionally speaking.

**JOHNSON:** I just had one more question, and then maybe we can take a break. President Reagan was in office while you were in the House. Did you ever meet with him or go to the White House, especially to talk about women's issues, issues that were important to the caucus, but also to you personally?

**SCHNEIDER:** I met with Ronald Reagan many times. As a matter of fact, the *Providence Journal* printed a photograph of Ronald Reagan as an elephant shaking hands, like in a receiving line. And then there was picture of little me, shaking hands with the President. And the President said, "You're from Rhode Island?" Essentially, depicting a shocking surprise.

So I met with Ronald Reagan many times. I was often invited in with some members of the leadership of the Republican Party. The reason was that I had been recognized {laughter} early on. Of course, I voted against the President's budget right out of the box. So he thought, "Well, she's an independent mover." And then the second thing that they noticed about me is that I was a pretty good coalition builder. I was able to bring the Republicans and the Democrats together on certain bills that I thought needed to move forward.

And so the President wanted to use me to be that coalition builder. It was particularly important because at the time, we had moderate Republicans in Congress, and we were called the "Gypsy Moths," which were a plague upon New England.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the Gypsy Moths would vote with the Republicans; other times we'd vote with the Democrats. Our guiding principle was "What is in the best interest of all the people?" We would meet regularly. So there were anywhere between 21 to 28 of us. We were the swing votes. We could determine, and did determine, what went forward and what did not. So I didn't hold a position in that group, but I was one of the strategist/organizers and coalition builders. And so when the President wanted to move certain pieces of legislation that he thought I might be receptive to, he would call me in along with Dick [Richard Bruce] Cheney, and Newt [Newton Leroy] Gingrich, and some of the other guys, even though I wasn't officially part of the leadership.

I remember one time I was invited in to observe some activity in Central America by the Soviets. And, needless to say, I was surrounded by military leaders. Some of the Joint Chiefs were in the room. And here I was, a young woman with no military experience or not much knowledge in that area, and I'm looking at this information about Soviet movement in Central America. I

got very concerned after speaking to the President. I thought, “We’re in a precarious situation. This Cold War could become heated.”

I started waking up in the middle of the night thinking, “Oh my God. Here I am in this position of power. What am I supposed to do to help prevent war?” And that is what gave birth to “CongressBridge.” I had lunch one day with a Democratic colleague from the Science Research and Technology Committee. He said, “How are you?” just casually. I said, “I’m terrible,” I said. “I’m not sleeping at night. I keep waking up at three in the morning, terrified that we’re going to have World War III.” And I said, “I’ve always believed that we can build bridges of communication, and if we sit across the table, look eyeball-to-eyeball at one another, we can create peace.” And I said, “We need to get the Soviets together with some of our Members of the House and Senate. But how do we do that?” He said—this was Congressman George [Edward] Brown [Jr.], from California—he said, “Let’s do a satellite hookup.” Well, we were both on the Science, Space, and Technology Committee, and I thought, “Could we do that? Can we make that happen?” He said, “Well, we now have the technology. It should be possible.” So I said, “Let’s do it. We have to do this.”

So we decided we were going to do a pilot project. Between the two of us, we raised \$100,000. We went to our constituents, and we said, “Look, this is what we want to do.” And then we approached ABC, CBS, and NBC. And ABC said, “Yes. We’ll do it.” So we once again laid out a five- or six-part series about how we have many things in common with the Soviets. And I remember negotiating that this had to be live and unedited. So they said, “Okay, fine. We’ll do it on the *Nightline* timeslot. We’ll have Ted Koppel host.” And I said, “Wait, no. Ted Koppel—wonderful guy, brilliant, but too confrontational. We need somebody like Peter Jennings.” They said, “All

right. Fine. You've got Peter Jennings." So Peter Jennings was our host. We had Members of the Supreme Soviet speaking to Members of Congress. And then I had gotten various business leaders to be in the audience.<sup>3</sup>

So I was grateful that the President called me in on some of these meetings. I remember there was an article in the *Washington Post* at one time when James Baker [III], Secretary of the Treasury, said, "Well, I'm going to get Claudine Schneider onboard because I know she can deliver New England at least,"—or something to that effect. So I think the President and the administration knew that if I believed in something, I was going to figure out how to build a coalition in order to move it forward.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Excellent. That's probably a great breaking point.

**JOHNSON:** I think so.

**WASNIEWSKI:** So we're a little over an hour. Take a break.

**SCHNEIDER:** Okay.

### **END OF PART ONE ~ BEGINNING OF PART TWO**

**JOHNSON:** Part two—we took a little break, and now we're back, and we wanted to ask you a few questions about your committee service. In 1981, you joined the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee, and you were the only Republican woman on the committee and just one of two women. How did you feel like your welcome was because of the size of the committee and that there were so few women represented?

**SCHNEIDER:**

Well, needless to say, it would be nice if half of the committee happened to have been women, but we had to deal with what we were, {laughter} the cards we were dealt. And so Barbara Boxer, who was on the committee with me, she and I would work together on a couple of different pieces of legislation in a bipartisan way, particularly on the Dolphin-Free Tuna Initiative, but on a number of other things, too. So she was a good ally from the other side of the aisle. And we had a very good rapport and were effective working together.

Being on that committee, as a woman, I do remember Congressman [name redacted] just liking to poke me, verbally. And I remember one day when I thought, "This is the last straw." And I said, "[name redacted], how are you today?" as I sat down, and we got ready to start the committee. He says, "Oh, I'm great." "What are you up to [name redacted]?" He replied, "Well, I'm out there raping the forests." Well, first of all, the word rape is unpleasant to any woman under any circumstances and raping the forest, knowing that I cared deeply about the environment, was very offensive. And I remember telling him, "You don't have to make these derogatory remarks. This is just not suitable for this workplace." So to me, even though I was a minority, as a woman, I felt it important to tell my colleague this should not stand. This is not acceptable.

And I remember one time when I was on the floor of the House, and I was speaking about something, and he called me a tree-hugger. And my first reaction was to take offense at that, but then he didn't stop. He said, "Well, you're a fern-feeler." And I thought, "Yes, I am a fern-feeler. And that's a good thing, thank you very much, because I appreciate nature and you should too." {laughter} But there was a bit of that, but he's the only member

of the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee that was inclined to nudge me.

**WASNIEWSKI:** You and Helen [Delich] Bentley spent three terms together on Merchant Marine and Fisheries. Do you have any memories of Congresswoman Bentley? Did you work together on any legislation?

**SCHNEIDER:** {laughter} Actually I don't.

**WASNIEWSKI:** That's fine. How important was that particular committee assignment, though, for you in terms of the way your district was situated?

**SCHNEIDER:** It was very important because as I demonstrated, all of this landmass of Rhode Island was intersected here by Narragansett Bay and then out there the Atlantic Ocean, Georges Bank, the great fisheries resource. So fishing is critically important to Rhode Island. Being on the committee that had to do with fisheries was very valuable from that point of view and also from the environmental point of view—so both employment for my constituents, as well as protecting our natural resources for everyone.

I remember, too, that while on that committee, we kept hearing testimony about striped bass and how their numbers were diminishing. And I thought, "Oh my gosh, we've got to do something about this. But what do we do?" And thankfully one of my staff's jokes, "Well, you could always do a moratorium on fishing them." And I thought, "Brilliant idea. This is good." So I did put together the legislation calling for a moratorium on the fishing of striped bass.

But strategically speaking, before I introduced that legislation, I held some meetings with fishermen around the state. Not just my district, but oftentimes I just dealt with the whole state. And I said, "Look, guys. This is

what I'm going to do, and here are the numbers, and here's why we need to do this now. Because, if we don't preserve the fisheries today, tomorrow you will no longer be a fisherman. We have to have a vision toward the future." And this is something that I don't think happens at all legislatively. And I am grateful because I don't know if it's a gift or just my *modus operandi*, but I always have a tendency to look toward the future, toward either ramifications of action or inaction today and what it would mean for tomorrow.

So yes, I introduced that legislation. I didn't get as much angry pushback as some staff members said they thought I would, but I learned that if you tell people what you are going to do before you do it, and you tell them why you are going to do it and explain to them the foundation for your decision, they'll agree with you. And so that was my strategic *modus operandi* all along, and it served me well. So ultimately, the majority of the fishermen were okay with that. They understood it. And now I have one claim to fame that I was in *Sports Illustrated* because of it. {laughter} So I may not have made the swimsuit edition, but at least I got in there on fisheries.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Well, that population's come back nicely now.

**SCHNEIDER:** It has. It has.

**WASNIEWSKI:** You can actually catch fish. Was there anyone on the other side of the aisle who you worked closely with on that particular piece of legislation?

**SCHNEIDER:** Nobody comes to mind right now. I'm sure there was because I always worked in a bipartisan fashion because that was the only way to get things done. And that's what I was about: making things happen. It's all about working together.

**JOHNSON:** We had read that you were hoping to serve on the Energy and Commerce Committee.

**SCHNEIDER:** Yes.

**JOHNSON:** Can you talk about that? About how you tried to get on that committee and what the response was?

**SCHNEIDER:** I wanted to be on the Energy and Commerce Committee because I knew that I wanted to focus on energy. The reason being is that energy is the foundation of every economy. If you go to the developing world, and you see women trying to earn a living sewing. Working a sewing machine, they need electricity. You need power to run industry. And so I thought, “Well, I foresee that there is a different energy future, that fossil fuels are not going to be around forever. They are a limited resource.” So even then, I was aware that that was where I wanted to be, at the center of action on energy.

When I said I wanted to be on that committee I was told, “Oh, no, no, no. That’s a really important committee. You’re from Rhode Island, and the way the system works is that if you have a delegation—a large delegation—to support you and advocate for you, it’s easier to get appointed to a key committee.” So Energy and Commerce was considered a primary committee, Science, Research, and Technology a secondary committee. So I thought, “Well, okay, I like science and research, and that’s fine.” I figured I would maximize my agenda in that committee in whatever way I could. Sure, I was disappointed, but pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and move on.

**JOHNSON:** Who did you make your appeal to, to serve on the committee?

**SCHNEIDER:** I remember letting Tip [Thomas Philip] O’Neill [Jr.] know because he was from New England, he was the Speaker, and I thought, well, maybe he’ll

look favorably upon me. But then also there was the Committee on Committees, as it was called. And so I had to go the chairmen of all these different committees and make the pitch and say this is why I wanted to be on it. And they said, “Well, look, you’re from Rhode Island. You don’t have any oil, {laughter} you don’t have any natural gas, you don’t have any coal. This is not the right fit for you.” “I have a different agenda, gentlemen.” But I didn’t mention that at the time because I don’t think they would have understood the importance and value of energy efficiency, which was my first, most cost-effective priority.

**WASNIEWSKI:** You mentioned Science, Space, and Technology. When you joined the committee, you were one of just three women. Representatives [Margaret] Heckler and [Marilyn Laird] Lloyd were the other two. How would you describe your welcome on that committee?

**SCHNEIDER:** I think it was just fine. But I felt like I fit in just fine. I loved going to this committee because the best and the brightest from all around the United States, and sometimes beyond, would come before our committee and share with us the research they were doing. So I had an aperture into the future that, to me, was exhilarating. When I left Congress, people said, “What do you miss most?” Well, I missed the hearings of the Science and Technology Committee. {laughter} That was very stimulating for me.

**JOHNSON:** Early in your career there was a really important issue where you made a name for yourself: the Clinch River Breeder Reactor.

**SCHNEIDER:** Yes.

**JOHNSON:** Can you tell us about that and your role in helping to stop federal funding for that project?

**SCHNEIDER:**

Having voted against Ronald Reagan's budget initially because I didn't like the spending priorities, I was eager to be a good Republican and follow the President's mantra, which was, "Waste, fraud, and abuse." So one of my staff people and I analyzed the budget that came before the Science, Space, and Technology Committee and reviewed it, and I saw, "Oh my gosh, Clinch River Breeder Reactor." It was initially a \$450 million public/private partnership project [in Tennessee]. But then it morphed into an \$8 billion project, and the government was footing the entire bill. And I thought, "This is fraud. This is waste. This is abuse. I'm going after the Clinch River Breeder Reactor." Plus, I already knew that the future of energy for this country was not nuclear power primarily because it's so expensive, secondarily because the security surrounding a nuclear power plant is questionable. So there are many reasons not to support it, so I thought, "I'm going after this." And I did.

And the first time I did, there was a parliamentary move that essentially pulled the rug out from under me. I was horrified. {laughter} I said to my staff, "How did this happen? How did we not know about this X, Y, and Z procedure?" And we all felt badly. And so I thought, "Well, hey, just have to do it next time around."

So when I was re-elected, I decided to go after it again. But I was not going to be fooled {laughter} this time. And I also noticed something among my colleagues on that committee that sometimes they weren't showing up for the vote. So I had my entire staff, on the day of the final vote to defund the Clinch River Breeder Reactor, show up. Each one was assigned a different Member on the committee. I said, "If any one of these guys or women go into the men's room or leave before the vote, you follow them and bring them back because we need to win on this." And that's exactly what we did. {laughter} One of my staff persons reminded me recently. He said, "Hey,

remember when you sent me into the men's room to go after Congressman so-and-so?" I said, "Yes. How dare he walk out on an important vote!" So that was a pretty exciting experience.

It then passed through our committee, went to the floor of the House, and I get a call from the cloakroom while I was on the floor, and the Page said, "Congresswoman, Vice President George [Herbert Walker] Bush is calling you." {whispers} "Whoa, oh, really?" {laughter} The Vice President said, "Claudine, Claudine, what are you doing this time?" I responded, "What do you mean, Mr. Vice President?" He said, "You know, this Clinch River thing is in Howard [Henry] Henry Baker's [Jr.] district." Howard Baker was the Senate Majority Leader. I said, "I know, but Mr. Vice President, this is a prime example of waste, fraud, and abuse that our President is asking us to do away with. And it's \$8 billion that the taxpayers are now responsible for, when it should have been \$400 and some million." And he said, "All right, all right." He said, "I trust you. Do what you have to do, but just, if anybody asks, let them know that I called you." {laughter} And I said, "Yes, you called me. You twisted my arm, but I didn't budge." He said, "Okay, fine."

It passed the House then one day when there was a gathering, Senator [John William] Warner, from Virginia, asked "What are you working on?" I replied, "Well, I'm working on killing the Clinch River Breeder Reactor. Do you want to help?" And he said, "Sure, I'll introduce it for you." He introduced the bill and did nothing on it. I thought, "Wait a second here. Fool me once. This is not going to work."

Then I encountered Senator [Henry John] Heinz [III], who was a good friend of mine because I'm originally from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. We had an excellent rapport and really wonderful, mutual respect and a good history coming from Pittsburgh. I said to him, "I'm very frustrated. Senator Warner

said he would take the lead on my bill in the Senate, but he's not doing anything." He replied, "Don't worry about it, Claudine. I'll take it over." So I agreed, "Okay, fine." Senator Heinz moved it through the Senate. He was a man of his word. He did what he said he would do.

And so the day of the vote in the Senate, I went over to the Senate Floor. Howard Baker was standing in the well. I suggested that Senator Heinz take one entrance, and I took another. "We'll get the Senators as they come in to vote." So it was challenging because there was Howard Baker standing right there where you register your vote. Senator Heinz and I spoke to every single Senator as they came in to vote. And in the end, we won!

But it was a matter of persistence, of putting the facts out there, to letting it be known that this was a Republican effort to reduce the deficit and to be responsible to the American people and do what was in the best interest of the country. So I made all of those arguments, and we were successful. But I have to give equal attention to the non-profit organizations that I worked with because, oh my gosh, we held regular meetings in my office, where various environmental groups came in. We agreed to go after every single Member that was on the committee. We did op-eds in Tennessee and numerous other newspapers. Everybody had a role. We had a division of labor, and that's exactly what happened. We had op-ed pieces appear in all the newspapers of all the Members on my House committee. And it was that grassroots educating, and using the media to communicate what was going on in Washington, that contributed to our success. It wasn't just an inside ballgame. It was, "Let the people know what's happening here."

**JOHNSON:**

Marilyn Lloyd was also on that same committee with you, and she was a big proponent [of the Clinch River Breeder Reactor]. Did the two of you ever debate in committee or have any kind of interaction?

**SCHNEIDER:** Not really. We didn't have many exchanges at all. She was very much march-lockstep, party-line kind of person. I was very much independent, best interest of the people. And so we didn't see eye-to-eye on many things. So we didn't really have many exchanges. We were friendly, but we didn't work together on much at all.

**WASNIEWSKI:** You had mentioned the call from the Vice President. What was the reaction after your success? {laughter}

**SCHNEIDER:** I think that he still respected me. I think he saw where I was coming from, and he liked me. He and I had a wonderful rapport—and the same thing with Mrs. [Barbara] Bush. She came up to campaign with me, and she was tireless and even did line dancing at the senior citizen home. There wasn't a grudge or anger or retribution like there is today. The leadership's control in the Congress today is so detrimental to democracy. It pains me. It literally, physically pains me to see these abhorrent Members of Congress today, who do not respect one another and do not respect "We the People."

**JOHNSON:** Earlier in your interview, you talked about the moderates in your party, and how you got together, and you had things in common, and you met with each other. But there was another woman who seemed to have a similar circumstance as you: Connie [Constance A.] Morella, a moderate also representing a district that had lots of Democratic voters. How was your relationship with Connie Morella?

**SCHNEIDER:** Great. {laughter} We were good buddies because we were both very straightforward people. There's nothing superficial. We're just direct. And we share a lot of the same values, too, particularly about women's equality, particularly about the environment, particularly about weighing cost and benefits. What's right? What is the good thing to do here? So I have a lot of

respect for her. And I think for the time that we were together, we were a wonderful team.

**JOHNSON:** Another person I wanted to ask you about was Olympia [Jean] Snowe, who also was in around the same time as you—I think she came in a term earlier. What was your relationship like with her?

**SCHNEIDER:** Also very good. We collaborated and exchanged information on a lot of different initiatives. And there, too, we shared the same values, oftentimes the same agenda.

**WASNIEWSKI:** We've talked a lot about moderates and various pieces of legislation you were associated with. Stepping back and taking a larger view, what role did moderates play in the institution while you were a Member of the House?

**SCHNEIDER:** The moderates played a huge role while I was in the House because we could determine the outcome of almost every vote. We met regularly. We talked about the Congresswomen's Caucus meeting, but the "Gypsy Moths" met very regularly to discuss various bills. What's the impact on your region? And how do you think this is going to play with this group or that group?" Great discussions!

I would say that the moderates were once again that group of people who were not concerned about winning one for the Gipper. I remember the first time a colleague said that to me, I responded, "What?" That was like a foreign thought to me: Do this for the President. Well, wait a second. The President didn't elect me, and I'm a Representative of not only Rhode Island, but the American people and the world. So I'm not in this to win something for another individual that's playing politics not true democratic deliberation. And that's the way, I think, most of the moderates in Congress also felt. We

asked what's the highest good where we could do, and what's in the best interest of everyone?

**JOHNSON:** What was your relationship like with the Republican Leadership at the time?

**SCHNEIDER:** Actually, it was congenial, even though the leadership's job is to get everybody in line and get everybody to vote for the party. But, Bob [Robert Henry] Michel would say to me, "Claudine, do what you need to do for your district." I thought, "Well, thank you." Jim [James Claude] Wright [Jr.] was not so understanding.

Other Members of the leadership: [Chester] Trent Lott often attempted to make his case. And I think Newt Gingrich, at the time, showed more respect to the moderates than some of the other members of the Republican Leadership. But Dick Cheney was a very curious figure because he would primarily come to our meetings and listen. I observed, "This guy's taking {laughter} notes on each of us. He's putting together his list." And I never felt terribly comfortable with Mr. Cheney because I always knew that he had some other agenda going on. He was not as straightforward {laughter} as Connie Morella or some others that I interacted with.

**JOHNSON:** The committees that you served on at the time, as you mentioned, didn't have many women that were on them. So how important do you think it was to have a woman's perspective on the committees in which you served?

**SCHNEIDER:** I think it was very important because there are certain things that women bring to the table. Psychological research since that time has proven this to be true. Even Jeannette Rankin herself had made it real clear—that peace can be equated with women. Now why is that? Well, perhaps because we are the ones that give birth to the next generation. We look forward to a good, safe, supportive world for our children. Having women on these committees and

in every decision-making sector provides more of a tendency where there weren't many. We had a tendency to look toward the future. To look at decisions and policies in a more nurturing way, "Is this going to work for everybody?"

I believe that having more female input allows for a greater sense of equality, whether it be equality between genders or among different sectors of our economy. What's business going to think? How will this affect labor? Much like a parent who looks at all of their children, hopefully they love them all the same—that was our job as Members of Congress: to look at the whole and to look out in the best interest of everyone. So yes, it was important to have more women who inherently bring this perspective.

As I mentioned on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee, I'm concerned about the survival, not only of the striped bass and the fishermen who fish them, but of all different species. And for a male colleague from that committee to say, "Well, I'm out raping the forest," was offensive to me as a woman but also as one who cares about all our habitats. What is happening to the forest is detrimental to the whole planet, and we're only realizing that now, but some of us knew that long ago. What happens in one part of the world is affecting other parts of the world. So this interconnectedness, I don't know if that's just a woman's perception—although some men think that way, too—but it's something that I, for one, brought to discussions in those committees.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Let's shift gears a little bit and talk specifically about a few women's issues pieces of legislation. We found a quote—actually I found a couple of quotes. You were once quoted as saying . . . I'll read to you.

**SCHNEIDER:** {laughter} Uh-oh.

**WASNIEWSKI:** It's all very friendly. "I never considered myself a feminist before I got this job, but then I started looking at the laws, and I recognized that many of them were written with a slant against women."

**SCHNEIDER:** Yes.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Can you talk about that transformation for you, generally?

**SCHNEIDER:** Yes. I never did consider myself a feminist because why would I? I was surrounded by five aunts who were businesswomen. They all managed their companies. They all managed their own budgets. I never experienced them or my mother being shut out of anything or discriminated against. So early childhood did not expose me to inequality.

When I got to college, that was the beginning of the women's movement. I was all for it, but I was not one of the activists. I was studying, at one portion of that time, at the University of Barcelona. So I was away from where all the action was. And having had parents who essentially said, "You know, you can be whatever you want to be," I didn't really think, "Well, I can't do this," or, "I can't do that." I mostly had a can-do attitude.

When I got to Congress, a 70-year-old woman was one of my first constituents who came to me on the verge of tears, and I actually got all teary-eyed too when she told me, "Help me. I thought I would be able to rely on my husband's benefits after his death, but I'm told I cannot." We found out that she was right. There was a loophole in the law that even the Congresswomen's Caucus hadn't pushed to close. That was very disconcerting to me. So to take it from the Women's Caucus then to the whole body of Congress was critically important.

Not until I came to Congress did I realize, “Wow, {laughter} there are a lot of inequities.” Not insofar as how I was treated but more in terms of the laws themselves. What about making sure that women have access to education or scholarships or health care? And what do you mean you want to tell a woman what she can do with her body? That’s not the role of government. That doesn’t belong here. So yes, there were many things that opened my eyes as a young woman in a governing body that had {laughter} dominion over this country.

While a Member of Congress and afterwards, I worked with many non-profit organizations, from Oxfam, who works on poverty, women, and children, and many other women’s organizations that bring to light the inequities that exist. So it was not until I got to Congress and listened to my constituents that I realized, “Wait a minute, I am a feminist. {laughter} We’ve got to straighten this out.”

**WASNIEWSKI:** One of the other quotes we came across was you said, “Women’s issues aren’t Democratic. They’re not Republican.” Looking at that decade, where there were roughly two-dozen of you serving in Congress, how do you evaluate your progress during that decade in pushing those issues?

**SCHNEIDER:** Well, I am pretty self-critical. It’s like, “What? We didn’t pass the Equal Rights Amendment while I was there? {laughter} Why did I not do that?” So I put a lot of pressure on myself. I accept a lot of responsibility. But obviously, you needed several hundred men to support that effort. As an individual, along with the moderate Republicans, and then the Democratic majority, we made some significant strides. Part of it was stopping bad things from happening. The other part was pushing forward with an agenda. The Women’s Economic Equity Act in the 1980s intended to remedy many inequalities. We were making 73 cents for every dollar a man made—and

today, what is it? Seventy-five cents? That is shameful. And to have everybody from the President on down talk about wage inequality? How dare a woman doctor be paid less than a male doctor, or a woman engineer be paid less than a male engineer. That is not fair. That is not right.

So, if you have more women who happen to be mothers, who deal with conflict between two children fighting over something, you always look toward fairness. Well, maybe that's another reason we need more women in Congress because I'd like to think they'd be stronger advocates for fairness. In all honesty, the progress that we've made on women's rights is pitiful. It is pitiful. Twenty-five, 30 years later, we should be doing a whole lot better. So what is this all about?

Women have to be stronger advocates for what we believe in. We can't just move forward and pursue our own careers and do our own thing. We have to look out for others. We are all in this together. And secondly, we need more supportive men, and all {laughter} of my male friends are that way. I guess otherwise they wouldn't be my friends. {laughter} But the reality is they know if they're working hard, and their wife is working hard, and she's making less money than some of her male colleagues, that man should be angry that his wife isn't treated fairly because they both are working hard to support their family.

Women, as mothers, need to do a better job in enlightening their sons that they need to be advocates and treat their sisters, all sisters, fairly, and then maybe we'll have a little better world. But yes, I wish I could have done more. And my feeling is what I didn't accomplish in the Congress legislatively hopefully I can move the same agenda outside of Congress.

**JOHNSON:** You have touched upon this throughout the interview, but I just wanted to make sure we asked you this directly: Because there were so few women in Congress, and you mentioned that one constituent that came to you with her problem, but she was from your district. Did you feel as if you had to, and wanted to, represent women across the country and across the world?

**SCHNEIDER:** Absolutely. I was blessed to be in a position of power and with that blessing came an enormous sense of responsibility. I remember sometimes the Republican Leadership saying, “We really need you for the party.” But if it was contrary to women’s interests, I thought about that proposal but concluded: “First I’m a woman. And I’m going to advocate for what is in the best interest of women. In addition, I am an environmentalist before I am a Republican. So I’m going to advocate for what’s good for the health of the individual and the health of the planet because they are inextricably intertwined.” It was real clear to me that yes, I had an extra responsibility as a woman in a position of power to help all women. I take that responsibility very seriously today, too!

**WASNIEWSKI:** Were there any women staff from your office, or elsewhere in the House, who stand out in your mind as leaders in their own right? People who contributed to the institution while you were a member?

**SCHNEIDER:** Staff persons in the Congress at the time, no. On my staff, yes {laughter} because there weren’t that many women staff. Each of my female staff were extremely capable and demonstrated leadership qualities. And the woman who became my initial campaign manager, she certainly stands out, and she’s continuing to do great work, actually, for marine life. She is a very effective leader.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Sure, sure. That's not a problem. But maybe in a more general sense, what effect do you think more women staff coming into the institution had on it?

**SCHNEIDER:** I think it's critically important to have more women staff. And just like I, being new to this august body, finding my way, I think some of the young women that were part of the staff of Members or of committees were also kind of feeling and finding their way. It's a male-dominated universe. Wouldn't it be fabulous if the majority of staff members were women? Because they would lend some of those values that I believe to be truly feminine values to the decision-making process. And hopefully, even though they would be staff members, they would be willing to stand up to Members to say, "Look, this isn't right," or "This isn't fair," or "This doesn't take into account the future," or "It doesn't take into account the other parties."

I think that having women in all aspects of life happens to be critically important. But when we're making laws that impact how we live for decades to come, we need women in those positions whether it's as staff of Members of Congress or Members of Congress or in the Supreme Court or any of the other judicial positions. There is a unique way of looking at challenges, I believe, and that science has proven. And so it's often been said—and this works for both Democrats and Republicans or men and women or whatever polarities there may be—we can't function unless we have both. And the more equal they are, the better off our country is.

**JOHNSON:** We just had a few wrap-up questions for you. The first was why did you decide to leave the House and run for the Senate in 1990?

**SCHNEIDER:** The reason that I decided to run for the Senate was two-fold because of the following exchange. Senator [Claiborne de Borda] Pell, the senior Senator from Rhode Island, and I would meet and have lunch occasionally. We had a

very good rapport with one another. One day he said, “Well, I have to tell you something in confidence.” I replied, “Lips are sealed.” He said, “I’m not going to run again. What are you going to do?” His question seemed rather suggestive, and I said, “Maybe I’ll run for your seat.” He replied, “Okay.” Then he changed the subject. He said, “We never had this conversation.” Well, I figure it’s time to divulge it now because I’ve never been asked this before.

Secondly, I thought, “I’ve been in the House for 10 years. I know how to move legislation. I know how to make things happen. I think that I could get twice as much done, twice as fast, as a woman, in the Congress at this time.” So I thought, “I’m going to run.” So I did. And if historically you look at that campaign, it was the most cordial, polite campaign probably in the history of the United States {laughter} because we were friends. And I was really struggling because I was being told by some Republican consultants, “You have to attack. You have to attack. You can’t win unless you attack.” And the best I could say is, “The Senator has lost the fire in his belly. I can do twice as much, twice as fast to make a difference.”

Also before I finalized my decision to run, I learned of an independent poll that showed, “What if Senator Pell didn’t run?” The current governor might be a possibility, who was a Democrat, or Congresswoman Schneider was another possibility. The poll had me beating all of the possible Democratic candidates. With Senator Pell, it was neck and neck. I thought, “Well, he already confidentially told me he’s not going to run, so I don’t have to worry about that competition.”<sup>4</sup> The polling data was another indication that it could be exciting to be a Senator because I would have fewer Members to persuade, and I could hopefully do twice as much, twice as fast. That’s what

I'm all about anyway. {laughter} Getting things done and making a difference!

**WASNIEWSKI:** There are now 108 women in Congress. There's 88 in the House. There's 20 in the Senate. We've asked you a lot of questions that are kind of focused on the past, but now we're going to ask you to prognosticate.

**SCHNEIDER:** Oh, no. {laughter}

**WASNIEWSKI:** We're doing these interviews to celebrate the centennial of Jeannette Rankin's election. So 50 years from now, on the sesquicentennial, how many women do you think we'll have in Congress? And how will we get there?

**SCHNEIDER:** I think it will make a big difference if we have a woman President. I think that the grassroots women's organizations have waned in their impact, and hopefully, having a woman in the highest position in the land would stimulate and inspire other women to run for office. So number one, I'm an optimist and hope to have a woman President in my lifetime.

Number two, I look at trends. And then how do we get there? What's the plan? What's the strategy? I think that women in this country need to be awakened to the importance of their role in the political agenda because I think it's up to us to help fix the dysfunction and the disdain that is held by the American people for the U.S. Congress. And I am included in holding that disdain. I have found that it has become so disrespectful, so partisan, and has lost its way in terms of its purpose of representation. And so I think it's disgraceful.

And being a world traveler, who has colleagues and friends all over the world, I am embarrassed by the U.S. Congress today and particularly by the Republican Party. Just yesterday to have the British Parliament debate

whether they should ban the leading presidential Republican candidate, that's pretty significant. So if our greatest allies have problems with our government, and our enemies have problems with our government, the American people had better wake up to the fact that this Congress, (not just the Presidency, where all the media focus seems to be), the body that actually runs or could run the country, needs to be replaced. We need to realize the difference between the presidential role and Congress. When we see that Congress is the problem, only then can we elect a new one—hopefully made up of 50 percent women. Once we see Congress as part of the problem, we can inspire more women to be part of the solution. But if they remain outside of the process, they're part of the problem.

**JOHNSON:**

If a woman came to you, and she was interested in running for the House, and asked your advice, what would you say?

**SCHNEIDER:**

Well, first of all, it happens regularly. {laughter} And my advice is always to stay true to your convictions, be clear about what you believe. Because if you aren't true to your values, you will be swayed by lobbyists, money, favors, or power. Those Members of Congress who do not stand firm on their beliefs ultimately live to regret it. Finally, be prepared to work hard because it's still true that women have to work twice as hard to get half as far as men.

So it's important for women who come to Congress to have clarity about what they believe in, what they stand for, and what their agenda is. If you have that strength of character, and couple that with persistence, a can-do attitude, and you're an optimist, oh my gosh, you can get all kinds of things accomplished. Congress isn't just a place to hang out and make history and say, "Hey, I was a Member of Congress." It's a place to make a difference. And so I would really question the woman, or the guy who is planning on running, because I've had men approach me, too, to say, "I'm thinking of

running for office. What do you think?" I tell both men and women the same thing, but I would probably tell women more not to feel different or separate. I don't oftentimes make that gender distinction. I'm a person. And I believe in fairness. I believe in equality. And I believe in uplifting those who are not quite at their full potential. And right now, that happens to be women. So whatever way I can help inspire and motivate women to be a part of the solution, rather than part of the problem. Wow, give me a call. {laughter}

**WASNIEWSKI:** Looking back on your career, was there anything unexpected or that surprised you about your service?

**SCHNEIDER:** When I was moving the legislation on the Clinch River Breeder Reactor, I was not aware of a parliamentary move that undercut me. That was very disturbing because I had put a lot of energy into passing that legislation. But I was not familiar with all of the rules that regulate the process in Congress. But I learned over time.

And it was also a surprise to find out there were loopholes in the laws related to women. Until I was elected to Congress I thought women were treated equally. Well, not exactly, but I thought surely the Social Security provisions would treat women equally. That was another surprise!

And one more surprise was when a colleague said to me, "Hey, let's win one for the Gipper." What do you mean? We're here to win for the American people. I'm not doing this for another man, or another woman. I'm doing this for everybody. So yes, those were some of the surprising moments. {laughter}

**JOHNSON:** I just had one last question. Given your decade of service in the House, what do you think will be your lasting legacy?

**SCHNEIDER:** {laughter} I've struggled with that. I don't really focus on that much because I recognize, despite history, how fleeting we as individuals happen to be. And there was some legislation, environmental legislation, I advocated while I was in Congress. And several years later, I am learning that it's being dismantled. So I was waking up at 3:00 in the morning, crying, thinking, "Oh my God. George Bush, Jr., is dismantling all of these things that were being done by the Environmental Protection Agency that so many of us worked so hard to accomplish, and now it's falling apart." So I don't know if I have a lasting legacy. {laughter} I hope there are some individuals I've touched that have been inspired to reach their full potential, to contribute to the whole, to think of the planet as our planet, and to do something about it. So I guess that's the best I can hope for. {laughter}

**JOHNSON:** That would be an amazing legacy to have. {laughter} That's all we had today.

**WASNIEWSKI:** We've asked you a ton of questions. Is there anything that we've missed or that you'd like to add?

**SCHNEIDER:** Yes. What about climate change? {laughter} Excuse me for getting all emotional here. There is one piece of legislation that has staying power, that I don't think will ever be dismantled. And it was part of the Global Warming Prevention Act. For eight or nine years, on the Science, Research, and Technology Committee, I listened to scientists year after year, after year come before the committee, and say, "It looks like we're going to have a problem here. It looks like the fossil fuels that are coming from utility plants, that are coming from automobiles, are contributing to what could be catastrophic outcomes in terms of climate change." Well, I heard that, and I thought, "Isn't it my responsibility to provide some kind of insurance that that doesn't happen?" And so I pulled together the best and the brightest of the scientists that had come before the committee, and my very talented and

committed staff, and I said, “Look, global warming could be a huge problem. Let’s figure out a solution.”

So with their help, I introduced the Global Warming Prevention Act. I had approximately, I think, 140 co-sponsors before I had introduced the bill because my belief is if I’m going to do anything, I want to succeed. So I had those votes in my hip pocket to begin with, which I think is kind of unusual in terms of congressional strategy. And this comprehensive bill was an omnibus bill that looked at all different ways we could address the problem. Solving climate change has no single solution. Each of us has a role.

So one piece of legislation—the appliance efficiency standards—seems to have survived various Congresses. Everybody’s got a refrigerator, washer, drier, TV set, blah, blah, blah. So I called in Whirlpool, and I called in representatives from Frigidaire and Maytag and all the different appliance manufacturers. I said that “I have learned from the federal, national laboratories that it is possible to be more energy-efficient in each of these different appliances. Why aren’t you doing it?” They didn’t have a good answer. And I said, “This is what is possible. I’m going to introduce legislation that will set appliance efficiency standards. Are you with me or against me?” Well, in the end, they were with me.

So I remember holding a press conference where I invited the environmental community—the non-profits that I worked very closely with—and the appliance manufacturers, and they each looked at one another with surprise, not knowing that both sectors were invited to the press conference. I announced, “I have a coalition, and we’re introducing this bill, and we are going to make some of the most energy-efficient appliances this country has ever seen.” And so we did that. That was part of the Global Warming Prevention Act that passed.

There were other pieces having to do with agriculture, with transportation, setting fuel-efficiency standards. Oh my gosh, the auto industry, the absolute worst. They don't want any directives from Congress at all. And one of the things that we did have in the bill was not only requirements for greater fuel efficiency, but we included mass-transit and other transportation options. And then there was a piece on almost every aspect of society and what we could do to mitigate climate change. So to me, it was an educational tool to say, "There is no silver bullet. We can all do something about this." And we did an economic analysis of the impact of these individual pieces, and it turns out it's much more cost-effective to prevent a problem than to deal with the crises afterwards. At this point, the billions that we have spent on floods, fires, sea-level, you name it, is ridiculous, and it will only get worse. Policymakers must shift from crisis management to prevention for all policy remedies.

I wish I could say the whole bill had passed as part of my legacy. {laughter} But I continue to work in this area and have secured 50 Fortune 500 corporations to sign the agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency, saying that they are committing to reducing their greenhouse gases. This I did years ago in the early 2000s, and I remember calling Bank of America. I said, "Hi. I'm calling on behalf of the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], and I'm curious what are you doing with your greenhouse gases?" There was a long silence on the other end of the line, and the gentleman said, "Well, you know we're a bank, right?" I replied, "Well, you also have lighting and heating and cooling, do you not?" And he said, "Yes." And I said, "Well, you are generating greenhouse gases." So that was the beginning of my educating some of these corporations that it's in their economic best interest to save energy rather than just waste it without any knowledge of the impact it's having on the planet. So that is still the most

important issue that we need to deal with, and it's one that I work on every chance I get.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Thank you.

**JOHNSON:** Thank you very much for coming in today and for being a part of this project.

**SCHNEIDER:** I'm thrilled. Now let me ask you one other thing because I brought the Jeannette Rankin little book with me, which obviously you have. But did you know that I was honored to be the person who unveiled the statue?

**WASNIEWSKI:** No. We didn't.

**SCHNEIDER:** There's a little picture of me in there, too. {laughter} I don't know if you want to have me say something about that or tie that in.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Sure. Sure, absolutely.

**SCHNEIDER:** You've seen this book, yes? On Jeannette Rankin?

**WASNIEWSKI:** No, I haven't seen that. On the actual statue—no, okay.

**SCHNEIDER:** All right. So Jeannette Rankin (the first woman ever elected to Congress, and the only Member of Congress in the history of the United States to vote twice against entering World Wars), I didn't even know about when I came to Congress. And as a matter of fact, I didn't know about Jeannette Rankin until I was approached by a member of the Montana delegation, who said to me, "Claudine, we would like to have you unveil the statue of Jeannette Rankin." So, I quickly said to my staff, "Who's Jeannette Rankin?" {whispering} Only then did I learn that she was the first woman ever elected. She was from Montana and was elected before women had the right to vote!

I became very uncomfortable because the Montana delegation was all Democrats. I was a Republican, not a Montanan, and I went back to the gentleman who had invited me to do this honorable gesture, and I said, “I feel a little uncomfortable. Why are you asking me instead of a Montanan or a Democrat to do this?” And he said, “Well, we all agreed that you embody some of the characteristics of Jeannette Rankin.” I was incredibly honored because when I learned about her courageous act of voting against entering two World Wars, I thought, “I probably would have done the same, {laughter} and, well, yes, I guess I’ve been pretty independent in my approach to legislating.” I think that having the opportunity to do this with the delegation from Montana, on behalf of a woman and to have the statue of Jeannette Rankin in Statuary Hall, is a huge honor.

I was, and am, quite astounded to realize there are no other statues {laughter} of women. So to me, it’s a big deal. And when you ask legacy or important highlights of my congressional experience, doing the unveiling of this phenomenal woman, who was a real pioneer and a can-do person, was really touching.

I’m thrilled that you’re honoring and remembering her accomplishments, and I trust and hope that this will leverage more women to understand their important role in governance.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Thank you.

**SCHNEIDER:** Sure. You are most welcome.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Initially interested in running for governor of Rhode Island after her husband declined to seek the GOP nomination, Schneider instead campaigned for Congress in 1978. After losing to her Democratic opponent, Edward Beard, in the general election, she ran again two years later, defeating Beard to win one of the two Rhode Island House seats.

<sup>2</sup> During the 1980s, gypsy moth caterpillars caused widespread damage of trees in the Northeast, especially in New England and New York.

<sup>3</sup> In 1987, ABC News produced “Capital to Capital,” which featured three televised discussions between American and Soviet legislators. Representatives Schneider and George Brown spearheaded the innovative programs called CongressBridge.

<sup>4</sup> Senator Claiborne Pell ran for re-election to the Senate in 1990 and defeated Claudine Schneider.