Confessions of a Presidential Speechwriter

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Published by Michigan State University Press

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Confessions of a Presidential Speechwriter.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/27997.
A few days after the election, Mary Hasenfus and I wrote a report on the important tri-county Portland vote. We concluded that we had turned out as much of our vote as possible, that Libertarian Toni Nathan had cut into the Packwood vote, and that despite our advertising efforts, the voters did not have an emotional connection with Packwood. Instead, they admired his smarts and his clout in the Senate. After we sent the report to Packwood, I took a month off to drive across the country, visiting friends and family along the way in the hope of restoring my soul. At one point, I took Highway 168 out of Monterey over to Salinas, where I caught Highway 101, El Camino Real, the mother route of California. I drove south while the full moon came over the mountains lining the east side of the valley.

I had been through the Salinas Valley many times, had in fact traveled Highway 101 since childhood. And now, beneath a gleaming white moon, I sped down it again, feeling at home in the clear, cool night air. I saw the silver sides of mountains, the slivers of water in wide washes, the fertile fields squeezing into the narrow arroyos, the bunched blotches of dark green leaves of the eucalyptus trees dripping with dew along the highway. Something was here that the materialist could not capture, something beyond nature, inspired by a moonbeam on a shiny live oak leaf.

Just outside San Luis Obispo, the fog began to roll in from the ocean. Breaking through the pass from the valley out to the sea at Shell Beach always thrilled me. And tonight was no different. The fog patches sped by, covering and uncovering the stars and moon. Suddenly, the road opened...
onto a beach, and the image swept my soul across the metallic surface of the ocean out onto the horizon. I pulled the car over and watched the moon appear and disappear through the fog. I looked across the silver-veiled sea and floated into a deep sleep.

I woke around 6 a.m. and drove to breakfast in Pismo Beach while the clouds burned off in the morning sun. An hour and a half later, on the UCSB campus on the coast at Isla Vista, I saw the tan, blond students walking to the beach with their surfboards and was taken back to the same beach where for the first half of the 1960s I studied history, thought about existentialism, and prayed for good grades. I saw the buildings I learned in, the dorm I lived in, and the grassy hollows I wished I had made love in.

The place simply had not changed. At 75 degrees under a perfectly blue sky, with mild winds blowing across the beach, the campus seemed timeless and as beautiful as the students who populated it. It was as calm and comfortable as its little algae-edged green lagoon. How, I wondered, did anyone get anything done here? How had I ever managed to graduate from this place? I walked through the campus under the coral trees, and along the rolling lawns. The nostalgia was overpowering. It was all too much. I hurried to my car and drove south into Los Angeles.

There I visited relatives and friends, and then it was on to San Diego and some time with my parents. While there, I called Sean to see when he needed me back at the conference to get ready for the Senate Republican Caucus elections. He told me to move my tail east as soon as possible. Mimi was bad-mouthing me to the Senator’s staff, and it was clear that she was not going to provide a place for me in the reorganization of the staff. I drove to Washington as quickly as I could, stopping at friends’ homes along the way only for an overnight stay. And then I was back in Arlington.

FINDING A PLACE

When the newly elected and returning Republican senators convened in December of 1980, they gave Packwood his second term as the head of the National Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, a vastly larger operation than the Republican Conference. Vice President Bush found a good job for me as chief of staff for Ray Donovan, the new secretary of labor. I turned it down because I wasn’t up on, or interested in, labor issues; I didn’t think much of Donovan; and I thought I could get a more interesting job from Packwood if I could just get by Mimi. That would be difficult
because I reminded Packwood of his election, which was unpleasant for him given his expectations of a bigger victory. However, Mimi soon got an appointment to the Federal Communications Commission and lost her influence over the Senator. When I finally got a meeting with Packwood, I explained to him that had he listened to me with regard to including the Libertarian candidate in the debates, he would have had his landslide. To his credit, he conceded the point. Then he moved on to say that my most valuable function for him in the campaign had been in research. When he assumed his post in January of 1981, he would make me research director of the National Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee. And by the way, he continued, “Why don’t you come to the inaugural and the ball as my guest. I have a box.”

In 1981, the inaugural balls were classy; not an expense was spared. I sat in the Senator’s box with Lane Kirkland, Ricky and Laurence Silberman, and Georgie Packwood, who seemed to have mellowed toward me. The champagne never stopped flowing, and when the Reagans arrived and did a turn on the dance floor, the room filled with magic.

As I moved into my new job, for diversions I kept up my campus lectures, my writing, and my visits with John Macksoud who had moved into a house we had restored in Madera, Pennsylvania. It was deep in the woods, about 35 miles from Pennsylvania State University. So I could visit John and also my former professors on the same trip. I was now deep into the inner sanctum of Republican politics and discovering some odd oxymorons. I found out over a lunch that a right-wing Republican fundraiser was gay. He confessed that he could never become part of a staff or a campaign. He was trying to draw me out. I felt sorry for him, but I wasn’t going to tell him that I was gay, because I knew he was right.

A few months later a friend told me that a born-again Christian, moderate Republican senator was gay and the model for the senator who is outed and commits suicide in Alan Drury’s wonderful novel *Advise and Consent*. I checked the story out with Packwood, who said, “Oh yes, it is well known. In fact his lover is his chief of staff, who works for a dollar a day since he is heir to a fortune.” The senator had one of those arranged marriages with his wife, who also worked as a realtor. Her job would eventually lead to charges of a conflict of interest when she was paid huge sums to find housing for Arabian diplomats who then sought favors from her husband, the ranking member on an important Senate committee. The worst case was a payment of $55,000 from a Greek financier while he was seeking approval of his company’s bid to build an oil pipeline in Africa. She badly tarnished her husband’s otherwise stellar reputation.
Later still, I learned that Terry Dolan, the head of the National Conservative Political Action Committee and the brother of Reagan speechwriter Tony Dolan, was gay. He would eventually die of AIDS, which in 1981 was barely on the nation’s radar. It had certainly caught my attention by the end of that year, and I talked to Packwood about what he could do about it. It was not until 1982 that the Center for Disease Control named the malady AIDS; the reaction of the Reagan administration was even slower.

AT THE SENATORIAL COMMITTEE

My various jobs at the Senatorial Committee gave me lots of opportunities to reestablish myself with Senate staffs and campaign operatives. As 1981 began, my research team provided every Republican senator running for election in 1982 with a book that detailed his or her voting record, and showed how it could provide the grist for campaign speeches, commercials, and debates. The books also looked at “vulnerabilities” so that our incumbents knew what negative advertising could be done against them. Wherever possible we also did opposition research on likely opponents of the incumbents to provide them with attack ads.

In states where Democrats would be running for reelection, we wrote books on them for use by the eventual Republican nominees. Relying on my experience in debate, my goal was to make these sets of books the most thorough and most accurate in political history. Unlike irresponsible groups such as the National Conservative Political Action Committee, which often used isolated votes to distort an incumbent’s record, we made sure that the votes were typical and accurate. The operation was so credible that it was imitated by other Republican and Democratic committees two years later.

Once our operation was up and running, Packwood also used it to chase pesky challengers to Republican incumbents from their races. A classic case occurred with Connecticut Senator Lowell Weicker, easily the most liberal Republican in the Senate. When rumors spread that Democratic Representative Toby Moffett might challenge him, I was unleashed to do my thing. Miles Benson of the Newhouse News Service interviewed me and then related what would happen if Moffett got in the race:

Craig Smith, director of the research division of the NRSCC, will swing into action. “First, we’d do a key vote analysis of Moffett’s record based on 150 key votes cast in the House since he was elected in 1974,” Smith explains. “Then we’d do an overview to compare those votes to poll data that came in from...
Connecticut and see if he is out of sync with voters—as I’m sure he is on busing, abortion, budget and tax cuts. The second step would be to look at all votes Moffett cast, with an eye to vulnerability, and divide those votes into 21 issue categories—labor, regulation, taxes—and report our analysis to the Weicker campaign.”

Moffett got the message and dropped out of the race. Packwood was very pleased.

The Senator worked with Rod Smith, our finance director, to construct a fundraising campaign second to none. It relied heavily on Packwood’s new love for direct-mail solicitation. This strategy was born of one of those small coincidences that always amaze me. In our 1980 Senate campaign, we hired a consultant named Paul Newman, who just happened to be an ex-college debate coach of mine.\(^6\) I was delighted to work with him and watch him work his magic with direct-mail solicitation, which he had invented in the aftermath of Watergate. The Democrats hadn’t even started it by 1981, the year Paul made sure the Republicans were the party of the small donor. Paul’s method was rhetorical; that is, each letter that was sent out was adapted to receivers based on their zip code and party affiliation. Six percent was considered a good rate of return; it not only paid for the mailing, but you could put half the money received into the bank. You also created a “house file” from each contribution so that you could go back to those people later in the campaign. Invariably, the return from mailings to the “house file” was much higher than 6 percent.

Packwood also set about to recruit the best and the brightest of local politicians to run against vulnerable Democrats so that the Republicans would retain their majority in the midterm elections of 1982. One such candidate was Judge Mitch McConnell of Louisville, Kentucky. McConnell would eventually win a Senate seat and become majority leader in the Senate.

As part of the leadership team at the Senatorial Committee, I monitored the races in several states. Since the NRSCC had lots of money to distribute, I was treated as royalty when I arrived on the scene. In Tennessee, we hoped to run Congressman Robin Beard against Democrat James Sasser. My job was to get field reports and try to find a way to keep Beard from putting his foot in his mouth. I failed in the latter task. The man had a terrible temper and regularly it flared up at reporters. Even in rehearsals with me playing the hostile reporter, I could get under Beard’s skin. I knew then he’d never make it.

In Washington State, I advised a whole series of potential Republican candidates on how to run. But beating redoubtable Senator Scoop Jackson would prove impossible. At least I got to visit with Dennis in Seattle every
time I came to the state. It was wonderful to catch up on him and his ever growing family.

I was delighted to take on North Dakota, because my dad came from there and I still had relatives there. The North Dakota Republicans were very suspicious of outsiders. But when I spoke at the state committee meeting at an outdoor barbeque in Medora, I talked about how my grandmother Clementine Muzzy was the first female homesteader in the state. I talked about my grandfather’s general store in Fortuna. And I talked about Teddy Roosevelt and the life he had led in and around Medora. I became a favorite son of the state.

With my roots and credibility established, I tried to seduce state senator Earl “the Pearl” Strinden to run for the U.S. Senate. I believed he would win, but he did not believe he could defeat the sitting Democrat Quentin Burdick, who, poll data showed, most people in North Dakota believed was a Republican. After the dust settled, the state party went with a native son who had spent most of his life in D.C. His name, Gene Knorr, made for some great negative advertisements because the Republican running for Congress was named John Nething. So the Democrats ran on the slogan of neither Nething nor Knorr. You can’t make stuff like this up. The Republicans went down to defeat.

However, the most fun and frustration I had was working in California. First, we had to get Republican incumbent senator Sam Hayakawa out of the race. I genuinely liked the man. An internationally known semanticist, he had been president of San Francisco State University and—wearing his trademark Tam o’ Shanter—kept demonstrators in their place during the troubled early ’70s. That led to his election to the U.S. Senate. Once there, he asked me to teach his staff how to write letters of response to constituents and speeches for him. However, Senator Hayakawa was narcoleptic and often appeared to pass out during meetings and meals. While in one of his “states,” he could hear what was being said. I remember being at a lunch with a lobbyist and the senator when he appeared to nod off. The lobbyist started making fun of Hayakawa despite my pleas and hand gestures to knock it off. Soon Hayakawa awoke, repeated what the lobbyist had said, and told him to leave the table. Hayakawa and I then enjoyed a lovely lunch together, discussing rhetorical theory.

However, the press was unforgiving to Hayakawa. Most of them were dying to get even for his iron-fisted response to demonstrations at San Francisco State during the Vietnam War, which had converted him into a Republican darling in 1970. In 1981, I looked at the poll data and saw that there was no way he could win reelection. Furthermore, I could see
the campaign that would be run against him. So I put together some mock campaign ads and took them over to his office with the leadership team of the Committee. The ad showed newsreel film of him asleep as the Senate conducted business, as he sat at committee meetings, and as he met with constituents. The ad concluded, “Sam Hayakawa, asleep at the switch.” When he saw the ad, he began to weep. Then he raised his hands and said he would not run again. We all felt terrible as we left the room, but for his well-being and the sake of the party, it had to be done.

Since California was the big one and lots of people were running, all of us on the leadership team visited the state. On these trips, I would always find time to stop to see former students, relatives, and various sites. One day I stopped by the cathedral on the campus of the University of San Francisco. It’s beautiful inside. On this particular day, I noticed that the green light over the confessional was on. So I took advantage of the opportunity to purge my soul. I entered the dark booth, and the priest slid back the panel on his side of the little window between us.

I began with the usual opening: “Bless me, father, for I have sinned. It has been three months since my last confession.”

“No, father, I’m visiting from Washington, D.C.”

“All right. Tell me your sins.” I promptly confessed among other things that I had sexual thoughts that the Church condemned as sinful, and explained that I was homosexual.

“Do you act on these thoughts?” he asked.

“No, father.”

“Do you ever have sex with another man?”

“No, father.”

“I really don’t think you have much to confess,” he told me. “You should hear what I have to listen to, especially here in San Francisco. By the way, did you say you were from Washington, D.C.?”

“Yes, father. Why?”

“By any chance, would you have access to President Reagan?”

“Not really, but I do have access to Vice President Bush.”

“Can you please get them to do something about AIDS awareness?”

“I can talk to the Vice President about it. I’m sure he’d be understanding.”

“That would be wonderful.

“And father, what about my absolution?”

“Your sins will be absolved when you talk to the Vice President.”

“Thank you, father.”

He shut the little window as he said, “Take care of yourself.”
In Washington, D.C., as the HIV/AIDS crisis accelerated, I met with the Vice President as promised. He told me that the President was considering the matter but was caught in the crossfire of conflicting advice. Nancy Reagan had many gay friends. His son Ronnie, who was active in the ballet community, and Surgeon General Koop wanted Reagan to make America more aware of the disease—for example, explaining that it was not just afflicting gay males. However, his Christian right conservative advisors, such as Secretary of Education Bill Bennett, opposed the President getting involved. Tragically, Reagan developed a blind spot on the issue. His secretary of health and human services, Margaret Heckler, did pay attention to Dr. Gallo’s claim that he had discovered the cause of AIDS. However, Reagan would not speak publicly about it until 1985; he may have been awakened by the death of Rock Hudson from the disease in the same year. However, Koop’s report was not released until 1986. Reagan finally authorized the Watkins Commission to study the epidemic in 1987. Worse yet, in 1986, the Supreme Court in Bowers v. Hardwick upheld a Georgia law prohibiting homosexuals “from engaging in sodomy.” In other words, the U.S. Constitution contained no protection for consenting adult homosexuals having sex. This dreadful decision kept many people in the closet and was not overruled until the summer of 2003 in Lawrence v. Texas. Leaving no doubt about the intent of the Court, Justice Anthony Kennedy in his majority opinion wrote that Bowers v. Hardwick “now is overruled.”

THE WASHINGTON ROLLER COASTER

George Bush was never able to get a position for me that was better than the one I had. When it came to the ones I would take, I made the final three, but never got the final offer. For example, I was among the final three for assistant secretary of education. However, given the high-level political work, and the access to the Senate chambers and various White House events, I was happy where I was. I even turned Roger Ailes down when he offered me a job in New York City to join his media firm. Had a bullet moved a bit to the left, Bush could have become president and my life would have changed on March 30, 1981. But as it turned out, Ronald Reagan’s luck held when an assassin’s bullet failed to do him in. The event moved Reagan closer to sainthood. So anyone challenging him was taking on a dangerous mission. Bob Packwood would make that mistake.

Problems started when Packwood decided to proceed with Tidewater
against my advice. We were no longer the out party playing loyal opposition. We had won the Senate and the White House. Holding a policy conference could lead to trouble. Packwood decided to move ahead anyway, and to me his motives were obvious: he wanted to be majority leader eventually and the Tidewater Conference was a great way to show off his talent.

The 1981 conference took place May 15–17 and attracted so many members of the electronic media that we blew out Easton’s electric generator. A record 117 politicians attended the event, including 13 senators, 74 congressmen, and 8 governors. House members Jack Kemp, Dick Cheney, and Millicent Fenwick rubbed elbows with Senators Ted Stevens and Alan Simpson. Things began to go awry when People magazine, on the day before the conference, ran a story on Packwood in which he was critical of President Reagan. Packwood’s criticism was motivated by several factors. First, he questioned Reagan’s intellectual depth. Next, Packwood supported abortion rights; Reagan did not. Then, as a die-hard supporter of Israel, Packwood opposed Reagan’s plan to sell AWACS surveillance planes to Saudi Arabia. Ed Rollins, a dark eminence and a political advisor to the President, attended Tidewater to monitor Packwood’s actions, though staff had been forbidden to attend. He had nothing good to say about my boss when the two of us had drinks. Rollins warned me that Packwood’s “ass was grass.” That worried me until I read David Broder’s flattering column in the Washington Post entitled “High Tide for Republicans.” It ran the day after the conference, which had run smoothly. I hoped now everyone could get back to work and forget about the nonbinding resolutions of the conference.

The summer began with the annual retreat of the Packwood empire. My small role would be to report on the progress of the research division of the NRSCC, so I could relax and enjoy myself. I was surprised when after my report, Packwood announced that I would be moved up to deputy director of the NRSCC. My salary went up, and my responsibilities expanded to include providing media help to incumbent senators up for election. On June 7, I prepared a memo under Packwood’s name to President Reagan that would go through Ed Rollins. It summarized 33 statewide polls we had taken for the upcoming Senate races. Complimenting the President on his high approval ratings, the report then detailed appropriate ways by which he could help us keep control of the Senate in the midterm elections. The key was that we be able to use Reagan’s signature on fundraising letters. Permission was eventually, grudgingly granted.

The summer was filled with wonderful events. For example, thanks to Vice President Bush, I was invited to sit in on a secret briefing by President Reagan to Republican senators at the White House. He told them that it was
his intention “to spend the Soviets into the ground.” It was the beginning of the end of what he would refer to as “the evil empire,” cleverly picking up on the popular culture of the day.9 The lynchpin of the President’s plan was the Strategic Defense Initiative, an anti-missile system that the press promptly dubbed “Star Wars” in response to Reagan’s line about “the force is with us.” I was later a guest at several White House functions. And I found someone new on whom to focus my mentoring, one of my research interns, John. I met him at a cocktail party because he was interning for a congressman; we retired to a couch where we instantly fell into lively conversation. I hired him to work as a part-timer in the research division at NRSCC. He did good work, so I moved him up to full-time. And we became close friends.

On September 16, 1981, I served as a go-between for the Vice President and Packwood. Packwood had met with Reagan confidentially on the AWACS issue, and Reagan had slipped by making public part of their private conversation, violating protocol. I did the best I could to patch things up. But Packwood wanted Bush to know that Reagan owed him one.

That night I was attending a White House dinner with a date from my staff. We had drinks downstairs and then were led through the Vermillion Room and Library to the reception line, where I shook hands with Nancy and Ronald Reagan. Reagan glowed with warmth. After introducing my date, I leaned forward and told him I had been a professor in California when he was governor.

“Oh, you must have hated me as governor,” he chuckled.

“Oh, no, sir. I was one of your supporters.”

He grabbed me by my shoulders, turned me toward the First Lady, and said, “Nancy, here’s a professor who loved us in California, can you believe it?” She laughed and patted my hand.10

“Thank you,” she said. It was a wonderful dinner, made special by the exchange with Reagan.

In less than a month, there was another falling-out between Reagan and Packwood. Lyn Nofziger sent a note over from the White House on October 6, saying that using the President’s name in a fundraising letter that Packwood signed was inappropriate. Nofziger was particularly critical of Packwood making an issue out of the AWACS sale in the letter. The reference to the AWACS sale was removed, and I hoped that things could be smoothed over. I should have realized that both sides were looking for a fight.

One of the best things that Bob and Georgie Packwood did was to put on dinners for the sole purpose of engaging in stimulating conversation. I was invited to almost every one of these monthly salons. I met Mark Shields, the PBS political pundit, through one of these parties and we remained friends for years.
On November 6, 1981, I was summoned for a soiree at the Packwoods’. The *New Yorker*’s political columnist Elizabeth Drew was there with her husband David Welch, a British diplomat. Former Republican senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, an African American, was there with his beautiful wife. Daniel Boorstin and his wife talked to me about their son David, who served with me on the Ford speechwriting staff. Then Boorstin, a noted historian who was still serving as head of the Library of Congress, and I had an interesting discussion about history that captured the attention of everyone else in the room. To balance me at the dinner, Susan Alvarado was added to the mix. A former aide to Senator Ted Stevens, Susan was an avid tennis player who was now working on the White House legislative liaison staff. She and I would be doubles partners at various tennis events, one time playing against Senator Dan Quayle and his wife Marilyn.

After the guests left and Georgie retired, Packwood and I retreated to his basement lair. We commiserated on the evening. I thanked Packwood for letting me see how Washington worked up close and personal. He told me I was welcome, but he had something else on his mind. He wanted to turn his attention to civil liberties and particularly to First Amendment issues. “Why are you interested?” I asked.

“Frankly, I like the history of the issues going back to the Magna Carta. You know what an Anglophile I am. But there is another angle.”

“What’s that?”

He sipped his beer. “The news media loves their First Amendment rights. And if I can win them over, who knows what can come of it.” So there it was. He was back to his presidential ambitions again. On November 13, he spoke to the Oregon Association of Broadcasters using information I had supplied. He wrote me on November 20, “On a scale of 10, it was a 12. . . . I love the way you have rewritten the Cotton Mather quote. It is much better than the way I say it.” I rewrote the speech for him, and he committed it to memory for an address to the First Amendment Congress on December 22, 1981. Bob Packwood had embarked on a journey that would change my life and First Amendment law in America.

However, before that occurred, many events intervened. Back in California, I held Maureen Reagan’s hand, trying to teach her the vicissitudes of campaigning for senator. She didn’t get it. I told Pete Wilson’s manager, George Gordon, that we were not allowed to endorse a candidate before the primary. Gordon threw me out of his office. I learned that there were many little secrets in Barry Goldwater Jr.’s past that would keep him from getting the senatorial nomination. I told Ted Bruinsma that being a college president was not enough to get elected to the U.S. Senate, even in a crowded field. Wilson went on to win the primary and eke out a win over Jerry
Brown in the general election. But by that time, I was no longer working for the Senatorial Campaign Committee, as we shall see. And we shall also see that Wilson would pop back into my life many years later.

After a short respite, I was off to North Dakota on another political assessment. I gave a guest lecture at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, which was great fun. Too often students find themselves listening to professors who have never been out in the “real world” and never tested their own theories. I provided a counterstatement to that anomaly, and it was not always welcomed by my hosts.

From there it was on to Seattle and a meeting with the Washington State Republican Committee. The new party leader, Jennifer Dunn, was articulate and attractive. I was helping her do in Washington State what Bill Harris had done in Alabama. She was so successful, she eventually got elected to the House of Representatives herself.

At the end of the fall of 1981, the NRSCC left our tiny digs atop a restaurant on Massachusetts Avenue and moved to our new offices on C Street. The open house went well. Each of us on the leadership team was given a nice potted chrysanthemum, with several others scattered about for effect. One day I came back from a trip and my mum had wilted. I complained to my secretary, who was supposed to be watering it. I put the mum in our bathroom shower, watered it, and left it to drain. A few hours later, I came back and the mum had completely revived. I happily put it back on my desk. The next morning I arrived to find the poor mum wilted again, so I put it in the shower. When I came back from lunch, it had revived. I put it on my desk and told my secretary I had a very odd mum that dried out very fast, and I couldn’t figure out why. She smiled and said, “Well, maybe it’s under a heat vent.” Someone laughed in the background, but I believed it was the result of a nearby conversation, not ours. Sure enough, the next morning I came in and the mum was wilted, worse than ever. I dutifully took the plant into the shower again and returned to my desk. After lunch I retrieved the reborn mum, but as I was walking it to my desk, the staff was in hysterics. When I got to my desk, I saw why. There sat the shriveled mum. My staff had been rotating a healthy mum into the shower every time I put my shriveled one in. At night, they took back the healthy mum and replaced it on my desk with the shriveled one. It was the best practical joke anyone had ever played on me.

My staff was very loyal to me, and I was very loyal to them. However, I remained a closeted gay man who had to continue to be careful given the constituency of the National Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee. As deputy director, I realized a rule in political Washington: The higher
your head, the easier it is to cut off. However, there were times when I let someone into my closet. For example, I received a phone call one day from Senator Alan Simpson’s office. His chief of staff was trying to place one of his interns from Wyoming in a permanent job so he could go to law school at night at Georgetown. I told them to send him over. His name was Marty and he turned out to be cute as a button and sharp as a tack. We struck up a close friendship.

One night over dinner, he asked, “Can you keep a secret?”

“Sure, Marty. What is it?”

Marty toyed with his food. “It’s risky. I’m not sure you’ll want to know it.”

I got a sense of what was coming. “Try me.”

“Well,” — he took a deep breath — “I’m gay and I’m afraid if I come out, I’ll lose my job. What do you think?”

“Marty, let me begin by trading secrets. I’m gay too.” He dropped his fork. “You couldn’t tell?”

“Not for a minute. I just liked you and respected you. You don’t seem very gay to me.”

“Well, I am, but I need you to keep it between us for obvious reasons.”

“Of course, but what would you suggest in my case?”

“If you come out, you’ll lose your job at the committee. If you lose your job at the committee, you’ll have to drop out of night law school. Why don’t you plan on coming out once you finish law school and get a job with a good firm?” And that is just what Marty did. By the time he finished law school, he had a partner, and he is a successful lawyer to this day, appreciated in a firm known for its diversity.

January 1982 began tragically. Someone came running into our offices and told us to turn on the television. In a snowstorm and during the evening rush hour, an Air Florida jet had crashed into the Fourteenth Street Bridge, the busiest one crossing the Potomac. Before rescue teams arrived, a man named Lenny Skutnik jumped into the icy river and began rescuing people. Soon word arrived that there had been a subway crash and the system was shut down. Like many others on Capitol Hill, I chose to sleep in my office since there was no convenient way home.

A few days later, Reagan was to give his first State of the Union Address. Presidents George Washington and John Adams delivered their State of the Union Addresses orally to a joint session of Congress. However, Thomas Jefferson, who was somewhat uncomfortable with public-speaking situations because of his stuttering, decided that he would write his Annual Message to Congress. The new tradition continued through the administration of the very large William Howard Taft, whose Inaugural read like a State of
the Union Address, and whose State of the Union Addresses were epically detailed. President Woodrow Wilson, as part of his progressive agenda, decided that addressing the Congress as had Washington and Adams would be a major improvement in relations with Congress, which the Democrats had conquered in the 1912 election. And ever since, presidents have trudged up Capitol Hill to deliver their annual State of the Union Address.

During his Address, Ronald Reagan praised Skutnik’s heroism. When Skutnik rose from his seat next to the First Lady to acknowledge the applause, the House was no longer divided and Americans could take pride in the virtue of one man who stood for us all. Ronald Reagan made that happen and a new tradition was established. It helped the Capitol recover from the tragedy.

We continued to monitor Senate races as we moved into the primary season for most of them. Unfortunately, there was also Tidewater v to plan. It would be the last. Not only had it outlived its usefulness, Packwood made a mistake that jeopardized his career and changed mine.

This misadventure started in late January 1982 when I received a call from a leading executive search firm. The headhunter said he would like to meet with me to discuss the possibility of becoming a speechwriter for a CEO of a major company, which he could not disclose. I was flattered and assumed he would fly me to New York City for the interview. On a lark, I accepted the invitation. Much to my disappointment, the interviewer came to Washington, D.C., to meet me over lunch. Without going into much detail about the company, he said it was in the top tier but was not located in New York City or Washington, D.C. I said, “With my luck, it’s Chrysler.” The interviewer dropped his glass of wine, which splashed over the table.

At this juncture, Chrysler had secured loan guarantees from the government—which Packwood opposed—and had avoided bankruptcy. I knew little about Detroit or about the auto industry, or any industry for that matter. The headhunter begged me to go to Detroit just to give them a chance to talk to me. So in February, I flew to Detroit to meet with Wendell Larsen, a vice president for public relations, to discuss the position. Basically, Lee Iacocca needed a writer who would work for him and no one else in the company. Other writers wrote for other executives—including Jerry Greenwalt, the president of the company, who was pretty much Iacocca’s puppet. Iacocca had risen to the same position at Ford, but had refused to be Henry Ford’s puppet. One day at recess on the campus of their Catholic School, Iacocca’s daughters heard the news that their father had been fired. Ford had given the news to the media before he gave it to Iacocca. Lee never forgave Ford for doing that and never uttered Ford’s name without
preceding it with some form of the F-word. After being fired, Iacocca recovered a few days later by being named CEO of Chrysler. His ambition was to have Chrysler replace Ford as the country’s number two automaker. But first he had to rescue Chrysler from the brink of bankruptcy, which he did by launching a massive lobbying campaign on Capitol Hill. Smartly, Iacocca pledged to keep the Chrysler headquarters in Highland Park, near downtown Detroit. And though he got his loan guarantees, the company never had to use them. Thanks to Iacocca, the company rebounded, though it was still struggling in the recession of 1981–82.

When I returned from Detroit, I politely turned Larsen’s offer down and began to prepare for the Fifth Annual Tidewater Conference. But no sooner had I gotten to work than Packwood called me to say that he had made a huge mistake and needed my help. His voice was breaking up, something I’d never heard before. I rushed over to his office in the Russell Building.

On the previous Friday afternoon, Packwood sat drinking cheap box wine he kept in his small office refrigerator. He was being interviewed by a reporter from the Associated Press on the national debt. Near the end of the interview, Packwood admitted that previously he had been mistaken about some items on the Pentagon budget. “For example, I claimed that so-called big ticket items like the B-1 Bomber were the cause of the deficit when in fact they are just a fraction of the budget.”

The reporter joked, “It’s pretty dumb to make those assumptions.”

Packwood replied, “If you think I’m dumb, you should have to go down to the White House and deal with Reagan.” He then claimed, “Reagan told us, ‘You know, a black man went into a grocery store and he had an orange in one hand and a bottle of vodka in the other, and he paid for the orange with food stamps and he took the change and paid for the vodka. That’s what’s wrong.’ And we just shake our heads.” On Saturday, the reporter filed the budget story without mentioning the anecdote about Reagan, but the story as released was damaging nonetheless. It claimed that Reagan’s “idealized image” of America was driving women, blacks, and other minorities out of the party. I could hear the wine talking as I read Packwood’s comments.

On Sunday, the Packwoods attended a state dinner at the White House, where Ronald and Nancy Reagan greeted them coldly in the reception line. On Monday morning, the AP reporter listened to his tape recording again, heard the anecdote about Reagan’s view of food stamps, and wrote a story about Packwood portraying the President as a senile racist. The Reagans were furious. Packwood’s colleagues were outraged that he had divulged something from what was to be a private, off-the-record meeting with the President. As we have seen, Packwood had previously criticized Reagan for
revealing pieces of his private conversation with the President. Even worse, because the reporter had reissued the story on Monday, it appeared as if Packwood had embargoed it until after he had attended the White House function on Sunday. That was not true, and the reporter, to his credit, came to Packwood’s defense on that charge.

When he read the reporter’s rewritten story, Packwood saw his career flash before his eyes and called me in for help. I began by calling the Vice President, who agreed to intervene. Packwood was allowed to apologize by calling Air Force One, where the President was in flight. Reagan accepted the apology, but later told Howard Baker, the Senate leader, to “take care of the Packwood problem.” Nancy Reagan barred the Packwoods from all White House functions. Of all things you did not want to accuse Ronald Reagan of, it was being a racist. I sent Packwood a letter about my experience with Reagan when he was governor and advised him on how to ride out the crisis. He responded, “Your letter of March 6 [1982] to me gives advice ranking among the best I have ever received.”

The right wing of the Republican Party, which was already alienated from Packwood because of his position on abortion, was out for blood. Joe Coors, the conservative brewmaster, threatened to cut off all funds to the NRSC unless Packwood was removed as its chair. Six conservative Republican senators asked Packwood to resign as head of the NRSCC. Resolutions were sent in for the Tidewater Conference that condemned Packwood. Ed Rollins stopped all of Reagan’s fundraising letters on behalf of the NRSCC. The crisis jeopardized our ability to maintain a majority in the Senate in the 1982 elections. And we were about to go into the Tidewater Conference, which ended appropriately enough on the Ides of March!

As I walked into the Crystal and Blue Rooms of the Tidewater Inn for the first night’s drinks and dinner, I knew this would be the last one. Despite some cancellations, the stars came out but our overall numbers were down. Congressman Jack Kemp of tax-cut fame held court in one corner of the room. Congressman Trent Lott, later senator and majority leader, circled here and there. Senators Pete Domenici (New Mexico), Slade Gorton (Washington), and Ted Stevens (Alaska) let people come to their tables while they swilled booze.

We surprised everyone after they sat down for dinner when we played a personal videotape from Reagan; he greeted the guests and told them to have a great conference. Then he kidded Packwood: “I’m told that it’s a tradition out there in Maryland to go crabbing. Of course, we all know it’s been a tradition here [in Washington] too. But, again, I don’t mean by anyone in our party.” The laughter was hearty. I looked over at Packwood and
he winked at me. It’s good to be friends with the vice president, I thought to myself. After dinner, clumps of celebrities gathered around the piano and sang songs, forgetting the nation’s economic woes and Reagan’s declining poll numbers.

The next morning the discussions began at various tables named for famous Republicans, such as Taft, Lincoln, and Teddy Roosevelt. The first resolution gently warned Reagan and the Congress that the huge deficits it was running up to end the recession were dangerous. “Voodoo economics” had become “supply side economics.” David Stockman, the President’s budget director, was on hand to fight and modify the resolution. He argued that spending was needed to stimulate the economy, and behind the scenes reminded those present that defense spending was aimed at crushing the Soviet economy. “We can spend them into the ground,” he said, repeating Reagan’s aphorism.15

The second resolution, initiated by Congressman Mickey Edwards of Oklahoma, begged Republicans to return to their civil rights roots to “fully integrate black Americans into the mainstream of the private economy.” The resolution went right to the heart of the Reagan-Packwood feud. The third resolution, initiated by Congressman Newt Gingrich of Georgia, called for a thorough reform of the Defense Department to “streamline research, development, and procurement programs” and ensure “that every dollar will be spent wisely.” The fourth resolution, initiated by Representative Claudine Schneider of Rhode Island, called for making America competitive in international markets by improving education at home. The fifth and final resolution, initiated by Congressman Jim Leach of Iowa, called for arms control. One of the “whereas” clauses said that while the United States had “a responsibility to take the lead in arms reduction negotiations,” this house condemned the Soviet Union for its arms build-up, and its “invasion of Afghanistan.”

I kept the house in order through all of the table discussions and debates while wining and dining the press in the evening. I often went “off the record” to say that the story Packwood told about Reagan was true, but it was not meant to imply that he was senile or a racist, only to point out that he was naive on budgetary matters. In the end, somehow Tidewater was again a success in terms of favorable press.