

**Association of Centers for the Study of Congress
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Session 2: McConnell Session, May 10, 2017**

Deborah Skaggs (DS):

– Senate majority leader, and one of my bosses, Senator Mitch McConnell. Born in Alabama, he lived in Athens until the end of second grade, when his family moved to Augusta, Georgia. The McConnells arrived in Louisville, Kentucky, early in 1956, when he was in the eighth grade. The senator attended Louisville’s Manual High School, where, in his senior year, he was student council president. In 1960, he enrolled in the University of Louisville, where he graduated with honors four years later. During his senior year, he served as president of the Arts and Sciences Student Council.

In the summer of 1963, he interned in the office of Kentucky’s U.S. Congressman Gene Snyder, and in the summer of 1964, he interned in the office of Kentucky senator John Sherman Cooper. He graduated in 1968 from the University of Kentucky School of Law, where he served as president of the Student Bar Association and excelled in moot court. After law school, he worked in Kentucky senator Marlow Cook’s office as chief legislative assistant, and then served in the Ford administration in the Office of Legislative Affairs as deputy attorney general. Meanwhile, he was (audio gap) as chief legislative assistant, and then served in the Ford administration in the Office of Legislative Affairs as deputy attorney general.

Meanwhile, he was building his political base back home, in Louisville, Kentucky, and in Jefferson County. Subsequently, in 1977, he was elected Jefferson County judge/executive and reelected in 1981. Leader McConnell was first elected to the U.S. Senate in 1984, edging out the incumbent, Dee Huddleston. He has subsequent Senate reelections with impressive margins, and now is in his sixth term.

In 1981, the senator and the University of Louisville founded the McConnell Center with the mission of identifying, recruiting, and nurturing Kentucky's next generation of great leaders. The McConnell Scholars Program is a competitive, nonpartisan program comprised of forty undergraduate students, usually ten in each class, who must be from Kentucky. They participate in liberal arts seminars and earn tuition as well as travel scholarships, and have opportunities to engage with distinguished speakers such as the U.S. Supreme Court justice, Chief Justice John Roberts, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and President George W. Bush. This program is supported by endowments raised by the senator. The McConnell Center also includes a civics education program, which provides various activities for teachers, students, and the public.

In 2009, the McConnell Center added the McConnell-Chao Archives and its Civics Education Gallery. The latter is an outreach program to bring students and the public in direct contact with archival materials, thereby creating a greater awareness and appreciation for primary sources through telling the story of the life and careers of the senator and his wife, U.S. Secretary of Transportation Elaine Chao. In the Senate, he has risen through the leadership positions to his election as leader in 2002 and majority leader

in 2014, only one of two – Alben Barkley – Senate majority leaders from Kentucky. From his childhood battle with polio to majority leader, Senator McConnell’s life and career reflects how he has faced challenges with patience and determination by playing “the long game,” which is the title of his recent memoir, *The Long Game*.

Why this lengthy biography? Because of all these life events, accomplishments, and even more are documented in his archives. Now let’s look at his watch. You have your watch on, Senator? Show them your watch. He received this watch for his twenty-first birthday. It was purchased on February the 2nd, 1963, for \$100. How do I know this? (Laughter.) The receipt’s in the archives. (Laughter.) This little-known primary source is an indication about the Senator’s interest in keeping records, and also his comprehensive archives. Please join me in welcoming Leader McConnell. (Applause.)

Mitch McConnell (MM):

Well, thank you very much. As you can see, I’m an archivist’s delight. I don’t know whether I hoped that someday I might amount to something or not, but I kept damn near everything, including, as Debbie indicated, this – my dad gave me this watch on my twenty-first birthday, and a hundred bucks in those days was a really nice gift. And I’ve worn it every day since, and had it repaired twice. But when I did move along in my career to the point where – I know you wanted to ask questions.

DS: No, you go right ahead, sir.

MM: – where, candidly, I was important enough to have an archives, I had everything that I had been saving over the years, all of which Debbie has now. And I had so much confidence in her that I finally decided to turn all the family photographs over to it. And to tell you how useful that became, my daughter popped me an email one day and she said, “Dad, I think my son looks a lot like your father. Have you got any pictures of your father at age two?” I sent her back a message, copied Debbie, and said, “Hey, Debbie, you got any pictures of Dad at age two?” And within – so not many people have their own family records so perfectly organized as I do and are so fortunate enough to have a professional in charge of our facility. So anyway, Debbie’s got – she could ruin me, frankly. (Laughter.) I’m very nice to her. (Laughter.) You want to lead off?

DS: Thank you. As your repository archivist, to lead in from that, I’ve been just amazed about the breadth and depth of your Senate records. We have personal records of you, photographs, schedules, correspondence, as well as your staff records, legislative files, communication files, press – you name it, we have it. And I was interested in when you became interested in saving those records, those important archival records, and how you went about working with your staff to save those important records.

MM: Well, when I got elected to leadership, which was sometime back, I designated somebody on my personal staff to be the archivist. So she began, in consultation with folks in the Senate about how to do this, organizing records in such a way that they’d be useful, already organized to be turned over. And then later, when I ended up with my own facility, it now houses everything. All the personal stuff I’d kept since my earliest

awareness of things, to the office stuff, which, in cahoots with Debbie, are turned over routinely. And you know more about that than I do. But I actually have somebody on my own staff who works with her. And so everything can be retrieved that we want to retrieve.

Now, some of you are probably thinking, “You must be insane, while you’re still active in politics, to have a facility like this.” So let me put you to rest. Nobody can access it without my personal permission. (Laughter.) And we’ve had people come by periodically from the *New York Times* and other places who would love to search through my records. And someday they’ll be available, but not anytime soon. So that’s how we dealt with that issue. There’s a confidentiality agreement that I have with the university, and it really requires my personal signoff to have access to any of it. And occasionally it’s appropriate, and occasionally we do that.

DS: I know that our audience would be interested in hearing you talk about the advantages of – you talked a little bit about a staff archivist, because these are people that are interested in members of Congress having staff archivists, because it makes, as you mentioned, when they come to a repository, the records are in better shape and they’re saved. What advice would you give them about what to say to members of Congress?

MM: Yeah, I’m rarely asked, but if I am asked, I always say, “You know, you’re more important than you think you are.” I mean most people don’t do this because they’re kind of modest and – believe it or not, there are people in politics who are modest. I

know that's shocking for you to hear. But probably don't really fully understand that a lot of the things that they're doing have some consequence. I always sort of had a special interest in history anyway. And to give you an example – the other thing – I'm rarely asked about this, but when I do, I also recommend they do oral histories. And I sat down before I knew Debbie, and even actually before I had designated someone on my own staff to be the office archivist, and started doing oral histories.

DS: That was in 1995.

MM: Yeah. And I started with my first recollection in life, everything I could remember, and worked forward. And it took a couple of years to catch up to the present. And then, for a number of years since then, I've only done it once a year. Ideally, you would do it a lot more often than once a year, because by the end of the year you don't remember all the details that you would if you did it more frequently. So recently, Debbie and I sat down, because I was involved in something of real consequence that some of you probably followed, the decision I made last year not to fill the Supreme Court vacancy, which was a big deal, as you know, quite controversial, which recently ended with the confirmation of Justice Neil Gorsuch.

And so, we decided that particular episode warranted a special sit-down, and so we did something we probably ought to do more often, but we did a special sit-down on that. To tell you – at the time I started doing it, I thought it was just for my children, basically. I wasn't sure how useful it would be. Fast forward to after I became majority leader. All

of a sudden, I discovered there was a lot more interest in me than there was when I was the leader of the minority, amazingly enough.

So the book came about, and we had all of those oral sit-downs transcribed. And without it, there would have been no chance to do this memoir in the time frame that we needed to do it in, which was about a year and a half. We would have had no chance to produce that memoir without those oral histories. So that's the other thing. I frequently recommend, on the rare occasions when I'm asked about members about this sort of thing, I also suggest doing oral histories.

And I said, "Even if you don't think you're ever going to be thought of as a consequential figure, your family will appreciate it." And I know I regretted, later, not having sat down with both my mother and my father for sessions about their childhood. And my dad was a World War II vet, and I would love to have, in retrospect, known more about his wartime experiences, which were quite hazardous, actually.

DS: Your archives includes campaign records, including all of your ads from your campaigns. How did that come about, your interest in saving those records? That just didn't happen. You had to be involved in that.

MM: Well, I mean we had – the facility that my wife and I have, that Debbie runs, is not just an archive. There's an outside that's like a museum. We call it the Civic Education Gallery. And it takes about an hour to go through it, and you can punch up the

commercials and watch them, which is interesting for kids. I mean, there's nothing to see in the archives. It's all locked up anyway. That's in the back. But out front, it's a museum-type facility. And you can – my wife's life is a lot more interesting than mine. Some of you may know this or not, that she was an immigrant to this country, came over here in a freighter at age eight, not speaking a word of English. And now she's in her second cabinet position, typical Chinese American overachiever. And at the end of this – well, you can describe it better than I can. There are a couple of films, one about her life and one about mine. So it's sort of like a mini museum.

DS: Did you tell people in your campaign, someone designated to make sure that those –

MM: Oh, yeah. We always kept the records. I'm a packrat. And a lot of this stuff was literally in my basement until Debbie came along. And we moved the campaign stuff out of my basement and into the archives that we have now.

DS: An anecdote about the 2014 campaign, I talked to the senator and I said, "Do you think people are saving records from the campaign?" He said, "Well, they should know to do that." I said, "Well, you probably need to talk to them, somebody, to tell them to do that." Well, soon, I got a call from someone on the campaign who had been appointed, and then when I went to meet him he told me, he said, "The senator pulled me aside and I thought, what in the world have I done? And he spent thirty minutes talking to me about the campaign records." I said, "Yeah, he really is serious about this. We need to work together to make this happen."

MM: But, obviously, in your line of work, the way you keep records, it's sure different now from – we had a lot of hard copies in the early years. Now, what have you got, a few discs?

DS: Well, we had two external hard drives. We're storing now with – we've had the campaign ads digitized and some other campaign records that were on VHS tapes. Plus, we had a hundred DVDs that we've had ripped. So we're storing about six terabytes now with our IT group. And almost all the records from the 2014 campaign are electronic. I mean we have some yard signs and things like that that are – but we have the electronic copy of that, too. So it's a very interesting change of recordkeeping.

Senator, you mentioned your mother and dad. You've also been the family historian through the years. And I can tell you that the family records are so – they fill in the blanks of so much about the Senator and his life. And I feel like I know these people because I've read – back in the day, when people actually wrote correspondence back and forth, his grandmother, his mother and dad, the nicknames people had –

MM: For example, I had on my mind today – are you all familiar with these Honor Flights, any of you? I went down – what it is, for those of you who are not familiar, World War II guys who are still survivors, and Korea, and some Vietnam now, come to Washington. They're flown at no cost up here to visit the World War II Memorial. I was down there today and I met a guy who was in the D-Day Omaha invasion. Just as an aside, if you

saw *Saving Private Ryan*, you know that a bunch of those people drowned because they stepped off the Higgins boats and went straight down. He stepped off the Higgins boat, went straight down, and somehow was determined enough to keep walking. And he's now ninety-four. So he survived falling under the water, off the Higgins boat, survived Omaha Beach, and he's ninety-four years old. Reminded me of my father.

And the story I was going to tell is I have this really interesting correspondence from my dad to my mother, some of which is on display and the rest of it is in the back with the archives. Since earlier this week was the anniversary of the victory in Europe day, May the 8th, 1945, I have a letter in which my dad writes at the top, "May 8, 1945, V-E Day." And you may or may not still have that on display. I don't know. But in some other letters he wrote was interesting observations. He was a regular foot soldier, one of which talked about what a big problem he thought the Russians were going to be in the future. He had met some Russians, because when V-E Day came, he was in Pilsen, which is now the Czech Republic, and that's where they met up with the Russians. And, of course, a whole lot of people who were hoping the Americans would get there even quicker, because they could hardly distinguish between the Russians and the Germans in terms of their fear factor. So we've got a lot of interesting things there for people who are interested in history.

DS: Right. And they go back to the late nineteenth century, so go back several generations.

MM: Yeah, on that. And I bet you all have done this before. I asked Orrin Hatch, a Mormon, to help me. I bet some of you have done this, too, or people you work with. The Mormons have got great records on everybody. So he asked the church to help me, and they did. So I had no idea where – most Americans, down through the generations, lose track of family. Lore frequently is inaccurate. For example, I had heard that my ancestors came from County Cork. Well, Cork is down south, and I knew we were Protestants. And I thought it never really made sense that we came from County Cork. In the Mormon records was a Revolutionary War pension application. During the Andrew Jackson years, they decided to pay some money to some of the old guys who were still left. And on the application – pretty much the same today, date and place of birth, which action you were involved in in the war, did you get wounded.

And on there was he was brought to the United States at age four or five by his parents – I never found his parents – in the Port of Charleston, and where he fought in the American Revolution. The key thing was he was from County Down. I looked at the map. County Down is next to Belfast. I later found out that the reason a lot of people think they came from Cork is that's where the port was. So if you were coming to America, you'd get on the boat in Cork. And I later learned that the big Scotch-Irish mass immigration was from 1700 down to the Revolution. And the Catholic was later, related to the potato famine, largely. So everything kind of fell in place. All of that came from this Mormon research that Orrin had done for me, too.

DS: And it became a great resource for me, as I was researching the family records, to know who this person was and how they were related and all that, which was helping my finding aids in doing that. Senator, I think this audience would also be interested in your advice to them about working with members of Congress to encourage them to donate their records to a professionally-managed archives. Can you help them with that, too?

MM: Yeah, I don't know –

DS: What makes a difference?

MM: Steph, do you know how many people actually have somebody on staff who does that sort of thing? Not many? Yeah, I don't – Betty, do you know anything about – do you ever talk to any of these members about maybe having –

B: We do. (Indiscernible 22:02). So there aren't that many. Do you have an estimate on how many?

US: A total number of archivists in the Senate right now is probably about ten, but that includes some of the committee archivists.

B: So really a handful of (indiscernible 22:22).

US: Everyone tends to hire folks when (indiscernible 22:23) retire, so – which is unfortunate, because we really do urge all of the members to think about assigning records-management duties to someone in their office, really, right from the beginning.

MM: Then, even if they do that, what do they do with them when they leave? See, I was lucky enough to have facility. I've got a place to put them. Even if they do that, what would they do with them if they had them?

US: Archives provides courtesy storage to every member of Congress.

MM: Up here, for the National Archives.

US: They give them a place to put them locally.

B: We also work very carefully with members, as they're heading towards retirement, to find a repository. So we work with them if they're going to a state museum or their alma mater or whatever the case may be. We have a pretty good success rate of connecting retiring members with a repository.

MM: Well, some of the more prominent members – I think, for example, I think John McCain has something similar to what I have at Louisville, at Arizona State. Are they archiving there, too?

US: Of the senator, yeah. They're getting that.

MM: They're planning on archiving there, too. So I think particularly more prominent members that might have a facility, a place to put it other than just at the Archives, not that the Archives are not important, but –

US: But also, there are others, like the (indiscernible 23:49) and other centers that will take in papers from the other members as well (indiscernible 23:55) that have become some centralized repositories for members of the House or Senate leaders from the (indiscernible 24:07).

DS: Good. We have a few minutes before the senator has to leave. I wondered if you have some – we have two minutes, Steph tells me. So maybe we can take one question about archives, please, for the Leader. Yes, Betty?

B: I have a question. That is, I'm wondering if you're keeping any sort of personal diary.

MM: Did I keep a personal diary?

B: Do you keep a personal diary?

MM: No, I don't. I did when I was, what, ten or eleven or something like that.

DS: No, you were in high school.

MM: High school.

DS: In college.

MM: Which I probably destroyed. Normally, I keep everything, but this was just too intimidating, too scary. No, I don't. I don't. But so much of my life is recorded anyway. I think the one thing I probably haven't done enough of is what I mentioned a while ago. When you have some really significant episode, like the Gorsuch episode, what I ought to do is sit down more often and really get into great detail while everything is still fresh. But, no, I don't keep a daily dairy. There's so much going on, and what I do is so written about that I figure enough said by all the others who are throwing stones or – most of them are throwing stones. A few applaud. But I mean, my life is very eventful and very written about, so there's just a lot recorded anyway. So, no, I don't. I probably ought to do more of it.

DS: How well I know, trying to keep up with it all. We have time for one more question. Does anybody have a question? Yes?

US: Senator McConnell, as another archivist who works with Senate historical (indiscernible 26:07), can you suggest anything that we can say or do to (indiscernible 26:11)? And I agree that many of them think, "My stuff isn't that important." Do you have ways to get

them to really understand how important it is to their states and to (indiscernible 26:25) to save those materials?

MM: What are you saying? Should I talk to others about those?

US: No, I'm saying any hints on ways we can get through, get those points across?

DS: What would be meaningful to them to say, to have them understand that their records are important and should be saved in a repository?

MM: I'm not sure I know the answer to that. If you're Ted Kennedy, you've got something up in Boston that's akin to a presidential library. If you're somebody that lost after one term, honestly, it'd be pretty hard to convince him or her that it's a whole lot – I don't know. If you're trying to get somebody to start doing this, my guess is make your best argument to convince them that what they've been involved in is consequential and would be interesting to someone. Otherwise, you may be keeping records that are – I know you all will hate to hear this, but records that aren't worth keeping at all. You probably think all records are worth keeping, but I think it's an easy answer of somebody who's a major player. An easy answer. Beyond that, it just depends on how long you were here and how much of an impact you had to make a convincing case.

Anyway, I love what you all do. I'm a constant reader of American history, not surprising to you. And I'm enjoying, at the moment – I'll say this before I leave – H.W.

Brands' recent book about Truman and MacArthur, which was particularly meaningful today because I saw a lot of Korean War vets just this very morning. And the one thing that all the Korean War vets, that they remember the most from Korea was how damn cold it was. Thank you, all.

[End of interview]