

*Steve Silver:* This is an interview with the Honorable Senator Lamar Alexander for the Bryce Harlow Oral History Project. Senator, it's a great honor to meet you and to talk to you about Bryce Harlow.

*Senator Alexander:* I am honored to talk about him.

*Steve Silver:* Let's start, I guess, at the beginning, and how you – tell us how you first got to know Bryce Harlow.

*Senator Alexander:* Well, Bud Wilkinson introduced me to him in 1968. I had been working at United Citizens for Nixon for John Warner in the Willard Hotel during the Nixon campaign, when the hotel was being refigured and they just stacked it full of Farmers for Nixon and Teachers for Nixon, and Bud Wilkinson was working there. Bud was a great hero, but he was great with young people, which I was at the time. I was 28.

And Bryce Harlow was the first appointment of President Nixon and I wanted to work in the White House and Bud said, "Well, let me call Bryce and recommend you," and he did, and he hired me as his executive assistant, which is a little higher-sounding than it actually was.

So my job, beginning in January 1969, was to sit in the room that is today the vice president's office in the White House with Mr. Harlow. He had a desk there and I had a desk in the same room, and Sally Studebaker, his secretary, later wife, was outside. And he was smoking dual-filter Tarrytons and I was smoking Lucky Strikes. People were coming in and out of there and I got a Ph.D. in politics and government overhearing and watching how he did things.

And then after about six months, they made a little cubbyhole for me in the outer office of what is now the vice president's office, where his secretary now is, and it's still there. It's about three feet by ten feet, and I worked there until July of 1970, when he told me, if you stay much longer, you'll never go home, thinking back on the fact that he came for a short time from Oklahoma a long time ago.

But it was his Oklahoma friend, Bud Wilkinson, who called him, got me a job, and it was the best possible job a young man like me could ever have had for a year and a half.

*Steve Silver:* I can only imagine.

*Senator Alexander:* Yeah.

*Steve Silver:* What kind of a boss was he? What are some of the things you remember about working for him?

*Senator Alexander:* Oh, I remember everything about working for him. First, he was considerate to me, like he was to everyone else. What everybody loved about Bryce was you always had his full attention. So he might have 50 phone slips on his desk of people whose calls he needed to return, and he might have a line of 20 outside, and the president might be calling him, but you had his full attention. And so everyone likes that; so everyone wanted to talk with him. *(Laughter)*. And so he made great friends.

One story I remember was, he was in the Pierre Hotel during the Nixon transition and, of course, he knew Lyndon Johnson when Johnson was a senator. He had worked for President Eisenhower and was Eisenhower's favorite staff member, and he was Nixon's first appointee.

So there he was in the Pierre Hotel, Nixon's first appointee, and Nixon had said something the night before about foreign policy critical of President Johnson, and Johnson had called Bryce, who was the only person he felt comfortable calling, and was just raising hell with him. "Didn't you know that there's only one president at a time and I'm still the president?" And he was shouting and carrying on. Bryce was respectfully listening. About that time, Sally came in – Studebaker – and said, "Mr. Harlow, Mr. Harlow, President Eisenhower's on the phone and would like to talk with you."

So he had President Eisenhower on hold and President Johnson shouting at him, and a moment later, Larry Higby, who was Bob Haldeman's assistant, ran in and said, "Mr. Harlow, Mr. Harlow, President-elect Nixon wants to see you immediately." So he may have been the only man who ever had the president talking with him, the former president on hold, and the president-elect expecting the same within seconds. That's how much in demand he was, because everybody liked him.

So I learned that from him. I learned to listen. I learned that a good part of dealing with the legislature is simply showing respect for the office.

There was another time when the efficient Nixon team had gotten in complete trouble with the denizens of the Senate, who were then

Eastland and Stennis and Elender and all these old Southern guys who met every night and drank bourbon and scotch. So they sent Mr. Harlow up to see them, to see if he could undo the damage that had been done.

While I wasn't there, this is what I understood he did. They were all sitting there in a foul mood in Senator Eastland's hideaway in the Capitol and Bryce, who was about five feet tall and who all of them knew and loved, walked in and dropped down on one knee and said, "I find myself before 175 years of wisdom and experience." And they all burst out laughing. But what he actually did was simply show respect to them and to their offices, which was a lesson I learned from him.

*Steve Silver:* And that probably went a very long way.

*Senator Alexander:* Oh, yeah. It was 90 percent of that.

*Steve Silver:* Yeah.

*Senator Alexander:* (Laughter).

*Steve Silver:* I wanted to ask you about reputations, since that's really emerging as one of our big themes in the oral history. Did he talk to you about the importance of integrity and honesty, or did you learn by example?

*Senator Alexander:* He never talked about it, that I can remember, but he was a constant example of it. I can recall that on one occasion – he always worked and never took a vacation, and a friend of his, who was just a personal friend, not a business friend, invited him and his wife to go to Mexico for a week on a vacation he badly needed. He made plans to go.

And about two weeks before, that same friend called up and asked for some minor thing, and about two days later, Bryce had his secretary call the friend back and say, "Mr. Harlow's plans have changed; he won't be able to go." And it was something he had really looked forward to going to, but just because that friend had asked him for some minor favor, he made sure that he didn't go with him to Mexico.

And I recall another time that Peter Flannigan – and remember, I was sitting there in the same room, watching all this, so it was all by example to me. Peter Flannigan – who would be a good person to talk with, the former Chairman of Dillon Reid in New York,

Nixon advance man in 1960, knew Bryce very, very well – had been appointed to be the president's liaison to the Federal Communications Commission.

So he came in to check with Mr. Harlow and said, “Bryce, I just want to check with you. I'm going to call the FCC. The president's friend in Miami has called. His TV license has been held up for 18 months and we are a business administration. We're for efficiency. And of course, we don't want to involve ourselves with the mayor to the license, but I'm just going to call over there and say, we want a decision one way or the other before the end of the month.”

And Bryce chuckled and he said, “Now, Peter. Do you remember Sherman Adams?” And Peter said, “Well, of course.” And he said, “Do you remember what he did?” He said, “Well, he was Eisenhower's Chief of Staff who was disgraced.” Harlow said, “But do you remember what he did?” He said, “No,” and Harlow said, “Peter, he received a Christmas present from an old friend of a vicuña coat for whom he had called the Federal Communications Commission and asked about the status of a case.” Peter said, “Thank you very much,” and he left and never made the call.

So he had such broad experience that he saw the subtleties that many people who are new to the White House wouldn't see. I've always thought that the reason the Nixon White House got in trouble was not because the staff members were evil, but because John Erlichman was a bond lawyer and Bob Haldeman was an advance man and they didn't have the breadth of knowledge and experience to sort out the things that should be done and shouldn't be done. And people like Mr. Harlow gradually got squeezed out, and it was at that point that Mr. Nixon didn't have advisors around him who knew enough about the presidency and about the world to protect him.

*Steve Silver:* It's almost hard to imagine somebody in Washington – although I haven't heard of any critics of Bryce Harlow. Do you remember learning anything about how he would handle people who disagreed with him?

*Senator Alexander:* Oh, I do. The Chairman of – right after we came in, a Democratic – there was a Democratic Congress, still – and so the question was, how do you announce federal grants? And the Nixon White House said, “Well, we'll let the Republican senators and congressmen announce the grants in their home states.”

Well, the chairmen of all the committees in Congress were Democrats, and they didn't like that. So one called from the House of Representatives, very mad, and Bryce listened and I heard him say, "Mr. Chairman, Mr. Chairman. Let me check on something. I'll call you right back."

And then he picked up the phone and called Larry O'Brien, who was his predecessor who handled congressional relations for President Kennedy and Johnson. He said, "Larry, would you refresh my memory on how you all handled the announcement of Federal grants?" And O'Brien said, "Well, Bryce, we did it the way it's always done; we let the members of our party make the announcements." He said, "Thank you, Larry, I was just checking."

And then he called back the Democratic chairman and said, "Mr. Chairman, I just checked with someone – I checked with Larry O'Brien – and I want to be scrupulously fair, so we're gonna do it exactly the same way the previous administration did it. We're gonna let the members of the president's party make the grant announcements."

Well, he handled that with humor and with fairness, and with respect. And even though the Democratic chairman didn't like the answer one single bit, he liked Bryce Harlow because of the good humor, the respect, and the fairness of his decision.

*Steve Silver:*

Wow. Why do you think he – or what made him such a good and trusted advisor to presidents? Why do you think presidents relied on his counsel so much?

*Senator Alexander:*

Well, he said that it was because he was – he could take dictation. He was a stenographer, and he went to work for General Marshall in World War II, and he said, there's no one more popular in a roomful of Generals than a stenographer who can take down all their orders.

So he was comfortable serving people who gave orders and had important positions. Second, he had a wonderful sense of humor, very smart, and he was a great speech writer, so he could make his principal look good. So whether it was General Marshall or President Eisenhower, or President Nixon, his editing of things was good.

But I suppose it was also because his advice was good. He had lots of wisdom. And everyone around Washington always wanted

Bryce's counsel because they knew it would be honest and it would be wise and it would be based on a lot of experience.

And so he was just a very valuable person to have around and a lot of fun to have around.

*Steve Silver:* How was he in meetings with top-level people? Was he kind of a screamer? Was he – did he sort of stay quiet and reserved and speak towards the end? I want to get a sense of how he was in the room with a whole bunch of principals.

*Senator Alexander:* Oh, he never screamed. I can't ever remember him ever raising his voice.

*Steve Silver:* Yeah?

*Senator Alexander:* I mean, he's a quiet little guy with a presence, nevertheless. He might not be the first person to speak, but, he might wait to be called on by the president. Usually, in a room full of really wise people, they would call on him early.

So he would be well-prepared. He would do his homework, do a memorandum, for example, in congressional relations meetings. Every Tuesday, the president would have the Republican leadership down and Bryce would prepare a little memo – I used to help him with it – for the president about his talking points on what to do. And he would sit at the end of the table and he would speak when he was asked to speak. But that's what you do in the room with the president. You don't speak unless the president asks you to speak.

*Steve Silver:* Yeah. Do you remember if he played a big role in policymaking decisions with Nixon, or was his role more knowing how things were going to play on the Hill, I guess politics as opposed to policy, or –

*Senator Alexander:* Well, it was all three. For example, in politics, in the 1970 congressional elections, he was detailed to the Agnew plane, and so he flew around with Agnew with Bill Safire, Agnew's speech writer, and he sort of managed the plane. I think it was partly to keep Agnew out of trouble and to deal with the press, who liked Bryce, and just to be a wise person on the plane. So he was very trusted in politics.

And in 1976, when there was all the discussion about a Ford/Reagan ticket or a Reagan/Ford ticket – or maybe it was '80,

when there was talk about President Reagan running with President Ford as a vice president, whichever year it was, Bryce was the broker. I mean he was the person who would go back and forth from one president to the former president, because he was of that stature.

*Steve Silver:* Bryce is, of course, widely credited with helping to really establish the idea of congressional relations within the White House. He played that role with Eisenhower and then, of course, with President Nixon. Why is this an important job? A lot of people might not know – why do we need congressional liaisons within the White House?

*Senator Alexander:* Well, George Reedy, who was Lyndon Johnson's Press Secretary, wrote a book called *Twilight of the Presidency*, in which he said that the president's job is three things. One is to see urgent needs; two is to develop a strategy to meet those needs; and three is to persuade at least half the people that you're right.

Well, on item number three, much of the time, your audience is the legislature. If you have a defense appropriation or foreign policy bill – for example, Bryce used to say that the foreign policy only has one constituent, and that's the president.

So somebody has to go up to Capitol Hill and persuade the Congress to pass the president's proposal. And then, there's a second job, which is to let the president know how Congress feels about various things, so we did a lot of running the traps before we sent a nomination up or a piece of legislation up – something I'd like to see the current president do more of, actually – because we didn't want it to be sent back to us, and sometimes it was, when we hadn't done our job as well. And then armed with that knowledge, you can make some contribution to the policy decisions and say, this is what the Congress thinks, or this is the reaction you'll get on the Hill. You may want to send this up.

So Bryce was influential in politics and in persuading people; he did that by writing speeches and memos, as well as working with Congress. And then he was a valued policy advisor, particularly at the beginning of his time there.

*Steve Silver:* Why do you think he was so effective later in his career at bringing the business community and government together, representing on the Hill? Why was he an effective lobbyist, do you think?

*Senator Alexander:* Well, he always – I think he always would say to lobbyists that your word is your stock in trade, that if you ever misled an elected official, you're dead. They'll never trust anything you say again. And in many ways, I thought, he almost single-handedly gave the profession of lobbying a good name. (*Laughter*). He elevated it, and really made it more of a profession.

And his ability to bring business and government together came because of his time with Procter & Gamble. He was Neil McElroy's great friend and lobbyist, the president of Procter & Gamble, who was then Secretary of Defense. His daughter, Bitsy Folger, still lives in Washington and might be a good person to interview.

But so he went back and forth between Procter & Gamble and the federal government – the White House – and then he went back to Procter & Gamble, went back to the White House. So he knew big business and big government better than anybody in town.

*Steve Silver:* Mm-hmm.

*Senator Alexander:* And because of his personality and the respect that people had for him, he was able to command – he was a natural leader.

*Steve Silver:* Did –

*Senator Alexander:* More of a pied piper than a leader. He didn't – he wasn't John Wayne. Quite the reverse, but he attracted people.

*Steve Silver:* People to follow him, right.

*Senator Alexander:* Yeah.

*Steve Silver:* Did he have a good working relationship with Democrats on the Hill? Was he a good bipartisan guy?

*Senator Alexander:* Oh, exceptional.

*Steve Silver:* Yeah?

*Senator Alexander:* Exceptional. I mean, he used to work for Democrats. I mean he worked for the Democratic chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and the House of Representatives and – after World War II – and then came to President Eisenhower. So he was Lyndon Johnson's favorite Republican. All of the Democrats felt

close to him because, again, it was good humor. The story I told you about the Democratic chairman calling him, so yes.

And I also told you the story about all those Democratic senators who were mad at the Nixon White House and it was Bryce they sent to break the ice.

*Steve Silver:*

How did Bryce Harlow deal with political adversity, whether it was something as minor as a setback on a particular piece of legislation, or something as major as the Watergate and what it eventually turned into. How did he deal with that, do you think?

*Senator Alexander:*

Well, I never – I wasn't around during Watergate. I left by 1970, I guess which was my good fortune – but he was loyal. I mean, he stayed on for a long time with President Nixon and then President Ford asked him to come back, if I remember right – well, I do remember right. He was back there in 1975 and '76.

So he was a steadfast ally during adversity. He could evaluate the political consequences better than a lot of other staff aides. See, there was a premium in the Nixon administration eventually placed on efficiency, getting this paper in and that paper in. And gradually, the wise old men, like Arthur Burns and Pat Monahan and Henry Kissinger, to a lesser extent, got squeezed out a little bit by Haldeman and Erlichman, just because they had – because they weren't efficient. Bryce would have 50 calls to return and he would take a long time on the phone with the Democratic chairman. Now, that wasn't efficient, but it worked – (*Laughter*) – in terms of relationships, so they didn't really appreciate that very well.

*Steve Silver:*

You mentioned a lot of the – sort of the way that the Nixon staff was structured and how that might have led to Harlow getting squeezed out. Do you think that the way Watergate eventually turned into – and obviously, you weren't there at the time – but do you think that changed the way people at the Bryce Harlow level advised presidents? Did that leave sort of a permanent mark on presidential counsel?

*Senator Alexander:*

I hope so. I trust so. I've – as I look at the presidencies after that, one of the effects, I believe, was that presidents realized at some point in their term that they were wise to look around Washington for the next best thing to Bryce Harlow. I mean, President Carter invited Lloyd Cutler to be his advisor, and Reagan, when he was in trouble, got Howard Baker to come into the White House. In other

words, they got people who weren't young and efficient, but older and wiser and knowledgeable about Washington.

I mean, Bryce used to teach us; he would say that the most important thing we have to do in the presidential staff is make sure that things that get to the president are only those things that are truly presidential. He said everything that comes to the White House is important, but only a handful of things are truly presidential, and the staff's job is to know the difference.

Now, most people who come to the White House to work wouldn't know the difference. *(Laughter)*. So the change after Watergate, I believe, would be that most presidents try to have around them some people who are at least broad-gauged enough to know the nuances of Washington and the difference between things that are truly presidential and things that are merely important.

*Steve Silver:* Right. What do you think made Bryce a unique figure in Washington?

*Senator Alexander:* Well, brains, good humor, and the kind of capacity that Bill Clinton has to lock in on a person with whom you're talking and make that person feel like you're the only person in the world, and a strong sense of public service and ethical responsibility.

*Steve Silver:* Considering that there are no laws or big government buildings named after Bryce Harlow, do you think that he had sort of an invisible influence on Washington, to an extent?

*Senator Alexander:* Well, he has a huge influence. He has today – everybody in town knows him. *(Laughter)*.

*Steve Silver:* *(Laughter)*.

*Senator Alexander:* I mean, if I say to people, “I worked for Bryce Harlow,” they want to stop and talk with me about it. And I hadn't thought about the fact that no building was named after him. He also never wrote a book.

*Steve Silver:* Yes.

*Senator Alexander:* I asked him one time, I said, “Mr. Harlow, you must write a book. I mean, in the first place, you can write. In the second place look at the era in which you worked and the people for whom you worked.” I mean, General Marshall –

*Steve Silver:* Legendary.

*Senator Alexander:* The Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Carl Vinson. He worked for Vinson.

He worked for Johnson. He worked for Eisenhower. He worked for Nixon. He worked for Ford. He was in all these meetings. He knew more history – I mean, he was a walking White House Oval Office tape. And he said, “No, that would be unethical,” and he never wrote a book.

*Steve Silver:* And to think what he could have said and –

*Senator Alexander:* Yeah, and today, most White House aides, it seems like, start taking notes for their book the day before they go to work in the White House. And he, the person who could've written the best White House book ever in history, probably – certainly modern history – thought it was unethical to write a book, and never did.

*Steve Silver:* Yeah. That was – what you just said was the perfect lead-in to my next question, because I wanted to ask about the idea of the passion for anonymity that White House staffers have. Do you think it's important that history remembers the great White House staffers? I mean, certainly, they'll remember presidents and senators and – people – elected officials, but what about the staffers?

*Senator Alexander:* Well, the staffer's job is to serve the elected person and to know the difference between a staff member and an elected person. I've been both and I know the difference. But a White House senior staff member, in the modern presidency, is a very important figure, because it is true that power in Washington depends upon how close you are to the president, not on where your office is or what your job is.

I mean, you can be the Secretary of State and be way down the line in terms of importance in Washington if your relationship with the president isn't close. Or you can be the Secretary of – William Rogers was somewhat that way with Nixon. On the other hand, you can be a junior-ranking Secretary, like Margaret Spellings is in Education, and because of her close relationship with the president, suddenly, she's more important.

But the people who are closest to the president and therefore, closest to power and therefore, very influential, are the senior White House aides. And while no one should confuse them with

the president – none of them were elected – there are a handful of them who ought to be studied and – if for nothing else, to see how one does his job.

I mean, I think it's important to know how Howard Baker did his job of Chief of Staff, taking over in the middle of Reagan's Iran-Contra thing.

*Steve Silver:* Right.

*Senator Alexander:* I think it's important to know how Jim Baker did his job for Reagan in that first term, after managing George Bush's campaign. Don Regan was an important White House Chief of Staff, as well as Secretary of the Treasury. I think it's important to know what Bob Haldeman and John Erlichman didn't do. On the other hand, in the Nixon days, there was Pat Moynihan, who was spouting a negative income tax, all sorts of policy consideration. There was Arthur Burns. There was Henry Kissinger. There was Bryce Harlow. So these are large figures; important people.

*Steve Silver:* I wanted to ask you about a letter that was kind of famous, I guess, in 1985, regarding the Dixon-Yates Power, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the importance that I believe Harlow wrote to you.

*Senator Alexander:* 1985, I was – that was my next to last year as Governor of Tennessee. Oh, I remember this, because I wanted to tell this story about how President Eisenhower – I used to tell it at Boys' State, always to young people, about how President Eisenhower, this most sophisticated president, this General who won the World War – and I wanted them to understand that when it came time to make a decision, he went around the room and got advice from everybody about all of the political intricacies, and finally, he asked the question, "Well, what would be the right thing to do?" and then he did it.

And I think that's what the story's about. Get the facts out.

Get the facts out; that was what I urged Nixon and Stans to do with Watergate in '72. It would have hurt a few people; it would have saved the presidency." So he was always in the middle of the big political decisions. So there he was advising, 1972, was after the Watergate break-in, after the election, before the Watergate committee, he was saying to Nixon and Stans, get the facts out, and they didn't listen.

During the first Nixon term, when it was time to fire Ray Bliss, who was the Chairman of the Republican National Committee, they sent Bryce to do it. During the first Nixon term, when they wanted to recruit Don Rumsfeld from the Congress to go to the Office of Economic Opportunity, they sent him to recruit him, and he did, bringing Dick Cheney with him.

And in 1975, when Ford was challenged by – about to be challenged in the Republican primary and needed a new campaign manager, Bryce was the one who called me up in late 1975 and invited me to come up to the Oval Office to meet with Ford and Cheney and several people, and Ford asked me to be his campaign manager, which I couldn't do right then because of my young family.

But he seemed always to be in the center of these important political decisions. And of course, what I was – what this letter suggests to us of how marvelous it would have been if he had written a book. “So I can tell it in perfect Harlowese,” because he had a very special, relaxed, humorous way of talking.

*Steve Silver:*

Yeah. As sort of a final thought, then, what are the more significant ways that Bryce Harlow influenced your own political career? What are the lessons you learned, I guess?

*Senator Alexander:*

Well, he reminded me to be scrupulously ethical. I should have known that anyway, but I remember when I worked for him, someone gave me a briefcase. I gave it back. I mean, I would never – no one would ever have known it, but – so that was one.

Number two, that it's important to show – even if you don't like the person in the public office that you're working with – show respect for the office.

Just look beyond the person to the office, and that helps. Number three, to respect different ideas of the other party. He reminded me of the importance of being a good writer, because he was.

*Steve Silver:*

Yeah.

*Senator Alexander:*

And he taught me a lot about politics and policy and government, because there's no school for that, really.

So I guess I could say, I got my Ph.D. sitting at a desk in Bryce Harlow's office.

*Steve Silver:*                    (*Laughter*). Senator, you've been really generous with your time. I just wanted to thank you, again.

*Senator Alexander:*   Well, I encourage you. There are hundreds of stories about Bryce Harlow, and I'm delighted that you're doing this.

*Steve Silver:*                    Thank you.  
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