

Steve Silver: This is an oral history interview with the Honorable Senator John Warner for the Bryce Harlow Oral History Project. Senator, it's great to sit with you and talk to you about Bryce Harlow.

Sen. Warner: Well, my recollections go back, I guess in the period around 1960 when Vice President Nixon ran for the presidency. I was a member of the advance man team, as we called it in those days. And I had the privilege of traveling with him to probably eight to ten states. In those days, an advance man had considerable authority because it's literally a small team that traveled with him. Maybe one or two Secret Service agents, one advance man, and his lovely wife, Pat, often traveled with us. And you really get to know a man under those circumstances. I got to know the Vice president, if I say with some modesty, quite well.

And later in 1968, he invited me again to join his campaign. This time I was sort of the executive director of an organization here in Washington of some 2,000 people at one time – it was that large – to support his campaign; used to be called the Volunteers for Nixon-Agnew. Then in that context through the years, I saw Bryce Harlow and I was always, I'd like to say, maybe two or three seats back in the ranks when he was present. Although I do recall on one or two occasions he stimulated in me the earliest interest to some day run for the Congress. And here I am now in my 27th year in the Senate. And by the way, his son is a very effective individual representing a number of clients here. He has much of the quiet effectiveness that his father had.

Steve Silver: Yes. We interviewed Larry Harlow.

Sen. Warner: Good.

Steve Silver: Could you talk briefly about the initiative to help dedicate the USS Carl Vinson?

Sen. Warner: Yes; I remember it quite well. I was then Secretary of the Navy and protocol in the Department of Defense was that Secretary of the Navy used to initiate the names of ships, taking into consideration the views of lots of folks. Then they would submit them to the Secretary of Defense. And Melvin Laird was the Secretary of Defense, one of my most dear, valued friends and advisors to this day. And I kind of came up with a hair-brained idea, so to speak, and that was that at that time because of budget constraints and a lot of other factors, we could only see that we were going to have three super carriers. And we'd name one for a president and one for a sailor. And I came in to see Laird and I

said, "There are three components that make the Navy: the commander-in-chief, the president, the sailors who sail them and the Congress that authorizes and appropriates the funds. Wouldn't it be fitting to have this third carrier, and presumably the last for some time, be named for a member of Congress that had made a great contribution?" Of course, we used to refer to him affectionately as Uncle Carl Vinson. I knew him slightly because he had retired from the Congress, but I had heard about him. He was a legend. And still is to this day. He served 50 years in the House of Representatives. To the day he was elected in the 50th year, he walked in the door, put on his hat, took his cane and left the Congress. He said, "That's it; half a century, gone."

Anyway, he used to head up the naval affairs committee in the House and he was known throughout the Navy. As a matter of fact, when I was Secretary of the Navy he called me down to Midsville one time with the chief of naval operations to discipline us a little bit because of some things that he didn't feel going on right in the Vietnam War with regard to our sailors and ships.

But anyway, back to the points you make. So, I said, "Let's name it after Carl Vinson." I remember Laird called back and said, "Well, the tradition in the Navy is you don't name ships for living individuals." I said, "That's correct. But I think in this instance we should waive it." He said, "Well, I think we better go see the president." And incidentally, Nixon served as a young naval officer in World War II. He was very fond of the Navy and, like all of us who were privileged to have some service in the Navy, once a sailor, always a sailor. So, he trotted over to Nixon's office I remember.

In those days things were a lot more informal than they are today. And we were all sitting around chatting a little bit and Laird said, "This young secretary over here's got this idea." And Nixon listened to it. I don't know whether Bryce Harlow was in the room. I just can't remember now. But I remember Nixon said, "You know, that's an interesting idea. Let's float it and if it sails, it's my idea. If it sinks, it's that Secretary of the Navy over there, Warner. He'll take all the heat for coming up with that idea."

So, it floated and that's as much as I can remember. I have this picture in my front hall which I showed you when I flew down with Nixon to Midsville; we stopped in Midsville. Laird and I were on the plane and we took him a model of the USS Carl Vinson when we laid the keel.

Steve Silver: One of the things that Bryce Harlow was known well for was working across party lines and when I interviewed the Vice president, he spoke about Harlow's legislative strategy to build coalitions across party lines based on specific issues. I wanted to ask you as a prominent U.S. Senator, is that sort of a dying art today or does that still go on?

Sen. Warner: Well, it still goes on and it's a very wise way to get legislation through. As an example, I was a party to the gang of 14, as we were referred to in the press. We were 14 senators recognizing that the Senate was in gridlock on the advice and consent rule in connection with judicial nominations. We decided to get seven Democrats, seven Republicans, put them together and try and work out a strategy to forego any filibusters and to allow nominees to go through. And sure enough, the gates opened and six or seven judges went through and the last being the current Chief Justice, John Roberts. So, that was an example of building coalitions on both sides of the aisle.

You'll find colleagues, and I'm quite active in doing the same thing, when you've got kind of a tough question, you want to get a Democrat, in the case of my being Republican, to join you on the bill in the hopes that that individual can attract some support from his or her side of the aisle. So, it still goes on. It's a sound fundamental principle of working with the Congress.

But I'm reminded of a story. One time I heard this story. It went along these lines. When Nixon first got elected in 1968, he brought in a lot of people from California. And Bryce Harlow was sitting around there where all these newcomers were coming into town. Somehow they expressed a total contempt, if not disdain, for the Congress of the United States and began to speak out rather strongly about a bunch of individuals in rather derogatory terms. And this went on from time to time in meetings at the White House. And finally one day Bryce got up and said, "I want to say something." And when he spoke, people listened. He said, "It's been my experience that perhaps some of your observations about Congress are true, but I tell you one thing. Congress has an enormous amount of power under the Constitution and if you begin to push it around and kick it around, all of a sudden it can pull back and lurch out and strike you with an enormous force. And sometimes throughout history it has really undone administrations." And I've seen that. And his wisdom, in a few simple words, but he was right.

- Steve Silver:* Do you think that that is now as valued anymore – the respect for the institution? Do you think not as many people have that?
- Sen. Warner:* Well, I've been here 27 years. I don't know. That's a fairly good period of time, but I've studied a lot of history of the United States Senate and the Congress. I find a lot of times I read biographies of the old-timers around here. Not a whole lot's changed.
- You asked me what has changed, I would say in my little more than a quarter of a century here, the number of lobbyists in town has practically tripled, the cost of campaigns has not tripled, but five times what it was when I first ran. So, we could use Bryce Harlow here today. And then, I don't know. We seem to certainly, at the present time, be caught on a swirl of ethics charges on a number of members. I'm not suggesting that there's any foundation. I'm not prejudging the outcome, but we've got our hands full at the moment.
- Steve Silver:* As sort of a final thought, Senator Warner, what were some of the ways Bryce Harlow influenced your own career in public service?
- Sen. Warner:* Well, he was an amusing fellow. He had a great sense of humor. There was a Secretary of Commerce named Rogers – no, Secretary of Interior. That's right. He was Secretary of Interior, Rogers Morton. And he was about six-foot-four. He was a very wonderful man. And his brother, Thurston Morton, was a United States Senator. And he and Bryce would, at some of the dinners, put on a little dog and pony show or Mutt and Jeff show because Bryce was around five-foot-what, three?
- Steve Silver:* About five-four, I believe.
- Sen. Warner:* And here he was, six-five, and Morton would start teasing him, you know. And Bryce would shoot back, "Well, when I came to Washington first, long before you did, I was six-foot-two, too. But then here they keep shaving you off and shaving you down and this is about all that's left of me." So, he went through the grindstone in this community.
- Steve Silver:* Yeah. Well, I just wanted to thank you again, Senator Warner –
- Sen. Warner:* Well, I thank you for the opportunity and I thank him for taking a minute or two in his very distinguished career to sort of reach back and kindle some thoughts in this mind when I was a very young man many, many years ago.

Steve Silver: Thank you again, Senator.

Sen. Warner: Thank you.

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