

Joe Stewart

05:15:59;11 05:17:22;12 mmi002-1 Joe Stewart

That was Senator Byrd's office when he was in charge of it. I first met Senator, I think in 1955 casually, when he was elected to the senate. I came to Washington in '51 as a page, working in those days in the cloak room, which is where the senators take their telephone calls and you answer questions from the staff about what's pending on the floor. This was before computers, before TV, before direct broadcast on the floor. So then of course I got to know him through the years and on the floor, and also I was working and attending law school at night and so did Senator Byrd. And we both graduated in 1963, and you may or may not recall, he graduated Summa Cum Laude, I graduated a few notches down from that. But we were both night students. You know, it's very typical of him or whatever he does, he does extremely well and takes it seriously, whether it's law school or a piece of legislation.

5:17:32;27 05:18:09;01 mmi002-1 Joe Stewart

Well he was a United States senator and he was a night student. He in many cases, Ms. Byrd would pick him up right at 6:00 or 6:15. In those days she would sometimes have a snack for him. He would eat in the car down on the way to school. Of course he would attend classes, and of course he missed classes of course if something was pending on the floor, which he couldn't be out. Despite that, he still managed to rack up a very high average to graduate summa cum laude.

05:18:10;10 05:18:43;24 mmi002-1 Joe Stewart

He did not. No, he...there was a Dean, John Sherman Myers whom we were all very fond of and he subsequently endowed the law school very handsomely. You know, he told Senator Byrd how difficult it would be to do this, but no, Senator Byrd asked for no special privileges. He took all the tests, he met all the requirements, and was a very good student.

5:18:46;16 5:19:17;02 mmi002-1 Joe Stewart

Well, that was much later. After I graduated from law school I moved over to the corporations committee, worked there for about five years and after that period of time, I then went to work for Senator Byrd's office, working on project. I think for West Virginia. I did some appropriations committee work and

some legislative work, which dealt mostly with items in West Virginia that he was developing and carried through.

5:19:24;16 05:20:10;07 mmi002-1 Joe Stewart

When Senator Byrd came to the Senate, you may recall there was a very...it was an election, he and Senator Randolph ran together and I think you hear the same story, it showed the difference in campaign finance, I think the two of them probably had 35,000 dollars from the committee to run jointly. But things have changed. He made it quite clear to the then leadership that he desperately wanted to be in one of the important committees for his state. He ended up being in appropriations and services.

05:20:13;09 5:20:16;11 mmi002-1 Joe Stewart

It's very coveted and it's very rare.

05:20:38;27 05:20:52;16 mmi002-1 Joe Stewart

Well... he is, first, a very organized man. He is very persuasive. He made his very persuasive argument to then majority leader Lyndon Johnson and he obviously succeeded.

05:21:02;02 5:21:54;17 mmi002-1 Joe Stewart

Well, when he was majority leader, he was an extremely good leader. He was both majority leader and minority leader. When you are majority leader, as someone said, it's a job something like herding butterflies because you have your colleagues, assuming it's, 52- 54 and your leader. They're all elected in their own right. At the same token, you have to sort of work with them and also have to keep them to moving in a direction that is good for the country. And Senator Byrd has always done that. He was very effective if you go back and look at the accomplishments- I mean the war powers act, the budget reconciliation act that we use today. Most of that goes back to things that he implemented when he was senate majority leader.

06:00:23;07 06:00:41;29 mmi002-6 Joe Stewart-tape 6
(Does he demand long hours from his staff?)

He does not expect his staff to work long hours every night, but he does expect his staff to work hard. He, umm, rightly so, demands good work out of his staff. And if they don't provide it, I'm quite sure they would not be there very long.

06:00:45;29 06:00:55;28 mmi002-6 Stewart

They'll find they're working a wonderful boss. He recognizes merit; he recognizes a good job. And he's quick to let you know if it's right or wrong.

06:01:31;17 06:03:42;21 mmi002-6 Stewart
(stories to tell?)

Oh, I don't know if I have any favorite stories to tell about Senator Byrd, but... he is just such a unique individual and you talk about a Senator for all seasons. When I first came to the Senate, we had some so-called giants. We had the Russells, the McClellans, and the Kellers. People whom you read about, now. At this point, Senator Byrd, would be, I think...he's the only member of the Senate who knows the rules. He's the only member of the Senate, when he finds it necessary to establish a new precedent, can do that. Every other member must rely upon parliamentary systems to do that. The Senate rules are very archaic. They're difficult to master and in some respects they're boring- to just reads. But he has mastered those rules. He respects them. That's why he was such an effective majority leader.

Ummm, You know I remember, umm, umm, once when we were in late session and I was secretary for the majority. And one of my jobs was to stand in the back of the chamber and as members came in the chamber I would tell them what the issue was. And they would sometimes ask, "what is the majority leader's position on this particular issue?" and I would tell them or explain it to them. This was going on about one or two o'clock in the morning and we are getting ready to recess and go into a two-week recess. Senator Byrd came back to the back and he said, "Well, umm, Joe," he said, "now that you've got a little break here, what are you going to do on your break?" And I said, sort of flippantly, "Well, I don't know I may go to the beach and have a few beers or something." And he looked at me and he said, "What a waste. I think what I'm going to do is reread all of Shakespeare. And if I finish that, I think what I'll do is start on Gibbons' Rise and Fall again." And, umm, of course something I should have said...He's a man you just have to respect.

06:03:50;27 06:04:28;29 mmi002-6 Stewart

(He's been known for pushing members too hard.)

He did, but you've got to look...he takes any job he has seriously. Um, he does it to the best of his ability. When he was majority leader, he looked at the legislative schedule for the year and he, if the members chose not to work hard, they would have to stay late. But he did get legislation moved through this Congress. He takes the chairmanship of the Appropriations Committee the same way. I mean, if you look, he takes pride in getting thirteen appropriation bills through that committee every year and in most cases he has done that.

06:04:45;17 06:06:26;21 mmi002-6 Stewart

(Some people say he's no longer majority leader because he's not the man of the "10 sec. sound bite; that he belonged to a different era.)

You know, that's certainly not true. I was in the room when Senator Byrd made the decision not to seek reelection of majority leader. Uh, had he chose to, he could have been reelected with no problem. It was his choice. Uh, he was a respected leader. Members, whether they liked what he was doing or pressing, they always respected him. And they always knew he was extremely truthful. Um, there's one thing that the members know, that when you talk to Senator Byrd, you never get an "iffy" answer or you never get equivocation. He generally will tell you, right up front, what he believes and where he is on a particular issue. And if a member asks for his vote and he tells them he will vote for it, you do not ever need to come back and check with him a second time.

(stumbles around here) There are a couple of members, there was an issue, I think it concerned...it was a train issue..it dealt with misplaced workforce in the mining industry. And Senator Byrd wanted to put in a, uh, reeducation, retraining component of it. And there were two members who gave him their promise that they would vote for that issue. Um, and of course, they did not. And it is sort of a legend around the senate that he has a roll call that sort of on the wall behind his desk where you can see those two members circled in red. (laughs)

06:06:27;18 06:06:39;00 mmi002-6 Stewart

(We have heard that he is a man you don't want to cross)

Well, I don't know...I wouldn't put it that way. He is a man who is truthful with people himself and he expects people to be truthful with him. And that's not unreasonable.

06:06:54;21 06:07:38;02 mmi002-6 Stewart
(He's also managed to juggle all of these interests)

He has devoted, um, his life, um..to his job and I would say that, um, if there...I think that he loves what he's doing and he does it superbly well, but I think that if there were ever any regret that he would maybe have it would be that, maybe, he was not able to spend quite as much time with his family as would like to have. Umm, but, you know, as I say...he has never, ever taken anything he does lightly.

06:07:46;25 06:08:59;20 mmi002-6 Stewart
(lifelong learner)

As I told you, when he came to the senate, you know what his education background was, but he continues to prodigiously read. I mean he has mastered the rules of the senate and that is a very thick volume. He reads...many volumes of English history, world history. He's read Shakespeare, um, many times. And I mean, people will tell you that history repeats itself. There's not a truer word that's ever been spoken and, uh, if you look at Washington's farewell address, I think that he mentions, you know, fractions. Translated to today's world, it's like "don't get caught up in partisan politics." And, unfortunately, that's where we find ourselves today.

Um, so history has a lot to offer. When you look back at the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, you can see a lot of similarities that happened in modern day. So, anybody that does not pay attention to history..certainly is not well informed.

06:09:21;13 06:10:14;23 mmi002-6 Stewart
(what do you say to kids who think this success story can't happen today?)

Oh, I don't believe that. I think that it can be done today. I think that it may be more difficult, but certainly you can educate yourself. You can take you schooling seriously. You can get as much as you can in whatever school you're in. Uh, you have many junior colleges and you have community colleges, which are more accessible today than they were back then. In most states, they are very reasonably priced. To my knowledge Senator Byrd never had a scholarship, but now you have federal loan programs and scholarships. So there are many people who pursue their goals and their education and achieve it.

06:10:57;11 06:12:39;06 mmi002-6 mmi002-6 - 06:10:57;11

I would say that the biggest, I mean a mark of his character is- he takes the interest of the country, the nation and puts it above current political considerations. If you recall when the Panama Canal treaty came up, that was a very unpopular move. And Senator Byrd, before making a decision on that, he educated himself on the issue. Now, probably his state, it was very unpopular. The feeling was the French tried, the British tried, we succeeded, we built it, we keep it. Umm, that, when you look at the diplomatic history of the U.S. of how that treaty was negotiated, it was not our highest point in our diplomatic history. Um, but Senator Byrd went to Panama, he talked to the military and civilian officials, he inspected the canal all over and he came to the conclusion that it was the right decision for the time. Course, people talking about keeping the canal, well, it's ended that's all. I mean the water supply is held up by earth and dam. And if it's ever taken out, it will take five years to build up for water to run the canal again. But also, it was hindering our image worldwide and it was the right thing to do at the time. And he's proven to be right.

06:12:49;02 06:14:06;02 mmi002-6 Stewart

He is not afraid to criticize presidents when they're wrong. And he's certainly not redigent to tell them, you know, when they're right. He is truly a person who is principled and I think he's probably the most respected man in the senate.

There were times during the past 5-10 years, succeeding majority leaders, succeeded Byrd, did not know the senate rules as well as he did. And they would call Senator Byrd, "Would you come up to the floor and see if you can help us straighten out this mess?" And in many cases, where there was a tremendous party wrangling back and forth and it may be 11 o'clock at night, but I remember one night when Byrd got up and gave a 15 minute speech completely unprepared but in effect, telling these people, "you are senators. Act like it. Stop this nonsense and get back to the business of the country." And it was amazing how that was taken seriously...(mumbles this) by the members and things got back on track. (pretty passionate during story)