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An Interview with James H. Bilbray

An Oral History Conducted by Jeff van Ee

The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2007

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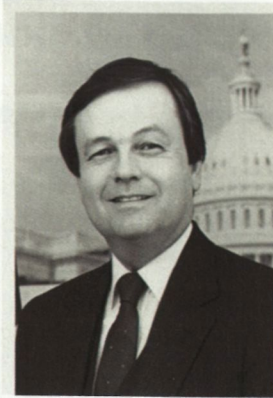
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The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project.

Claytee D. White, Project Director
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Preface

Jim Bilbray served Nevada as member of the Board of Regents of the University of Nevada, chief legal counsel in the Clark County Juvenile Court, Nevada State Senator, member of the United States House of Representatives, the United States Senate, and is currently on the Board of Governors of the US Postal Service through 2015.

Jim was born in Las Vegas on May 19, 1938. Among his most memorable accomplishments is his work for the environment. As a young boy growing up in Las Vegas, he loved the climate. His backyard at the family home on 3rd Street was at the edge of the city so his playground was the desert. These early years led to a lifelong appreciation for the Nevada outdoors.

The 1980s and 1990s were historical for Nevada and environmental efforts. The Nevada environmental triumvirate and congressional delegation composed of Jim, Harry Reid and Richard Bryan are widely known for passing significant legislation in this field. They worked closely together, in part, because of their friendship formed while growing up together in Las Vegas. This interview helps put into perspective the pivotal role played by Congressman Bilbray.

During his terms as Nevada Senator (1981 – 1987) and US Representative (1987-1995), Jim worked on a number of major public lands issues for Nevada. He helped to defuse the Sagebrush Rebellion, designate additional Forest Service wilderness, protect Red Rock as a National Conservation Area, assign the Spring Mountains as a National Recreation Area, and initiate the legislative effort to establish the Southern Nevada Public Lands Act.

Jim currently resides in Las Vegas where an elementary school is named in his honor.

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March 26, 2009
Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Jeff van Ee

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Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project



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Congressman Jim Bilbray

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Jeff Van Ee

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Date

James H. Bilbray March 26, 2009

Signature of Interviewer

Date

Jeff Van Ee 3/26/09

My name is Jeff van Ee. And I'm here in the office of Congressman Jim Bilbray, interviewing him for an oral history project for the UNLV Special Collections department. The date is March 26th, 2009.

Tell me how it all began.

All right. Well, I was born here in Las Vegas in May of 1938. My parents moved out here from New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1936. My dad came out looking for work like most people did in the 30s because it was in the Great Depression. And I went to Fifth Street School, which I thought actually was the only grade school, but there were actually two grade schools. There was one in West Las Vegas (Westside School) for the black students and one in downtown, which was at Fifth and Bridger, but now is Las Vegas Boulevard and Bridger, which is where the Foley building is. And that was where Fifth Street School sat. And I went there and then when St. Joseph's School started, which was the first Catholic school, I went to Catholic school down at St. Joseph's, and then attended Las Vegas High School.

And when I finished up Las Vegas High School at that time I enlisted in the Army Reserve and went to six months' active duty at , California, and then came back here and served seven years. I actually had a seven-year reserve obligation. Then after three years at UNLV where I was student body president we couldn't graduate. UNLV had their first graduating class, then Nevada Southern, in 1964. And I finished up my three years in 1960. I was offered a job by Senator Howard Cannon, Democratic first-year United States senator from the state of Nevada, and went back and worked partially on his staff and got my BA in government public administration from American University in January of 1962 and entered law school the next month and graduated in August of '64 from American University Law School.

Came back to Las Vegas; was appointed a deputy district attorney. Was admitted in '65 to the Nevada Bar and became a deputy district attorney where I served for three years. Then I was chief counsel for the juvenile department in '68. And then I went into private practice. I was elected to the Board of Regents of University of Nevada in 1968 [1968-1972]. Because I was an elected official, it was kind of awkward being in the DA's office.

So I started practice with Mel Close, as Close & Bilbray. And Mel was at that time elected

to the state assembly and was speaker of the assembly shortly thereafter and then was elected to the state senate. I served on the Board of Regents from '68 through '72 and ran for United States Congress in '72 and was defeated, although I defeated the incumbent, the United States Congressman Walter Baring in 1972 with the support of the environmental community. Walter Baring was head of the Public Land Subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives and was listed on the "Dirty Dozen" as one of the worst environmental people in the United States House. Was defeated in '72 you remember with the McGovern problem. Richard Nixon won every state except Massachusetts and the District of Columbia. And was defeated. But Mo Udall called me after that race was over because he was kind of my big brother in the campaign. And Mo Udall told me, he said, Jim, you know, you lost the race. But by eliminating Walter Baring -- and he would have been chairman of Interior that coming session -- he said you have done a lot for the environment of this country because Walter Baring would have been disaster to the environment of this country if he would have been reelected for his 11th term at that time. And so I was defeated.

And it was not until 1980 I ran for office again. And I was elected to the Nevada State Senate and served -- I was elected twice and served on the Public Land Subcommittee of the Nevada Senate where I traveled the state with Congressman Seiberling [John] when we looked at the proposed wilderness areas and traveled around the state, which had me in good standing when I went up to the United States Congress because I had a great background on what areas should be in the wilderness bill and what shouldn't be. And, of course, I was elected in '86 to the U.S. House. And that's when we started working on wilderness issues especially with the Sierra Club; you, Jeff [Jeff van Ee]; and with Lois Sagel and other members on those issues.

Well, I had no idea. Thank you very much for that introduction. Now, you had said earlier that when you were growing up Boulder City was larger than Las Vegas.

Yes, if you look at the map. Well, actually Las Vegas started catching up in the early 40s. But Boulder City was the town that had been built for the dam. So Boulder City was larger than Las Vegas. In fact, I asked my dad, I said, what was the population in Las Vegas? He said, well, there was about eight to 10,000. But that was the whole county. That wasn't just Las Vegas. I mean it was that small. We lived at 900 South Third Street. We were the last house in town.

What was it like growing up in that kind of city or town?

Well, it was interesting because, for instance, we still had a creek running through the town, the old Las Vegas Creek. And it ran down to what was called the Old Ranch, which was where Cashman -- actually, the Natural History Museum is down there by Cashman Field. There was a huge -- we called it a plunge. But the natural water ran down in there and people swam there because no one had their pools like you do today. Unless you were very rich you didn't have a private pool. And so we kids would go down there. And there were also stables down there. My dad kept horses. And I'd ride in the evening. And you could ride all over the area. Where the Sawyer building is down there, Cashman Field was all areas you could ride in. I mean it was just a really small town.

In fact, I was a Boy Scout in the Elks troop down there. And it was interesting because Richard Bryan and I were Boy Scouts together. And I always like to tease Richard that I was the patrol leader and he was not patrol leader even though he was about seven months older than me. And I always try to remind him of that. But then he reminds me that I got selected to go to the National Jamboree in Valley Forge. Then they found out I was three months short. By May 1st I had to be 12 and I was only 11. And I didn't turn 12 until May 19th. So Richard got to take my place. And he talks about how he went back and he had lunch with Senator McCarran. And I always hated him for it that he got to go and not me. But we were Boy Scouts together. We were in the same troop.

In fact, one of the funny stories was one time Richard and I; we had a camporee down there where right now would be where the Sawyer building is. And it was a hot, hot day. It was in May, but it was like 105 or 106. And we're doing this test where you're going around with your compass and you look around at everything. So Richard and I with our patrol -- we had about nine or ten people in the patrol -- we looked out and we went right by the Old Ranch pool. And Richard and I agreed that they would never miss us. So the whole patrol, we went into the pool and went swimming. And lo and behold as we came out of the pool, we ran into one of the Scout masters who penalized our patrol like 100 points for having taken an hour off and going into the pool. And I always try to blame it on Richard. He did it. He was the one that suggested it. He knows better. It was me.

But we had a great time because you could be kids. You could leave your door open in Las Vegas. You didn't have to worry about those sorts of things. Las Vegas High was the only high school. Basic High had been built in the 1940s when Henderson was established because when I was born Henderson wasn't there.

Really?

Yeah. Henderson was built during the war as a factory town for the supply of munitions and titanium and that sort of thing. In fact, my father was the manager of the naval section out there at Rheem that made shell casings for artillery pieces.

So the Las Vegas Valley was wide open. And for a kid growing up here the opportunities to get out and explore Southern Nevada were endless.

Well, you had Sahara. Now at that time even that street in the 50s was named San Francisco. It was changed to Sahara --

It was named San Francisco.

San Francisco Avenue. And it got changed to Sahara when the Sahara [Hotel Casino] was built. Right on the corner of what's now Maryland Parkway and Sahara there was an artesian well that you could go catch frogs and things like that. It ran all the time. And that was Artesian One. There was another artesian well probably where DI [Desert Inn Road] would come in. And there was another one out further. And we'd go out. I mean you had a lot of places to go. You didn't have to drive to get out of town to go up in the mountains. We camped out at Red Rock as a kid. And, of course, you didn't have to worry about too much pollution up at Red Rock and things like that because there was nobody there. We took a walk and looked at the old petroglyphs underneath there. And we camped out where the creek would come out at Red Rock. It was a different lifestyle. You know, it wasn't a big town. It was a small, little town. I would compare it to be like maybe Beatty. I'm kind of reminded of Beatty or maybe Tonopah.

But wasn't there a lot of pollution from the -- well, it wasn't called Henderson at the time -- but from BMI [Basic Magnesium Incorporated] at that time?

Well, you know, we didn't have the clouds. Down in L.A. you remember as a kid you could see Mount Baldy, you know, when you were in downtown L.A. And today you can't see it because of the cloud. But, you know, remember with our prevailing winds heading towards the southeast, if

there was any pollution coming out of the plants -- and what you could see of the pollution was the waste material. I remember going out, you know, hiking and you'd see -- it was beautiful -- these little creeks coming out of the plant and there were blue crystals all along the creek. And they looked beautiful. And I'm sure that they were very toxic and very bad. And you could see that out there. But, you know, no one realized.

Remember my dad was manager of the naval section at Rheem. At the end of the war they took all these trucks and they went out to a gully out there, an arroyo, in the middle of the night and they dumped all those things, thousands and thousands of barrels of materials. Their attitude was, at the time they were doing it, because there was a lot of stuff that they didn't think of as being toxic. I think they thought people would take the copper and the zinc and everything that had been used in the development of these materials and that people would resell them on the market and stuff like that. And he tried to point out to me once where they dumped it. It was more out towards where the Henderson Armory is now, the National Guard Armory at least was in the 70s. And I remember telling the mayor, Gibson [James B. Gibson], one day, I said, you know, we've got a lot of that ammonium perchlorate and everything coming down into the river. You ought to be checking out that stuff because I think there's homes built over that stuff down there. You might have another little Love Canal because my dad said a lot of it was in metal casings, you know, in barrels and stuff that have rusted out over the years because this was 1945.

But that was a different time back then. I mean Love Canal really wasn't known until the 70s. But I would venture to say at that time this was the desert. I mean you could dump anything onto the soil and it would disappear no problem.

Yeah. And I guarantee you there's still a bunch of really bad stuff out there in that area.

Well, they're in the process of cleaning it up right now.

Yeah. Mostly cleanup is on the other side of Boulder Highway,ponds.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

But I bet you -- because there are homes built over that stuff out there by that Henderson Armory. And who knows? But he said there was truck after truck after truck after truck. And they would go at night. From the plant it was kind of a curved -- because they didn't want the drivers to know where they actually dumped it because they were worried about scavengers going and digging it

up and getting to it.

Well, so you really have had a long history of interest in the environment, far greater than I even knew. I mean you said something about your position in the state legislature.

Well, when I was elected to the Senate in 1986, I served on the Natural Resources Committee and was appointed as one of the people on the Public Land Subcommittee that met in the interim when we were not in session. And as such I traveled the state with Congressman Seiberling when he came out looking at the wilderness, the Forest Service Wilderness Bill. And I traveled all through the state and looked at it, which served me in good stead. When I got to the Congress I knew all these areas and what was done and recognized that they needed to be protected.

I remember the attitude up in the rural counties, though, was they didn't want these areas declared wilderness areas because it would probably bring too many Southern Nevadans up there to visit these areas. And the attitude was that these areas belonged to Central Nevada, didn't belong to Southern Nevada. And they didn't want people from Reno and Las Vegas coming out there and camping and things like that. And it was kind of a shock to me -- well, not a shock. Having been at Nevada Southern I knew how the feeling was in the northern part of the state. But it was something that I thought was very important.

And that's why when I got to Congress I started working with Senator Reid, who was a big advocate of these things. But with Senator Hecht there and before that Senator Laxalt, there was very little chance of getting much wilderness established in this state.

Well, I first met you -- I remember it quite well. I first met you at the Howard Hughes aviation terminal where there was a big kickoff for Congressman Seiberling and you and others to go into Central Nevada to look it over. And I thought, my gosh, who is this man from the state legislature? I mean I was amazed that you were so enthusiastic and upfront at that time because as I recall that was when the Sagebrush Rebellion was pretty big in this state.

I was opposed to the Sagebrush Rebellion in the legislature. In fact, Mike O'Callahan wrote an article about that, quote, unquote, I wasn't very tall and very big, but the fact that I was tall in stature because I stood up against the Sagebrush Rebellion because I was very concerned that if the counties and the locals got control of these areas, you know, that there was no real controls of

how they would administer those areas because we'd had constant -- these rurals, they wanted to drain the water out more than they should. We talk about the great water coming down south. But at that time a lot of these farmers and ranchers up there wanted to over drain these reserves up there themselves. They wanted to increase the amount of their farmlands and things like that where the water engineer had come in and said, you know, you only have so much water in this basin. So we really had a lot of fights. And I had been involved in that.

And it was kind of I guess unusual for a Southern Nevada state senator to be involved. But I was born here and raised here and I wanted to see all the state protected as much so we could pass it onto our grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the natural areas of the state. And I guess I was kind of a natural -- I think just like Richard Bryan -- a natural environmentalist. And Harry Reid is, too. You know, we love this state and wanted to protect it.

Well, that still amazes me given the history of the state, as I understand it being one of mining and ranching. You know, what attracted me to this state was the fact that there wasn't much here. It was a big mystery to me. At the time that I came out here, which was in 1971, we had no national park. We had no wilderness areas. We had few green spots on the map.

That's right.

I remember reading back east, well, Nevada had wild horses, free range in many areas. But it's surprising to me to this day that the three of you in particular became such strong advocates for the environment given the timing of when you were here in Nevada. But I guess it's your childhood experiences, perhaps, in Las Vegas or Southern Nevada.

Yeah. And I think that Richard Bryan and Harry Reid and I grew up as kids that our parents were staunch supporters of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. We came in the 60s. I was head of the Students for Kennedy in Southern Nevada. Richard and Harry were -- you know, we were all strong Kennedy supporters. We loved John F. Kennedy. You can see it on my wall today Ted Kennedy and all of the different Kennedys. I mean we were solid supporters of the New Frontier and the New Deal. Our parents were Democrats. I think we just grew up the liberals. And then you had the generations who came in under Ronald Reagan that were conservative. And now I think the students have come back to the more liberal philosophy that we grew up in. It kind of shocked me

in the 80s and 90s to see these young people going out through high school and college that were so conservative.

I agree.

And I just thought, hey, you know, you're a young student; you're not supposed to be right-wing happy, right-wing philosophies. But you can see the difference between a John Ensign and me, for instance, what we believe in. And John and I have totally different philosophies on government.

Well, so when you were in the state legislature -- I should know this, but correct me -- Nevada had one congressional representative?

Yeah, we had one till 1990. We got our first I think it was -- yeah, it was '90 that we had to break into two. Very difficult for us because there were a lot of fights on how you divided this up. And some people wanted an east-west division where parts of Elko -- I mean Elko would be with North Las Vegas and Boulder City would be on one side and Reno and parts of Sparks would be in that district and parts of Reno and Carson City and everything would be in the district that would be Summerlin and out here. I opposed that. I supported a north-south split where you created a southern district and a northern district.

And it was really funny because -- Harry Reid is one of my closest friends, my five closest friends in the world. And Harry, to be honest with you, wanted to run for United States House of Representatives. I was able to pull enough votes out of the Senate including my friend Mel Close and others we changed. And we barely won to have a north-south split, which created a district that Harry Reid was able to win easily in the next election. I had no plans to run for the United States House of Representatives. The reason I ran for House probably in '86 was that I just actually felt I had to do something beyond just serving in the legislature. It was too difficult. But the fact was that we created the north-south district. And I did it, a lot of it, to help elect us, make sure a Southern Nevadan got into the house because I was afraid if we split it east-west that Northern Nevada would get both seats because, you know, we had fought this battle with Northern Nevada for years.

I mean when I was a regent I tried to build a med [medical] school down here because I thought here's where the patients were going to be. At that time we just had started Medicare. But

a lot of people were in the public services. And it was natural the med school would come down to Southern Nevada. But they still controlled. The north had the control of the House and the [Nevada] Assembly and of the Senate. And it was a terrible fight. And they had to get their med school in that year, the last year before reapportionment.

And the same battle on reapportionment. It was really a fight. Now you're going to have a fourth seat. That's going to be really a difficult thing to divide up because you'll have three Southern Nevada seats and one Northern Nevada seat. And that's going to be a huge battle.

It's hard for me to image a dividing line down the middle of the state, which would divide the state on an east-west basis because for years, since I've been here, it's always been that north-south split that everybody talks about. And it had to be a challenge for you as a representative in congress to represent at that time the whole state, right?

Well, you know, it made it easier. The fact is like, for instance, when I pushed my wilderness bill, of course we had to wait until [Chic] Hecht left and Richard Bryan got elected to be able to push something like that through because Hecht just put a hold on it. And in the Senate unless you have 60 votes you're not going to move it and nobody can move it. But it was easier for me to push larger wilderness bills. And Vucanovich and I really got into it. I think that's our first major fight that Barbara and I had was that Barbara really didn't want to see any wilderness bill at all and then tried to pare it down drastically. I pushed my bill out on the wilderness and Barbara Vucanovich was just ballistic, just absolutely ballistic over it. And Congressman [James] Hansen came to me. And Congressman Hansen was the ranking, I think, member from Utah, was the ranking member of the Public Land Subcommittee and the Interior Committee.

And he was a Republican?

A Republican from Utah. Hansen came to me and he said you've got to help your colleague Barbara Vucanovich. She can't live with this bill. Here's all these things that we want to take out of it. And I looked it over and I met with members -- I think you and other members of the environmental community and basically said, you know, if we start paring it down now, they'll pare it down even further. So let's go with our bill as much as we can possibly get.

And the Senate introduced a bill on the other side. And I talked to Richard and Harry. We had a policy that when we were in together every Wednesday we met at lunch and went over all

the bills from the House and the Senate, the three of us. And Richard and Harry said, Jim, you can actually get a stronger bill out of the House than we can get out of the Senate. So it was decided between the three of us that my bill would be the bill that was pushed.

Of course, that's the bill that went over. You know, I got every single Democrat except one to vote for my bill. And the only person who would not vote for it -- and he was a friend -- was Nighthorse Campbell, who was at that time a House member and a Democrat from Colorado who left the party later and later became a Republican and went to the United States Senate as a Republican. But Nighthorse was a strong supporter of Gary Hart, but he was a rancher. That was his background even though he did jewelry and stuff like that. He was part Cheyenne Indian. And Nighthorse was a friend. But I got every single Democrat and about a fourth of the Republicans voted for my wilderness bill.

But on the floor we really got into it. Actually, the interchange was between myself and Hansen because Vucanovich let him do kind of her dirty work for her. And Barbara -- I didn't realize it -- but later on in her book I mean it was obvious that she never forgave me for that wilderness bill. In fact, in her book she writes that I was the most partisan of the Democrats; that I was a Democratic activist serving in the United States House. And I don't think I'm any more of an activist -- I am an activist, but I think Harry and Dick are, too. But the fact was that she really resented it and that we pushed it through. But we got the 710,000 or whatever it was acres of land through the bill. And then when it got to the Senate we hardly got any changes. The bill was eventually signed.

Also, I got a call that she had gone to the White House because I had a friend who said, you know, Barbara was over here with the President earlier and she's trying to get him to veto your bill, your wilderness bill, and that he's looking at it, but I don't think he's going to veto it. And he didn't. But the other thing was that, you know, normally if you can see some of these bills in the back here [pointing to his office wall] that when they sign those -- one's Red Rock expansion and I think the other one is the Spring Mountain National Recreation Area. When you sign those bills, they generally have you over for a signing ceremony. I did not get an invitation. They sent me the red line. I've got it packed away somewhere and the pen. But they never invited me over. But she really pushed hard to get the wilderness bill vetoed. She just did not like it at all.

Actually, I've got five of those. I got two from Bush. It's on the postal [Jim is a member of the US Postal Service Board of Governors] because I was appointed twice, one for full term then the other time with the National Security Policy Board and then the BRAC Commission [Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission] and then the West Point Board I was on. Since I left Congress I've been on five different things that I've been appointed to in the federal government - boards and commissions.

And you're enjoying that because you're keeping busy. You're not ready for retirement.

No. No. I am 70 years old, but not yet.

Well, I want to back up a little bit and actually talk about a few things before wilderness. Your efforts in establishing wilderness for Nevada's Forest Service Lands, that's a significant accomplishment. But was there anything before that, I mean that we can think of that we can point to, significant environmental accomplishments? I know there was debate in Nevada sometime around then about transferring lands from the BLM to the Forest Service. There was that going on.

Well, the Sagebrush Rebellion was the biggest fight that I had when we were up there. If you remember that was a huge problem in the time in the 80s as they really pushed forward, you know, from the rural county legislators. And it was really interesting because --

This is when you were in the [Nevada] State Legislature?

In the State Legislature those fights came. It was the first time Southern Nevada had got the majority in both houses of the legislature. We still had the problem like even when I was back on the regents [Board of Regents, University of Nevada System] where many of the regents were UNR graduates instead of UNLV graduates or UNLV people. And the same thing in the Legislature. Many of the legislators, even though they were sitting there, a lot of them had large ties with Northern Nevada rather than Southern Nevada.

But a lot of them were from Washoe County, too, though, right? And Washoe County was not a hotbed for the Sagebrush Rebellion.

No, it was not. But there were still a lot of the Republicans that supported the rural Republican legislators. We still had Democrats from the rural counties in those days like Norm Glaser and before that "Snowy" Monroe [Warren "Snowy" Monroe]. I mean in the last 20 years almost all

the Democrats up there, the legislators -- I think Joe Deeney was one of the last rural legislators that was a Democrat.

What happened to them? I mean why did they disappear from the rural areas?

Well, it basically -- for instance, the last campaign I was co-chairman of the [John] Kerry campaign. And we sent people up to try to talk to the mining workers up there, who are union guys by the way. And they were convinced that Kerry had said something at some point that he thought mining activity should be taxed just like petroleum products, the eight percent. And they virtually told everybody in the rural counties, the miners and the activists, that if Kerry were elected president that mining would go out of business in Nevada and that Elko would become a ghost town and Ely would become a ghost town. All these areas that relied on mining were dead. In the rural areas that's happened more and more and more. I mean these guys I'd send up there to talk with them, you know, Bill Stanley from the building trades, he said they were like glassy eyed. They said, you know, we're right, we don't want a Republican president; but, on the other hand, we can't take a chance that if he did tax us at eight percent. And these gold mines would have never closed up. But the fact is these people were convinced that might happen and they could lose their jobs.

So in the Nevada legislature you were pretty much on defense with the Sagebrush Rebellion.

Absolutely. We were on defense, but we weren't because the biggest thing I found is to stop something it's easier than getting something on. And that's true in the federal congress as well. The fact that if you want to stop something -- like, for instance, the power companies tried to push these very low efficiency air conditioners and heat pumps out into the rural areas. They couldn't sell them in Clark County because the codes had changed. So they tried to put laws in that allowed them to take these highly inefficient but cheap air conditioners and heating and sell them out to the rural areas.

I had no idea.

Yeah. And I stopped it in committee and wouldn't let them push that forward. Then they tried a little trick. At the end we call what are called conference committees at the end. And they have first conference committee in the legislature and a second conference committee. First one usually doesn't do too much unless it's something very minor. And then they come in if we can't reach a

conclusion and then we go to second. The second conference committee is the one that really performs. So at the end of the legislature everybody is going crazy. The copies of the amendments and everything are coming from copy machines rather than printed bills. And I look at this one provision and they tried to slip it into another bill. I mean the power companies wanted to sell these terribly inefficient air conditioners and heaters, you know, heating pumps and stuff out to the rural counties.

Well, that's a subject close to my heart because I took on the power companies in Las Vegas for not promoting higher efficiency air-conditioning units. I had no idea that prior to me taking them on at that time they were doing something like that.

Yeah. They were pushing very hard to break all the rules. I mean these things would have run up huge bills for these people out in the rural areas, created a lot of inefficiencies. But the fact was they were cheap because they couldn't sell them down here.

Wow. So, again, at that time 86 percent of Nevada is federally owned. You're from Southern Nevada having grown up in the metropolitan area if you will. It's not like the metropolitan area we know today. And you have a love I guess for the land.

I absolutely do. If you recall one of my plans were when I was in Congress was to make the doughnut hole all around the valley. You know, we do the Red Rock. We do the Spring Mountains. And we go over to Rainbow Gardens and we put that in a protected area. And we virtually surround the valley and force the growth into the center of town and limit it. And, of course, I was defeated in '86 before I completed my plans to do that. My emphasis was not as much on a new Santini-Burton type of thing as it was to protect the environment around the valley. I mean these people wanted to build right up into Red Rock. I could envision them building homes on top of Red Rock Mountain if you would have allowed them to.

Well, I've got Red Rock on my list to explore with you in more detail later. But I'm just, again, fascinated with your position in the Nevada legislature because my perception is that you were probably outnumbered in the legislature in terms of Sagebrush Rebellion proponents.

Well, actually, you know, I don't think that's a hundred percent true because what I think is in the Sagebrush Rebellion you had some of the rural legislators. And you know what was interesting,

though, when I went out there with Seiberling and I was out there at other times meeting with the Public Land Subcommittee, a lot of rural residents would whisper in my ear that 'we're very supportive of wilderness and we're very supportive of protecting the environment out here, but we can't speak out because I have a drugstore there in Ely and if they think I'm supporting some of your proposals like Harry Reid doing the Great Basin National Park and things like that, if we tell them we're supporting, all these ranchers and these conservatives will boycott my business and they won't come in. So we're for you and we think you're doing the right thing, but we're not going to stand up in the town meeting and tell you that.' But we want to let you know, Congressman, that we support your provision -- or state senator when I was there. So you even had legislators from out in the rural counties that really were not supportive of the Sagebrush Rebellion.

And one of the funniest things is that the mining industry turned on them. When they had pushed a lot of their stuff in there, the mining industry came in -- their lobbyist -- I'm trying to remember his name now, the bald-headed guy who represented the cattlemen and the miners. I think you'd probably remember who he was. But he came in and testified against it. And I'll tell you Dean Rhodes became unglued, you know the state senator that took Norm Glaser's spot. I guess he was still in the Assembly then. But he came unglued. And then I asked him afterwards because I was pleased that they were opposed to it. But he said because if we turn these lands -- there was a bill that put some state lands -- you know, to take some BLM [Bureau of Land Management lands] from the state. He said we'd rather deal with the devil we know than the devil we don't know. And we're afraid that if the state takes over some of these lands the state will tax the proceeds from those lands where we know under the old 1874 or '76 act --

1872.

-- '72 act that we're pretty much excluded from the taxation. But the state might tax us. So all of a sudden after supporting Dean Rhodes and these guys for years when it looked like there's a possibility of something passing they made 180-degree turn and Dean Rhodes thought they had stabbed him in the back. And they had.

Well, I heard some of that, too; that when you really could talk to somebody that was promoting the Sagebrush Rebellion they would quietly tell you that they really didn't want

the federal lands. They'd be a nightmare to manage. They cost big bucks to manage. But it was sort of a power kind of thing. I guess they wanted more of a voice, maybe, in how the federal lands were being administered by federal agencies.

Well, you talk to the ranchers and they have the Taylor Grazing.¹ And if you even talked to them and said, well, what if we had it appraised and we sold you these Taylor Grazing, no, because they want to pay the low, low price. I mean but they think of it as their property. And they lease it from the federal government. And they don't like the federal control of how many head they can graze on the property. But if you even attempted to talk to them even if you weren't serious and say would you really buy the 10,000 acres you have, no way because it's too expensive. They don't want to buy it. They want to pay at that time it was two dollars or something an acre they pay for year. It was a very cheap price for them to graze. But they think of it as their property. So you did have a minority. But the very vocal minorities like the extreme right, you know, they'd set the agenda. And they set the agenda out there and terrified -- not terrified, but really people were fearful of retribution from these people if they didn't support their views.

So prior to Congressman Seiberling coming out, prior to the wilderness bill, it was pretty much the management, the ownership of the federal lands; i.e. the Sagebrush Rebellion that you were dealing with in the Nevada legislature.

Yes. And I sat on the committee and I was kind of the lone voice because it seemed like on the Natural Resources Committee it was always the rural guys that wanted to get on.

True.

And I wanted to be on there. And that's my first committee assignment when I was on there. And then that's why I served on the Natural -- and we had a representative, Karen Hayes from Clark County, because she was on it.

I remember her.

So we had some voices on it. But generally I was probably the only, quote, unquote, environmental voice on that committee. The guy from Carson City, [Alan ?] Glover was helpful.

¹ The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 (43 USC 315), signed by President Roosevelt, was intended to "stop injury to the public grazing lands [excluding Alaska] by preventing overgrazing and soil deterioration; to provide for their orderly use, improvement, and development; [and] to stabilize the livestock industry dependent upon the public range" (USDI 1988). This Act was pre-empted by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA).

But he was -- when I was chairman of the Taxation Committee, for instance, they wanted to strip out -- wanted Bryan's appointment. They wanted to put a provision in that one of his appointments on the mining committee, you know, the Mining Commission had to be a person that ran a small mine. And they were trying to get a pro-environmental guy off of there. And the mining people keep coming to me because I wouldn't bring it to the vote. And Glover would come to me and say, Jim, would you not bring it to a vote because I've told the governor -- that was Richard Bryan -- that I didn't support it. But if you force me to do a vote, I'll vote against it. But it will really hurt me badly here in Carson City in this area to vote against it and these guys will come after me next election.

So I personally held that bill and wouldn't let it be voted on the whole session because that would have changed it. And Bryan's guy would have had to fall out. And they would have put another pro-mining guy on the commission rather than have a more neutral pro-environmental guy to kind of balance it. So Richard Bryan sent me a note afterwards that talked about it because I tried to help Richard because Richard's been my friend forever. His dad and my dad were buddies. So I mean that kind of relationship. But he said your office smells because of all the bills that are rotting and hidden away in your deal. So we were able to, especially in the Natural Resources, kill some of the stuff.

I mean these people out there, you can't believe how venomous these people were when they came to the committee and threatened you. And poor Pete Morose I think his name was. Was that the guy that was the water engineer?

Pete Morose, yeah.

Oh, did they malign him and attack him because he wouldn't give them drilling permits to drill more water.

So where were your friends, the environmentalists? Did they show up at these hearings?

Yeah, you know, they did. And they would testify. But they were always drowned out by the 30 or 40 ranchers and miners that showed up. And it was almost like the pro-life and pro-choice. The environmentalists in this case were not as venomous. They were there and they would talk. We had help. I mean I could say it. But in the committees I was always the dirty guy. One time I was teasing Harry when he was running for re-election. And I said I think I'll run against you in

the primary. And he said, oh, do. He said you're the only guy that's probably disliked in the north more than me.

Well, you've mentioned your relationship with Richard Bryan and with Harry Reid.

Yeah. Landra [Harry Reid's wife] was my friend. I knew Landra before I knew Harry. She went out to Nevada Southern. And she introduced me when he was a student at College of Southern Utah. And then we went back to law school. He went to George Washington. I went to American. And we were both capitol policemen together during the time we were in law school. And Harry would come over to my house. Mikey, my wife -- we had a baby and then later had another baby. And she would fly back to Vegas to be with her parents for a while. And I had to wait until we earned enough money so we could fly her back. And she'd stay a month or two. And Harry would come over and study at my house because I worked from midnight until eight in the morning. And then I went to law school nine to one. So Harry would come and study at my house. And Harry, during that period of time, was the closest friend I ever had. And he's still one of my five closest and we were in Congress together. And we still e-mail each other about every other day. And I just e-mailed him today and I told him I thought him helping the MGM was a good idea. I don't care what people are saying. What are you supposed to do? You know, you're talking about 60,000 jobs or a hundred thousand jobs.

Well, let me ask you about another name that's been prominent in Nevada's past and that's former Governor Mike O'Callahan. Where does he fit into your life?

Not as much with me. Of course, he was Harry's guy. He taught at Basic High School. And this poor kid came from Searchlight. And Harry was dirt poor. You know that. I don't know if you read his book or not. But he was dirt, dirt poor. And Harry would hitchhike into Henderson to go to school during the week. And Mike found him a place that he could live in this room at a person's house. And Mike was really Harry's mentor.

But he was a strong advocate for Nevada's environment. He was in favor of keeping the public lands in federal ownership.

Yes. Well, he praised me on that. I told you he said, you know, I'm small of stature but strong of heart and everything because I opposed the Sagebrush Rebellion. But I was never one of Mike's close intimates. You know, Harry was, Mike Sloan, a lot of these guys were very close to Mike

O'Callahan. I think probably one of my problems was that my dad's chief of staff was former Mayor Bill Burn -- not Burn, the former mayor of Henderson, not Bill Breer, Bill Burns. And Bill Burns and Mike O'Callahan were deadly enemies because O'Callahan helped get him defeated as mayor out there. And I think that the relationship between my father and Bill Burns and everything caused a little bit. But we were friendly.

But O'Callahan was really strong. He was one of the most difficult people to deal with when you're in the legislature in the world. O'Callahan had a habit of calling you at 5:00 a.m. or 5:30 in the morning. I swore to God with Harry that he got up and called people then went back to bed. But he'd call you at 5:30 in the morning. And the phone would ring and you knew it was O'Callahan. And if you were opposing a bill he had or something or weren't supporting a bill, he would scream at you and use every four-letter word that existed on the phone.

At 5:30 in the morning. Oh.

And you're duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, the workingman, duh, duh, duh, you know, and really bad. In fact, I told Jim Gibson one day, who was the senior that was majority leader, I said, Jesus, Mike O'Callahan is just so tough on you. He just beats the hell of you, you know. And he said, you know, he tried that on me. And he said I told him, Mike, if you ever call up and scream at me again or if you ever use foul language with me on the phone I will never take another phone call from you. And he stopped. He never did it. I hadn't thought to do that to him. But Jim Gibson had done that.

And a funny story that I told Mike O'Callahan that I thought was funny. I got into Congress and an early bill that came up was the Contra-Aid Bill. And I got a call. And I decided to vote against Contra-Aid. And it was Ronald Reagan. And Ronald Reagan says to me, he says, Jim, can I call you Jim? You can call me Ronnie, you know. I said, Mr. President, you can call me Jim, but I just don't feel comfortable calling you Ronnie. Anyway, he says I need your help on this bill. I'm from California and you're from Nevada. We're like brothers, you know. I said, Mr. President, I've already committed to the speaker that I'm going to vote against it. You mean you won't help me, Jim? And I said, Mr. President, call me on something else in the future. I'm glad to talk to you on it. But I can't help you out in this. So when I finished I had said to my AA -- she said, well, how did it go? I said, God, he didn't call me a son of a bitch. He didn't curse

me out. After dealing with O'Callahan for all those years it was easy to tell him no. And I told O'Callahan. He thought it was funny.

Well, when I think of a period in Nevada's history that was really remarkable for a western state especially a small western state with the kind of background that we had it's that era -- Mike O'Callahan, Richard Bryan, Jim Bilbray, Harry Reid. And I don't know whether we'll ever know a period like that again in the future.

Well, I think that you've got to remember all three of us were close friends. I mean I could call and talk to Richard anytime, anyplace. I could talk to Harry anytime, anyplace. They could call me anytime, anyplace.

You were all Boy Scouts?

Well, Harry was from Henderson. But we've all been friends for 40 years. When Harry and Dick were up there they called them the "Gold Dust Twins" because they were so close together. But the fact is that there were rifts at times. But the fact is we're all friends. We met every Wednesday. We worked on these things. Like I said O'Callahan -- in fact, when Richard wasn't going to run against Hecht -- no one knew if he was going to run -- O'Callahan grabbed me and he said you tell Richard if he doesn't run I'm going to run. I don't know if anybody ever knew that. I don't know if O'Callahan really planned to run for senator or not against Hecht. But the fact is he said I want Hecht out of there and if he doesn't run I'm going to run. And I talked to Harry and I said, Harry, if you want to be the junior senator forever you better get -- even though he would come in for junior than Harry -- I said you better get Richard to run.

And Bonnie Bryan got mad at us. In fact, she grabbed us one day, the two of us, and said -- he was governor -- and she said would you lay off Dick? You and Harry, all you do is talk about running for the United States Senate. But we knew if we got Richard there that we could really do some remarkable things as far as the environment and helping Nevada.

Well, I still find it remarkable that given the population of Nevada at that time that there were such strong feelings for keeping Nevada -- I wouldn't say the way it was, but keeping it --

As best we could.

-- as best we could.

And I think Lake Tahoe helped that a lot even though we in Southern Nevada --

I was going to ask you about Lake Tahoe. That's certainly a big environmental issue.

Right. And it probably brought us more support from people that we didn't expect support from. In other words, it became such a huge issue to the people in Reno and Carson City and Douglas [County] that they could be Republicans and conservatives. But the one thing protecting Lake Tahoe became an issue. And by doing that it's like the scholarship funds out at the university. You know, they say a lot of the money that we've raised for academic scholarships have come from people that came out to see the basketball program. A person bought tickets for basketball games and put a scholarship up and all the sudden got involved and started donating tons of money to the academic programs because they got involved through the basketball program. I think many of the environmental community in Northern Nevada became involved because of Lake Tahoe --

I agree.

-- and then expanded it out to other areas. And now you've got a county -- Washoe County is blue. I mean it's a blue county. You got more Democrats than Republicans. If you would have told me 20 years ago that Washoe County would be a democratic county anytime in the future I would have said you've been smoking something. It's never going to happen. Washoe County is, I would say, more environmentally conscious than Clark County.

So actually when you were in the Nevada legislature upon reflection it wasn't just the Sagebrush Rebellion. I mean Lake Tahoe was there.

Lake Tahoe was a big issue. And I supported all the issues. And I supported the bond issues to buy up sensitive lands and was for anything we could do to protect Lake Tahoe. I mean there were people that really hated the TRPA [Tahoe Regional Planning Agency] up there. I mean just detested it.

Right. Right.

And I mean I remember when Nate Jacobson cut the trees down around his Hyatt he had up there. Remember Nate's Castle he had? I forget. It's a Hyatt now or something. And he went out in the middle of the night and cut down the trees in his parking lot after he was told not to. I mean people up there, you know, they became incensed at Nate Jacobson. From then on he never got

anything out of the county.

But there were people that wanted to build on different properties up there. And I tried to push -- I'd get people on the committee and I'd say -- he'd say, well, I have a 500,000-dollar lot and I can't build on it and everything. It's caused the value to drop. It's only worth 200,000 right now. And then I'd bring it up, well, what if the state buys it and offers you 500,000? You say it's only worth -- I don't want to sell it. I want to build on it. They wouldn't sell it for \$500. But we really had a lot of problems on Tahoe. And I think the legislature was very supportive. And, again, we can count on the people from Douglas and Carson City and Washoe that normally weren't with us on a lot of votes, but they were with us on issues that involved the TRPA.

So we talked about the wilderness bill as being one of the big legislative initiatives.

That was tough. That was '94 before I think we got it passed. I got it up there [on his office wall]. I don't know which one it is. No, I haven't got it up there because George Bush signed it. But that's beside the point. But the fact is we did get it passed. And I think it was a good bill. I just felt bad that we never got to the BLM wilderness bill and got that done while I was there. I think that was the next big test. But once we had too many Republicans around and Ensign got on the other side I guess there was little or no chance -- I don't think we ever got a BLM wilderness bill. Have we ever?

It's a whole different philosophy now. It's being done on a county-by-county basis -- or that's what they're trying to do rather than a statewide.

Yeah. I'm sure they do because Clark County would approve it and maybe Washoe, but you wouldn't get it on in Elko or Ely or in those places.

Well, actually one of the philosophies now is to try to throw in enough things to entice the opponents of wilderness to support it on a county-by-county basis.

Not that new bill that just went through. Did that have any effect on Nevada?

It had very little, very little.

Yeah. I was going to say I didn't see anything.

But I know as we speak, wilderness designation in Lyon County is hotly contested and they basically are saying, no, we don't want wilderness and we're not going to accept wilderness legislation on a county by county basis for this county. So it will be interesting to see where

things happen. But, you know, I've been somewhat amazed that we no longer have these state looks at wilderness or natural resources.

Yeah. I think if Richard had stayed in and I had won the state and the house I think we would have got wilderness. We would have probably had a BLM wilderness bill. But now --

But then there's the President. I mean there's the administration and you could have been in Republican --

Congress, too, yeah. We'd have never got it through till we got Congress back.

Right. Right. Right. So do you recall when the Great Basin National Park came up?

I'll tell you when it first came up. It was brought up -- Walter Baring had fought that back in the 60s and 70s. They really were against it, you know, having it created. And it really started Harry when he was in the House moving the Great Basin National Park. And up till then it was kind of a "you don't talk about it" because --

The idea for a Great Basin National Park goes that far back? Really?

And Walter Baring campaigned that he would never allow it to happen.

Huh. So who was promoting it way back when?

I think it was a combination of some environmentalists. But it was also I think a lot of the local merchants and others who thought it would be a great -- you know, the local merchants thought creating a Great Basin National Park would also bring a lot of business into Ely and that area. But like I said the ranchers opposed it because they thought they couldn't graze their cattle in the Great Basin National Park and the mining because they were afraid that it would exclude mining and their activities. And so it never had the strength to do it.

And I remember in my '72 campaign it came up constantly. It was an issue. I won everything. I won in '72 in the general election. I won Lincoln, Nye and Clark County. And I lost everything north of that. I think I took Mineral [County], too. But generally everything south of that line. But it was a big issue. When I was out in White Pine County and those places, boy, I'll tell you they were just dead -- you know, the ranchers and miners just dead set against the concept. So that concept's been around since the 60s.

And it finally got done because people up there felt that it would be a good thing. I guess the copper smelter closed in Ely and they were getting desperate for economic diversification or

economic growth. So now we have a Great Basin National Park.

Yeah. And you can credit Harry Reid with that. I mean he pushed that through. And that became a principal issue of his. And, again, he represented the southern part of the state. And it wasn't as hard on him pushing it just like me pushing wilderness. This was not something that was really tough for me because even though some of the labor unions and stuff like that -- the labor guys, you also think of them being Democrats. But many of them are hunters and occupations like that and they think if you do wilderness you're going to preclude them from going up with their four-wheel drive and shooting their elk or their deer, which is true to some extent. But there's still a hell of a lot of places they can go hunting that they don't have to take their four-wheel into Table Mountain or places like that to do it.

So for you going on Congressman Seiberling's helicopter tour of Central Nevada, were you seeing parts of Nevada that you had not seen before?

Yeah. It was amazing to many because -- you know, as a boy I had been all over. I had camped out and everything. But with that -- we flew that flying crane that was run by the National Guard. And we got into areas that we would have never got into, Table Mountain and all those different spots. Like Table Mountain when it came up I remember the (Bruscetti) boys saying don't make Table Mountain wilderness. And I said why? And he says because that's kind of a secret spot for us up here in Tonopah. We don't want everybody to know about Table Mountain because Table Mountain is almost like the sacred mountain to the people up in that part of Nevada. And it is. You've been to Table Mountain. You know how beautiful that is with the rubies in all those different areas, yeah.

But prior to this helicopter tour you actually made it into some of these areas from Southern Nevada as a Boy Scout.

Yeah. Like, for instance, even right up here, Hidden Forest behind the wildlife preserve up there. How many people have been up into Hidden Forest?

Not many.

I've been there. I was there as a student and a kid. I mean it's gorgeous. I'm glad they're protecting it. But I think it makes Charleston look sick.

Well, this sort of gives me some background. It gives me an indication of how you ended up

doing some of the things you did. I mean you had firsthand personal experiences, wonderful experiences in some of these places as a kid. And Red Rock no doubt is a place near and dear --

Red Rock is a great place to camp out, you know, Charleston, Lee Canyon, Red Rock, the other side of the mountain there, you know where the youth camp was on the other side of Red Rock on the backside. I mean all these places as a kid I camped in and went to. I just want my grandchildren to see some of the things I saw. It gets tougher and tougher.

So refresh my memory on your contribution to Red Rock. It was very significant.

Well, what it is: Harry pushed to create Red Rock. But it was very limited as you recall because you were involved with the drawing of the maps to expand it. But we also knew that if we didn't expand the developers would be right out there. Remember Del Webb. I mean they were going right up in there.

I was going to ask you about that.

And, of course, when we expanded it -- and, of course, I thought it was really funny that Del Webb comes in and shows you 10,000 more acres on the other side that should be protected instead of the property that they wanted. And we just added that to the bill when they showed it to us. What did we add 20,000 - 30,000 acres to it? I can't remember.

I don't recall.

It's one of those there. But Red Rock, you know, there was no question to me that the -- I mean they're already further up there than I wish they were into it. But at least it gave us a buffer zone that can be protected. Just like in the recreation area in Mount Charleston we had to stop somebody -- I mean there are already too many houses and too many things up there. But the fact is that at least we were able to slow down the mining and any new mines and anything like that.

Well, that was one of the things that constantly impressed me about you was how you would do these things almost without asking. I mean suddenly you would be willing to expend the political capital I guess to get out front --

I made a lot of developers really mad.

-- on some of these issues and to try to preserve a bit of the past that was being rapidly lost in a rapidly growing metropolitan area.

I just wish we could have done Rainbow Mountain. That's pretty -- but over here in Black Mountain and Anthem and those areas, we should have never let them go all the way back up into there. But you can't win them all I guess. And then, of course, once I was out there was nobody. Even Richard, to be honest with you, didn't want to at first pick up the bill for the doughnut hole and the expansion. And I had to talk him into it. And then Ensign jumped on it, too. But it never was as expansive as I wanted more protected areas, not just the sale of the land. And I didn't want it to -- I wanted the money to go to just acquisition of properties that we sold.

Well, we'll talk about the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act in a moment because you had a major impact on that. But with Red Rock you had some pretty powerful opponents to what you were trying to do. You mentioned the Del Webb Corporation. There was also a company that wanted to put a pumped hydro project up on Blue Diamond Hill. And that was a fly in the ointment I guess during the legislative process of trying to get Red Rock designated. But somehow I guess it worked out.

Well, you know, the thing I learned -- and I think every legislator learns -- is that for instance just like the mobile home park over here that the senior citizens have over here off of -- what is it? -- Jones or something, it has been worked on for 20 years trying to get this acreage. And the fact was that leadership needed my vote on something. To be honest with you I traded. I gave them the vote they wanted on an issue and they gave me that mobile home park. The same thing on Red Rock. They had key, hard, tough votes they wanted. And I told them to be honest with you that I wanted that bill to move through. And then I had Harry Reid and Richard on the other side. So I mean that helped me on the senate side get the bill through. You know, they didn't want to take the lead on it. Just like Red Rock or Spring Mountain, they didn't really want to take the lead. But if I could get it through the House, then they would pick up the ball and run with it.

And the House at that time, was that democratically controlled?

Yes. Yes. We didn't lose control of the house till I left in '94. We had 40 years of control of the house.

That's right.

And then through the Gingrich revolution we lost control of the House. But it was still -- you've got to remember that we didn't have a great working majority in '94. We had about 30 more

Democrats than Republicans or 20 some odd. But you had a lot of boll weevil types², too. And a couple of them actually went over and became Republicans after the Republicans took over. But the fact was that you couldn't count on them on environmental issues, a lot of them from the south and some of these ranching-type of Democrats from Colorado and those kinds of places. Like a Nighthorse Campbell, you couldn't count on him on these kinds of issues. So you really had to work it. First, you had Mo Udall and then you had George Miller that were good committee chairman to work with. George Miller is probably one of the toughest guys you ever want to deal with because he's as blunt as they come. Bilbray, you want that Red Rock bill, I got to have this vote. If you don't give me the vote, you'll never see it. Okay, you got it, George. He'd tell you exactly where he stood.

You know I almost lost the wilderness bill over a stupid thing. Kiki de la Garza, chairman of the ag [Agriculture] committee -- because you remember Forest Service came through ago because it's not Interior [Department of the Interior].

Right. Right. Right.

I had my bill already on the committee sitting there. I can't get it to the floor. So I try to talk to him and I try to talk him. And I can't get it out. So I called Harry and I said, Harry, I don't know what's going on. I cannot get it to the floor for vote. I mean I have the votes and I have everything, but I can't get it to the floor. And I can't get Kiki to talk to me about it. And so he called me up and he said I got it coming out for you, but Kiki's furious with you. And I said why? He said did you take your bill off National Goat Week? And I said what do you mean?

[Proclamation 5834 -- National Dairy Goat Awareness Week, 1988]

What happened to me was that one of the other congressmen, Bill Gray, had called up. And Kiki had National Goat Week. And he'd called up and they put it down as Congressman Bilbray called to support it. I got a call from the Las Vegas Review-Journal. And they said why are you supporting National Goat Week? And I said I'm not. Well, you're one of the sponsors. So I called over there and they admitted their mistake. And so I didn't know it was a big deal. I just said would you take me off as sponsorship, which means the committee chairman has to go to the floor and get up and ask your name be removed as a sponsor.

² **Boll weevils** was an American political term used in the mid- and late-20th century to describe conservative Southern Democrats.

Well, it pissed Kiki de la Garza off. And he was going to hold up and stop my wilderness bill from going through because I took my name off National Goat Week. But Harry got him to do it. And then I went up and apologized. I said I didn't realize. If you want me on as sponsor, I'll be on National Goat Week, you know.

Well, timing is very important in life. And it seems to me that in many respects you were at the right place at the right time.

Yeah. We had the majority.

Correct.

We had two democratic senators and we were able to push through the recreation area, the expansion of Red Rock and the wilderness bill.

Because for a lone congressman from a western state, I mean that's not a lot of priority or a lot of seniority. I mean there wasn't a lot of seniority involved. And, yet, that was to my way of thinking a very productive period legislatively, environmentally for Nevada.

It was. And you know the interesting thing about that was that in '94 Ensign spread the myth that what has Jim Bilbray done? And I made a mistake of really not responding to that. I thought it was so stupid because there had been different things I'd done with the VA clinic and the buildings, the VA hospital, the buildings I'd put at Nellis, all these different things that I had done all over the valley. I just thought it was so ridiculous that people knew that I had done a lot, you know. And I should have gone up with an ad that basically explained everything that I had done in my eight years in Congress. But my numbers were so strong; my polling numbers at the lowest was 17 points ahead of him and the maximum was over 20 points ahead. Well, what we didn't foresee was like a 38 percent Democrat turnout and almost 60 percent Republican turnout in '94. I had people calling my office afterwards saying, God, if I knew the congressman was in trouble, I would have voted. We had that happen all the time. People thought when the polls came out -- the Journal poll had me 17 points up -- that the race was over.

So was '94 a presidential -- no, it wasn't a presidential --

No. If it had been a presidential year, I would have won. What happened was -- remember Foley lost, Chairman Brooks of judiciary lost. I mean people that had been 30, 40 years lost their elections. It was the Gingrich revolution. I thought the contract with America was the stupidest

thing I ever saw. But it sold. It sold to them. Well, just like this -- you know, my cousin was defeated, had to fight through -- my cousin Brian [Bilbray] who is down there as a congressman in San Diego.

He's still in congress, isn't he?

Yeah. But he had to fight -- he actually lost in 2000 and then came back and won Duke Cunningham's seat.

Oh, I wasn't aware of that.

He represented Chula Vista, Imperial Beach and Coronado. Then he moved up to La Costa. And he ran for that seat when Cunningham left. But he faced the same thing. '94 was a terrible democratic -- '72, you know, back when McGovern was a terrible year-- but then they faced in 2006 -- I mean he had a tough, tough race because it was a terrible time. This last race for a Republican was a terrible time to run. I don't know what 2010 -- I hope it's going to be a good democratic year. It all depends on what happens with the economy. If the economy starts coming back I think it's going to be hard for the Republicans to take back seats.

Yeah. I agree. Well, one thing that I don't think you got enough credit was the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act. You mentioned earlier about this doughnut hole, which some people may not be familiar with. Can you maybe explain the situation in Southern Nevada with the lands?

Well, it seemed like every developer wanted to have a thousand acres or 2,000 acres or 4,000 acres of ground. And they were going further and further out into what I considered pristine areas and areas that needed to be protected. My idea was to set a boundary around the valley that you don't cross. First of all, the county government kind of liked the idea because it would infill a lot of the areas, 40-acre parcels, 20-acre parcels, force people to build. Every one of these developers wants a master planned community that they buy cheap and then they develop it and they make a ton of money. And a lot of developers did. Hughes, of course, had the land from Summerlin from back in the 40s when Howard Hughes bought the property. But you had Del Webb. You had all these other developers out in North Las Vegas, the Aliante and everything, all these areas that could be developed and would be developed. But the fact was that how far out do we go?

I mean when you look at Harvey Whittemore's plans way out there in Coyote Springs

and..., I kind of wanted to prevent and try to bring people into the urban center for not only pollution but for economically reasons because the services are there. We already got the sewer lines running there. We've got the waterlines. I was one of those that pushed in the legislature to try to force people to connect to the waterlines. You know, I had to compromise. It was one of my bills with the Water District to force people to come off of their wells and try to connect them. And, unfortunately, I had to agree that they wouldn't charge them over \$500. And it didn't make it very practical because it would cost the Water District more. But I thought eventually that we needed to connect everybody to the Water District and not have all these individual wells or nothing, not only for safety reasons because some of those private wells are never tested to make sure they're not contaminated.

But the doughnut hole was very important. And, of course, you were involved and Senator Titus [Dina]. Remember she was there working on it. And really to be honest with you it didn't have much support out of the delegation on that particular issue. And that's why I said when I was defeated in '94. I went to Richard and Harry both about picking it up. And between you and me I mean the fact was when John Ensign jumped on it at a certain point is when Richard jumped back into it. And then, of course, Brent Heberlee, who was on my staff, went over to Richard. So it was natural because Brent had worked on that issue very heavily. And it was really the solution. We really needed the infill. Now because of the economic conditions people aren't really moving out -- you know, they're not looking at the gas prices. But what happens when the economy comes back? Do we see another expansion out -- where do they go? And I think it was important to finish up the act to protect the area.

Well, you actually convened a panel, a relatively diverse panel of people to --

Yeah. We had about four of five meetings before the November election.

Yes. Yes. And then you lost to Ensign. And then as you said there was some period of time where it was uncertain if this idea of expanding the Santini-Burton legislation, basically -- whether it would go anywhere. And it did go somewhere. And now we have a bill that many people say was more successful than they could have possibly imagine. The Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act is raising hundreds of millions, if not billions.

Are they still making any money now because I don't know anything? I haven't seen any sales going on with it.

I don't think they are having major sales. I mean the revenue has definitely dropped.

Well, the prices that came in during that period of time were incredible.

Yes. Yes. That's true.

And, of course, some of them went up north to Tahoe to buy the environmentally sensitive lands. And I think that'll probably go down in history as probably one of the best deals for the local population than ever. Like I said a few things I would have wanted to put in there. I would have wanted to put in Rainbow Gardens and carve it out. Right now it's in BLM study status, right? Is that where it still sits?

Yes. And it's being chipped away. A major power line goes through it and flood detention basins are being put in there. And, of course, it's suffering from neglect as well. It's close to a major urban area. The BLM doesn't have the resources to patrol it. So litter is a problem, vandalism, all those kinds of things.

Well, that's why we expanded the recreation. And when you get more money in a recreation area and a conservation area you get more money from the federal government. And that's one of the reasons when I did Red Rock and expanded it was the fact that it would designate more money to go in there because all the people dumping their garbage out there.

So how do you feel now when you go to some of these areas, when you go out to Red Rock having seen all these changes? Having personally contributed in your career to trying to protect them, how do you feel when you visit these areas?

Let me tell you. I talked to my wife one day. We were talking about '94. And I didn't die of a single stab. I died of a lot of wounds, for instance, I voted against the assault weapon ban. You know, I voted to ban assault weapons, when I voted for the Clinton tax plan, when I voted to bring in the conservation areas because a lot of people got mad at me. Republicans didn't like the idea of expanding Red Rock. The paper came out, the Journal came out saying it wasn't needed to be done.

Well, Del Webb certainly didn't like it.

No. But the paper came out, the Journal came out and attacked me on it and said it was a bad idea.

But the fact was I said to my wife, when I look back at the votes I made and I lost votes on, I lost people voting for me -- I mean the NRA went after me viciously. But the fact was there's not a single vote that I didn't think was a right vote. And, you know, if you're defeated because you made the right votes, the fact is you look at it and say, hey, it was meant to be. But the fact was I am proud. I'm proud of my wilderness bill because what did we have, 30,000 acres or something when I passed that bill? The Red Rock expansion, I was proud of that, putting Mount Charleston and Lee Canyon into the Spring Mountain National Recreation Area. All those things I'm proud of and I can look back and say those were my bills just like Harry can be proud of the Great Basin National Park, establishing the first area, the 7,000 acres we had in the conservation area. I mean everything that Harry's done Harry can look back on and say, hey, I did these things for Nevada. And I feel the same way.

She asked me the other day did you miss being in Congress right now? And I said, no, I don't miss being there. I'm happy to be part time doing the postal work and trying to correct the post office problems. I loved serving on the BRAC Commission. I did the National Security Policy Board.

What is the BRAC Commission?

It was base closing and reassignment issue.

Oh, right. Okay.

And I served on that in 2005. I played on the West Point Board. From '96 to 2000 I was on the West Point board. I enjoyed all those things that I didn't have to spend full time on. But the fact is I look at my history of what I've done from back on Cannon's staff to being a deputy DA to being a state Senator to being a Regent, serving in the United States Congress to being on the BRAC Commission, National Security Policy Board, you know, and the Post Office Board. I got this term till 2016 I'll be on this board until then.

Wow. So why did you start down this path to begin with? I mean when you started getting involved in your school politics --

Well, remember my dad was county assessor. And he won five terms as county assessor. But also when I was in high school I worked for candidates. I walked door to door for candidates that ran for mayor and city council and put up signs. I mean I did that all my life. I was a delegate to two

National Young Democratic Conventions. And then I ran for -- you know, I was in student council at Vegas. And then I ran for student body president at Nevada Southern and won that. And then, of course, I was active in the Democratic Party when I came back here.

Public service was a calling and you wanted to make a difference.

Right. I got my degree in government and public administration. So I mean I loved history and government all my life. And the things I look at that are making society better, Jeff. I mean the fact is on the environment. I mean I love the wilderness bill. I love Red Rock. I love the Spring Mountain. Like I said I can look back and say I made a difference.

So where do you think we're at today in Nevada's environment? I mean do you think we're as progressive as we were back then? Do you think we're resting on our laurels? Do you think the economy is --

No. You know, I look at it today that if we didn't have the Southern Nevada Lands Act we wouldn't have any acquisition because the state would have not come with any money. The county didn't have the money to do it. So we've done that. On the state level I don't know where we're going in the future because the fact is unless they correct the imbalance we're in real trouble as a state. I think they will. I hope they just don't take the stimulus money and say we'll address this problem in two years now. You know, now that we've got the stimulus money we don't have to address it now.

Some of the reasons I'm asking you these closing questions is because I feel like I was part of the period that you were so active in and I think a lot of progress was made. And I look around and I mean I'm glad of everything I've done, but I just am somewhat bewildered, somewhat saddened that the political climate -- I mean things have changed a bit since --
Don't you think this President's going to move us the right way on this?

Yes, I do.

It's not going to happen overnight. It's like I mentioned I had dinner with John Kerry. And after eight years I said can we correct the problem? Not overnight; it's going to take a while. And I think that he's being resistant on some of the caps on emissions and policies like that. He may not get it on this year or next year. But I think that people are going to address global warming. I think we're going to address these problems. It's just going to take some time. And I think the

people have to. I mean I want to leave clean air to my kids. I want to leave clean water. In fact, I think right there the Clean Water Act is on the top of this Roman thing [pointing to an object in his office]. I was one of the sponsors of the Clean Water Act.

Yes. Yes.

So one of the first things, you know, I look back and I was one of the sponsors and the pushers of the Americans with Disability Act, totally separate from the environment. But I got Harry and Dick to vote for it.

Do you feel that this Nevada today is different than the Nevada that you were growing up in?

Oh, God, yes. You've got to remember when I was graduating high school there was like 25, 30,000 people here. This was a different town. Just like when you're talking about dumping all the stuff out there in Henderson, I mean could you imagine some company -- well, you could imagine somebody trying to do it today, but it wouldn't have been the federal government doing it. And that was who did it. The federal government took it all out there and dumped it. But, no, it's a different world. But I hope that -- like I said Washoe County, just the fact how green they've gone and how they developed is a great sign to me. And the thing is I just wish we were as green down here as they are up there.

You know, I look at people -- for instance, our population is so many newcomers and so many people from out of place. When I go down the street and see the trash thrown out on the street and everything and I see people throw a cup right out the window, it just appalls me that people aren't taking care of the environment here. I mean little things like I was in Albania at a school and they were training these young people in Albania to be computer technicians, seamstresses and occupations like that for the new Albania. Coming out of this dark side they were there. It was a communist regime. And they said they had to teach them. While they were eating their lunch, they threw their paper on the floor in the classroom. And they said you don't do that. Why? Because you go over to Tirana and it's all filth out in the street like if you're down someplace in Central America or something. And they said because western businesses that are going to hire you want you to have a clean office. They don't want you to throw your trash down. But why? They had to explain to them.

And I see the same sort of thing here. Why did you put graffiti on the walls? We have

them down where we come from. Why should we not put graffiti up? It doesn't hurt anything to put graffiti up. Why does it care if you throw stuff out? So you pollute and your car spews out carbon emissions. It's just like how do we reach out to these people that don't seem to care?

Well, what I'm hearing in Southern Nevada and, in fact, all over the country is that a lot of the youth are not getting out into the environment as they used to. They're behind video games and computers and I-phones and things like that.

How big are the Boy Scouts anymore? The Mormons have a good Boy Scout movement, but I'll bet you that you don't see many other Boy Scout troops.

Good question. And it was those experiences for you that made such a difference.

Remember we were pre-TV.

Yeah. Wow.

We sure didn't have video games. We went out and played basketball and football after school and threw a football back and forth.

You were pre-TV?

TV came here when I was in my sophomore year in high school. The first channel was Channel 8.

Sophomore in high school. Wow.

Yeah. We didn't have TV in Las Vegas until I was a sophomore in high school.

Wow.

It made a lot of difference.

Yes. Yes. Well, I mean for me it was the wonderful world of Disney that I watched with my family in the Chicago area on Sundays that instilled the environmental values in me then that I hold to this day. And I had a chance to pay my respects to Walt Disney to tell him that personally that it was his programming of the west, of the wide open spaces, the wildlife that I watched in my home in the Chicago suburb that convinced me that there was something different out there to explore, something wondrous. And that's one of the reasons I ended up in Nevada is because it was a black hole in the west. As I said, I remember when there were no national parks, no wilderness areas, no conservation areas and national conservation areas. And for me that was intriguing that the old west, the free range could still exist. And I'm talking in the 70s. And, of course, on your scale --

This was the 40s and early 50s. You know, we watched the test pattern is mostly what was on Channel 8, you know, the test pattern set on the screen because we only had like six, seven hours of actual television in my sophomore year.

And that's one thing that we didn't cover was the Test Site. I thought you were going to tell me that you watched on the screen the aboveground nuclear --

The big blasts you could see from my backyard. You could see the mushroom cloud. And it would rattle your house, shake it. And then actually I was a volunteer for the Red Cross when I was in high school and we went up to the top of Angel Peak and would watch the blasts go out. And then I was at Willow Creek one time. You know where Willow Creek is. And I was at Willow Creek when the blast went off one day and the whole sky -- and you could hear it.

And my sense is that those moments, those experiences were defining moments for Richard Bryan for Harry Reid and yourself and Mike O'Callahan, too.

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

I mean there was something I guess wondrous about seeing it. But there was also the feeling that this is probably dangerous stuff going on.

You know what? No one thought it was in the 50s. Remember the city seal of Las Vegas had an A-bomb on it.

Yeah. That's true.

Everybody thought it was a boon to the economy and that it was not dangerous. It was only in the 60s and 70s when we were coming up as new politicians that we began to realize how dangerous these things were. And it probably influenced us because we realized. I mean that's why Harry has been such an advocate for the "Downwinders." I mean he realized how sick people got. And he saw it more as a senator than ever before. But I think we all came up in that generation. But that man, John F. Kennedy was kind of our inspiration at the time.

And somewhere in all of this is this transformation that Nevada's not a wasteland, right?

Yeah.

I mean that's something that you had to assert when you went back to Capitol Hill.

But, yet, they still believe that; that we're a wasteland. You talk to people about the repository and basically they tell you what's a better place to put it than the middle of the Nevada desert? I mean

we're still a wasteland to 99 percent of the people out there.

So you must have felt pretty proud to showcase Red Rock and some of these areas that you were working to protect. I mean you had to educate your colleagues to try to get the votes, to try to get these bills through.

I was just glad that I got every single democratic vote except for Nighthorse. And Nighthorse apologized. But he said I was a rancher; I can't support it. But I said you'll be the only Democrat that votes no. And I even got a lot of those blue dog Democrats that never voted for a wilderness bill in their life to vote for it. But every single Democrat except.

Well, it's been almost two hours. So I'm ready to cut it off.

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