South Carolina Political Collections
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview

with

Michael Copps

University Libraries
University of South Carolina
Interviewer:

Herbert J. Hartsook

Date:

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Location:

Dr. Copps’ Office
Dept. of Commerce, Washington, D.C.

Synopsis:

The interview focuses on Dr. Michael Copps’ role on the staff of Senator Ernest F. Hollings, 1970 to 1985, as a special research assistant, executive assistant, and eventually Administrative Assistant. Copps reflects on Hollings’ work habits and character, provides astute descriptions of the inner workings of the Hollings Office, and comments on Hollings’ impact on the debate over the SALT treaties, the Carter administration’s passage of the Panama Canal treaties, and Hollings’ 1984 Presidential campaign and decision to shift from the Budget Committee to Commerce.

Transcriber:

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Citation:

Michael J. Copps Interview, South Carolina Political Collections, University Libraries, The University of South Carolina
HARTSOOK: Can you tell us a little bit about your background, where you were born, what your parents did, where you were educated?

COPPS: I was born and raised within a thirty-five mile radius of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My dad was a businessman and a good Republican. He was in the mining business in Milwaukee. He had some mining properties in the upper peninsula of Michigan, so I spent a lot of time going to and fro between those locales. My mother did not work. She was at home with the children. We moved to Florida when my dad retired at the close of the 1950s, but within a few years he found himself back in the mining business. Some friends of his had some other friends in South Carolina who had started a mining business in Pacolet, SC. They didn't know much about it so they asked him to take a look at it. When he got there they said—"Why don't you come and run it?" By that time he was ready to go back into business.

We moved to Spartanburg, SC, in late 1959 or early 1960. I went to undergraduate school at Wofford College and majored in U.S. History under the venerable Lewis P. Jones. He was an institution up there as you probably know. I had planned to be a lawyer, but it was due to Lewis Jones that I developed an intense love of history and followed his footsteps to Chapel Hill. I received a Ph.D. in American history at UNC-Chapel Hill in 1967. I'd graduated from Wofford in `63. I took my first and only job teaching at Loyola University of the South, in New Orleans. I taught there for three years, but I had always had this little bug inside, saying—"Go to Washington and do politics for a couple of years. Then go back to the real world, back to the groves of academe."

I was pursuing that and in the early spring of 1970, Senator Hollings was looking for a researcher/writer/special-assistant-type person and he happened to mention that to one of my Wofford classmates, George Dean Johnson. George Dean knew of my interests, and happened to mention my name to Senator Hollings, who shortly thereafter picked up the telephone and called me in my apartment in Metairie, LA. We had a brief discussion and he said—"Come on up and let's talk." So I did that. I came up and visited with him on St. Patrick's Day in March of 1970. He offered me the job then and there. I accepted then and there. Thus began our relationship.
which I thought would last, professionally, maybe two or three years, but ended up lasting fifteen, professionally, and then all the years since then on a personal basis.

HARTSOOK: What was your first impression of him?

COPPS: I was kind of in awe I guess. I had developed an interest in politics back in Wisconsin, as a young fellow of twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old. I was writing to all of the senators. There was just something that attracted me to politics. I had a file cabinet full of letters from probably fifty senators who were serving in the early 1950s. Just being in the presence of one was an impressive experience for me. I guess what impressed me was the range of activities that he was involved in, even as a freshman senator; the intelligence and the dedication that he brought to those issues. The two or three years, as I say, turned into fifteen.

HARTSOOK: What were your original duties in the office?

COPPS: A special assistant. At the time he was looking for some help in research and writing. Issues were coming from every direction. You remember that period back in the early 1970s. We had Vietnam, all of the unrest here at home, everything else going on, the Nixon years. So I focused primarily on that for the first year or so, just getting into some of the issues and helping him with some of his speeches. He was becoming more widely known at that period of time, a new senator, outspoken on the issues, very candid.

[Tape stops as the interview is interrupted by a phone call, then restarts]

HARTSOOK: You were talking about your first duties, doing research. Did your history background and research skills translate well for the Hill?

COPPS: I think so. It was a wonderful symbiotic relationship, although I benefited more than the senator, I'm sure. Coming from the academic background, the research skills and knowing where to go for information and things like that helped. But I had all of my academic
background and baggage with me. It was wonderful. Nixon would be on TV one night talking about Vietnam. I’d come in the next morning and the senator would ask— “What did you think about that?” So I’d tell him what I thought about that from my vaunted academic perspective and all. [He'd say—] "Well, that's interesting. Let me tell you what this really was all about.” Then we'd get the political perspective. So that was a wonderful educational experience.

I think as it went on, I began to think a little more like he did. There was some melding there. But in answer to your question, I think having some sense of history helped. But really it helped largely because he had a sense of history. He always said— “I'd like less economists around me and more historians.” I've heard him say that many times. He's an avid student of history. He likes to read history. He has an uncanny ability to remember what he reads, and assimilate those lessons. I guess that probably was a big part of the attraction - just the sense of history that the fellow had. We both shared that love of history.

HARTSOOK: I'm always intrigued with what he's reading.

COPPS: He's always reading a lot. [laughter]

HARTSOOK: It usually has some history, some economic theory. Surely that has to be very unusual for a man with those kinds of demands on his time.

COPPS: I think it is, but he reads on the airplanes. He reads wherever he's going. [He reads] during the weekends. He's always got a book, and it's always a fairly heavy and significant tome that he's looking at. But he does have a fantastic memory. He can quote stuff in literature that he learned in high school back in Charleston. He can pull those allusions out. It would be my job to go off and find the exact quote. [He would say—] “I think so-and-so said this or that.” Usually he was right on target. Sometimes it was a bit more challenging when he'd just remember the outlines of a quote. It was a pleasure to work with him on that kind of research and writing.

HARTSOOK: Dan Hollis, a history professor at USC, wrote some speeches for the senator early in his career. He told me you'd never hear your speech at the event for which it was written.
He'd make it totally his own. But you might hear some of the things that you brought up later on. What was your experience?

**COPPS:** I think there's a lot to that. I would only say that my experience was [extended over] so long [a period of time] that after a while, I think our thought processes melded and I really knew what he wanted or what we could reuse from another speech that had already been through his vetting and his mental processes. I think there's a lot to that, not only with regard to speeches, but just ideas generally. You could be sitting around there in front of his desk and say something. You wouldn't always know if he really had heard that or not. Then, maybe two weeks later, you'd be sitting in when he's talking to some leader or CEO and out would come this idea that you had mentioned a couple of weeks earlier. So Dan's recollection of that is accurate.

**HARTSOOK:** What are the duties of the Executive Assistant?

**COPPS:** When I got that title it was really kind of an add-on rather than a substitution for what I was doing. I continued doing research and writing, concentrating on some specific issues. Then added to that [was] the actual management of the office. That was an administrative position. I did that for a couple of years, I guess.

**HARTSOOK:** Was that a hard office to manage?

**COPPS:** Yes. I think it was a difficult, challenging assignment. You've got two or three state offices to coordinate with the central office. You have a diversity of management skills that are called for, including issues or policy management (which can be a full-time job in and of itself), personnel or office management. Who's going on vacation when, or what job assignment is this person's, who's going to handle this new issue? But over and above those details there is also some oversight of the media aspects of the office, although you have a press secretary. But if you're the office manager, you have to have some overview of that. [Also part of the job is] the legislative management from day to day, coordination with state offices and with other senators' committees on Capitol Hill, [and] communication with other members of the delegation on the
Senate and the House side. So, by definition, I think it's a fairly significant management challenge.

In 1970 or '74, we're talking about a fairly junior senator who doesn't have a lot of staff on committees to assist him. So we were doing a lot of the research right in our own shop. You've got the Library of Congress or the Congressional Research Service to call upon for help, but you don't have a lot of other resources to call upon for that assistance. You have a relatively small staff charged with all of these different responsibilities and functions and information gathering. So it was a daunting challenge.

HARTSOOK: I get the impression, going through the papers, that you took that role very seriously and were a very hands-on manager.

COPPS: Some would maybe say I was hands-on, others would tell you that I wasn't sufficiently hands-on. I don't know. You have to try to relate your management style to the management style of the fellow that you're working for. I suppose that was a challenge, too. Here's a senator who's going off and assimilating information from a thousand and one different places - not just from those books you were talking about, but from everybody back home, from his social or business colleagues, from his contacts in the business world. All very informal. He would be talking to people about his various conversations.

You had to make sure that you had a chain of organization and structure so that those ideas would get back to the people who needed them for implementation and follow through. That was challenging, too, because he was free-wheeling, out in so many different venues and places getting information and learning things. Just putting that into an organizational structure to translate what he wanted done into reality was a good-sized job.

HARTSOOK: How personal a role does the senator take in office affairs?

COPPS: He was always most cooperative and helpful in looking at job assignments or who was doing what, or the questions of payroll. He is not what I would call a micro-manager from the standpoint of managing a Senate office staff. I think he looked for us to do that—me in the
Washington office, Bubba [Meng] in the state, and the people on the committees. His interest is policy and the affairs of the state. That's what he likes to focus on and that's what he should be focusing on. You don't want to get him too consumed by day-to-day management of the office, and I don't think that the wanted to be too consumed by it. So you manage with that in mind, too. I had a good bit of running room, from the standpoint of day-to-day operations in the office. He was not interfering or saying—"This decision's wrong"—every hour of the day.

But I often needed him on personnel problems and things like that. He was always willing to take whatever time was required to solve the problem. Obviously, we have some highly talented and dedicated "A-type" personalities involved up there. So clashes of personality or of policy are not infrequent and sometimes call for his personal intervention. When it was [necessary,] I had no trouble getting it.

HARTSOOK: One of the things that always interests me [about] this staff is how long people have stayed on with him. Two home secretaries, a handful of administrative assistants.

COPPS: Well, there's great loyalty to him, but I think in the final analysis there's an appreciation on the part of the staff that the loyalty was reciprocated. He could become somewhat outspoken in how things were being done, if something had been mishandled. But, there was a feeling that he wasn't running outside the office to tell his colleagues or other people or the press that somebody goofed up in his office. He would always be protective of his staff. So the loyalty was a two-way street.

I think you seldom find that kind of loyalty. I think you find it more in politics than you find it in the business world. I don't think you find it as often in politics now as you found it twenty years ago in the `70s. I suppose you didn't find as much of it in the seventies as you found back in the fifties or the forties. It's a diminishing quality, but it's nice to see. I still feel a tremendous loyalty to him, and I haven't worked for him now since 1985. But there's still a tremendous feeling of loyalty.
HARTSOOK: You took over as A.A. [Administrative Assistant] in 1975. What's the role of the A.A. in the Hollings office, and was your perception of that role any different than Mike Joy's [Copps' predecessor]?

COPPS: Your question is correctly phrased—"in that office". The role of A.A. differs dramatically from office to office. In some of those offices the A.A. is primarily a policy person. In other offices he's primarily a political advisor. In still other offices he's an executive assistant—[a] day-to-day, hands-on manager type of person. It even varies in the specific office, depending upon who's the A.A. and what the interests of that particular person are. Yes, I think my involvement was somewhat different from Mike Joy's. It's regrettable you didn't have an opportunity to talk to Mike because he was almost like what Huey Long called himself—sui generis, one of a kind. Mike was, I would [say] an intuitive politician.

I often think beyond a certain point you can't learn politics. You either have a really intuitive gut feel, or you don't. Most of those fellows who serve long, like Senator Hollings, obviously have it. Relatively few people on the staff level have it. I would never claim that I had that kind of intuitive genius for instantaneous political reaction [regarding] how something's going to work. Mike had it. He was a very intuitive politician. He was a very creative young man. He was A.A. by the time he was twenty-two or -three years old. He was very tightly wound. He died very young with heart trouble. He had high blood pressure that would go through the roof.

He tended to be very good on the political implications of things and I think he was really a valuable [set of] eyes and ears when Fritz came up here in 1966 as a junior senator with a very small staff. I think Mike was a tremendous assist in getting to know people in Washington—other staff, people in the various constituencies, in the business world, the labor world, and all the other communities out there, so he was a good gatherer of information into the Hollings office. He was not terribly enamored with the day-to-day managerial responsibilities that come with managing a Senate staff. I think that was one reason why, after I was there a couple of years, they said—"Why don't you take over some of this day-to-day stuff, because we need to have a bit more structure and organization than we had with Mike." Mike made an absolutely signal contribution to the Hollings office, and to getting it established, and to helping to win friends in the community for Senator Hollings.
HARTSOOK: How do you think your perception of that role, or your work in that role differed from his?

COPPS: When I got the job I was probably somewhat more policy-oriented, or issues-oriented. I never entirely gave up having some role with regard to the research and the writing and the handling and consideration of issues. I spent more time on issues. I spent more time on day-to-day management and coordination of the staff and the various offices. Outreach, too, is obviously an important component of the job. Because there are only twenty-four hours in a day, I probably ended up doing somewhat less of that kind of outreach and schmoozing with the various constituencies than Mike did. Now, Mike still remained on the Hollings staff for some years after that so we didn't lose those skills.

HARTSOOK: What about your relationship with Bubba Meng?

COPPS: I had a good working relationship with Bubba. He had been around for a long time, having worked for Olin Johnston, and gone way back with Senator Hollings. I coordinated basic questions with him. It was during my tenure there that Senator Hollings decided that we ought to be doing casework in South Carolina, rather than doing it out of the Washington office. It was quicker to do it that way. There was a faster turn-around if you weren't putting letters and replies in the mail for two, three or four days and waiting for them to go through the Senate post office or the U.S. Postal Service. It was quicker to do it down home and also probably more cost effective. It was just better politically and substantively. We coordinated on issues like that.

We would coordinate on the schedule. I did not get much involved with trying to manage the staff down there because it was Bubba's responsibility as State Secretary. When I came we just had the Charleston, Columbia and Spartanburg offices. Then we added the Greenville office and for a while the Florence office. So he was going through some additions down there through those years, too. Bubba had some of that intuitive political feel that I was talking about [regarding] Mike Joy. He's very much a people-oriented person. He thrives on that and is very good at it. I think he made a lot of friends for Senator Hollings and kept a lot of friends. He often
had to deal with some very delicate issues, from a substantive standpoint, because some of the stands that Senator Hollings took, as you very well know, were more than a tad controversial over the years.

HARTSOOK: Can you talk about how the senator develops his legislative agenda, and whether that is a formal or informal process?

COPPS: I would say informal. Again, I would go back to this vast network that he relates to and converses with, whether it's colleagues, constituents or friends back home. When ideas came in, from many different sources, we would often vet those ideas in the office. He didn't rely on any one structure for input or for suggestions of what the Hollings agenda should be. He just put that together from all of these different sources, then we would talk about it and consider it. He was certainly the primary force in figuring out where we were going.

HARTSOOK: So, going into a Congress, would he have a list of areas...?

COPPS: More and more we started to do that in the middle and late `70s and in the `80s, trying to bring a little more organization to it. His responsibilities were growing and he had chairmanships to take care of, so the time available to him was less. We would try occasionally to get the staff away and just talk about agendas and where we were going for the next year or the next term. We did this a couple of times. I remember when we just went off to South Carolina one time, just the staff. Then, Fritz and Peatsy came in towards the end for the last day or two and heard our suggestions and comments. Then we had the basis of their input. Out of that, I think we had a better appreciation of where we were going.

HARTSOOK: Who does he turn to for counsel?

COPPS: I think there's just a variety of people. He's on good terms with many of his colleagues. If you tune on the TV when C-SPAN is on you'll seldom see him sitting in his seat alone or standing alone or standing alone while a vote is being taken on the floor of the Senate.
He always seems to be talking to somebody. Those discussions often tend to be fairly substantive, issues-oriented types of discussions. You have that. You have the leadership luncheons, the policy committee, and things like that. All of those are obviously formative influences.

Then you have your office staff and all the folks back home you see on the weekends and talk to and are getting ideas from. So it would be difficult to say—"Well, Senator Hollings talks to one, two, three, four, and that's where he gets ninety percent of his ideas or his agenda." It just doesn't work that way. Some of them may come out of that reading, and that historical perspective that we were talking about before, too.

When you stop and think about it, the agenda [has been] amazingly consistent over the years. He has been interested in national defense since he was a young man. He's been interested in trade policy and the competitive position of the United States. Through the years he's been interested in expanding educational opportunity. This isn't a fellow who goes from term to term, and says—"Okay, now it's 1974. I've just been reelected. I need a new agenda." The agenda has a lot of continuity in it over the years, going way back into the 1940s. You're talking about a fellow who has a fifty-year agenda on many of these issues. [It's] remarkably consistent.

HARTSOOK: What are your most abiding impressions of the senator?

COPPS: He's really one of a kind. You always think of the old Readers' Digest, "the most unforgettable people I've known." I've known some fairly unforgettable people, but he's way out front on that list. Just the personality, the keen intelligence. When I came up here, you'd ask—"Who are the really intelligent people around this body?" He was always mentioned right up there at the top. I guess when I came, people would say—"Jake Javits has tremendous intelligence. Herman Talmadge, in spite of his mannerisms and his drawl, has a remarkable, penetrating intelligence." I think everybody would agree that Hollings has an acute intelligence combined with a unique perspective. He comes up with things that nobody else seems to have thought of. Ideas, policies, comments. He's got this tremendous sense of humor which once in a while has created an occasional difficulty for him. So those things impress me.
The other things that impress me are the pride he takes in public service. You don't see or hear much of this. Today, if you want to be elected to office, you bash the job that you want and you denigrate the people who are in politics. He still thinks here in August of 1996 that politics is a good and honorable calling that [one] should be proud of. I think there are fewer and fewer people who think that. I admire that tremendously. He is proud to be a United States Senator. He's proud of the service. He loves it. I don't really think he's thinking about retiring. I think he just loves public service. It's stimulating to him and he sees it as a noble calling.

[Tape 1, Side 2 begins]

[Responding to Hartsook's comment on the value that Hollings places on foreign travel]

COPPS: ...I had the chance to go on one or two of the trips with him. They were very informative trips, not only from the standpoint of what I learned but just watching him. He used those trips as an opportunity to broaden his own expanses, to learn. [It's] very important, obviously, for a member of the Appropriations Committee to know what [the Departments of] State, Justice and Commerce [are doing], to know what's going on at the embassy post. When we went out there he went to the meetings, he learned, he asked the penetrating questions. He would try to develop sources of information other than just what the embassy was telling him by talking with not only other U.S. government folks out there, but members of the private sector or whoever he would run into.

I also found those trips were very good for the people that he visited. I think congressional trips really get a bad rap. I think most of them are very seriously oriented, and it's a hell of a good stimulus to the embassy when you go out there and the senators come in and they (the members of the embassy staffs) have to answer hard questions and be up on everything. I think it's valuable. One of the things I really rue, and I see it from the perspective of this job that I'm in now, is that there's not enough of that going on now.
When this new Republican congress got elected in `94, we were just on the verge of having a substantial delegation go over to Russia from the Congress on energy issues that I deal with - Russian oil and gas. [You] really need to have this kind of interchange with the members of the Duma. Well, all of a sudden there was this pull back. [They said—] "Oh, we're not going anywhere anymore." The travel just about ceased. There have been many more Duma members come over here than we've had going the other way in the last two years. You've got this Duma that really needs to have the education, the benefit of the relationship— both politically and substantively—and that's not happening. I think those kind of exchanges are absolutely essential, and I hope we can get them back on track. I think the trips that I saw him participate in were very valuable to him and to the people that he met with.

HARTSOOK: You just mentioned the sense of humor. Does the staff ever ask him to downplay or moderate a stance or a statement?

COPPS: Sure. That's what a staff is for is to raise either cautionary or green flags. I think we wouldn't be doing our job if we didn't do that. He was always a good listener. That doesn't mean that he always takes the advice that he's given. [He] probably does so with less frequency than many other people. He's not driven by his staff. I don't think anybody would ever say— "Boy, I was on his staff, and I'm the person who came up with this idea. I'm the person who managed telecommunication, or trade, or education," because they didn't. He's the person who basically managed that and made the decisions. But would we talk about, not only opportunities but an occasional peril? Sure. We would talk about that.

HARTSOOK: Can you be pretty blunt with him?

COPPS: Yes, you can be blunt with him. He can be pretty blunt with you, too. You have to be careful. He's not only a U.S. Senator, but he has this incredible personal presence which I think especially new staff people find a little bit daunting at first. I think people exercise due caution and diligence in how they say things to him. I think from the standpoint of saying that you disagree with something, that's fine. He encourages that. [He'll say—] "What's wrong with
this? Critique this." I've heard him say that before. And he might say— "Well, you're a damned fool for what you're thinking." But he always listened and considered my point of view and no staff person can expect more than that.

I don't think I would have stayed there for fifteen years if I felt I couldn't go in and disagree with the fellow or say— "Gee, I really don't think that's right, or let's do this" —if I thought he wasn't listening. I think that it would have been two or three years instead of fifteen.

**HARTSOOK:** Somebody once told me that he liked to have information come from a variety of sources, and that if he wanted something researched, he might assign it to three different people without letting any of the three know that anyone other than [he or she] was doing the research.

**COPPS:** I think there was some of that. I don't know if it was always deliberate. I think sometimes it was just somebody happened to be with him back in the state, and he'd say— "Do this." Sometimes that person wouldn't necessarily tell me or whoever happened to be A.A. that they were doing this. Other times, I think he would do that intentionally. They always say that Franklin Roosevelt, as President of the United States, was a chaotic administrator. But he also made the comment in his career that he was the only person that really knew everything that was going on in his administration, and he would do things like farm assignments out to different people. Here's a guy sitting in a wheelchair, the commander-in-chief. How does he stay on top of it and make sure that he's the boss? That was one way that Roosevelt did that.

I don't think that Hollings did it from the standpoint of ensuring he was boss, because everybody knew he was the boss. He did it from the standpoint of getting substantive input on the issues, or a different spin on the issues. Occasionally, I would be asked to do something that might be in one of the legislative assistant's domains. Occasionally he'd be asking people for input on some things I was doing.

For most of the years I was up there we did not have what I would call a foreign policy person. I had some interest in foreign policy. His main committee assignments were not foreign policy-oriented, but obviously in the 1970s lots of votes were foreign policy-oriented. So I ended up handling a lot of those issues just trying to keep abreast of them over the years. We had a lot of
opportunities for discussion, and he developed a lot of different sources of information. Obviously, he couldn't just rely on one person, who was doing foreign policy as maybe twenty, or sometimes thirty or forty percent of his job, for input on all of these detailed votes. He would be constantly reaching out to colleagues, journalists.

The Panama Canal was a good example. Another example was the SALT I and SALT II treaties. He took leadership positions on all of those issues. But he didn't do that before he'd spent enormous amounts of time in his office counseling with the experts. He usually did this from the standpoint of preparing a newsletter to the folks back home. This was always a "production" for the Hollings office. Most people in other offices would say— "What's he doing?" "He's handing out these newsletters to his colleagues." "He doesn't write these things, does he?" Well, he did write those things.

When he got into a big issue, he used it as sort of an educational experience for himself and his constituents. So when he came back from Panama he was pretty clear in his own mind that he was going to support the Canal treaties, but he wanted to test all the arguments and to talk to the experts. So he did that. On the SALT I and II treaties he wanted to be damned sure he knew what he was talking about on throw weights, missile technology, verification, and everything. He got the experts in there and would talk to them for hours. Out of that he would write a newsletter and some speeches. He usually had a pretty high level of expertise under his command when he came through one of those exercises. That was interesting to participate in.

**HARTSOOK:** I'm sure. If I could travel back in time to 1970-71, I get the sense that I'd see the very much the person I'd meet today.

**COPPS:** You really would. He was forty-eight years old when I went to work for him. Now, he's going to be seventy-five here on New Year's Day. It's remarkable how little he has changed. Mentally, the agility is still there. The dedication to public service, thinking forward and not spending undue time reminiscing, is still there. Physically, the appearance is still remarkable. He is very much the same person, although he's got an incredible twenty-six more years of experience and knowledge under that head of his than he did when I came to work for him in 1970.
HARTSOOK: What key changes did you witness in your years with Senator Hollings, particularly in terms of the legislative agenda, work load, and constituent demands and interest in legislation?

COPPS: These were years of great change in the United States government. I came in [during] the middle of the Nixon years. These were the dying years, I guess, of the imperial presidency. Beginning in the early ’70s, Congress began to react to the imperial presidency by building up its own resources. There was no longer trust of the executive branch from the standpoint of the budget numbers, or the facts and figures that we were getting, or of the policy discussions, or of the reasons we were doing things, or the intelligence information. So Congress came to the conclusion that it had to have the resources to deal with these things independently. That's why we got a Budget Act, and a tremendous proliferation of staff and of subcommittees in the House and in the Senate those years. Much more bureaucracy was created as a reaction to the imperial presidency.

Some of that was necessary. Some of it was essential. But attendant upon it came some of the ills that you always get with bureaucracy— staff assistants somewhat differently oriented than you'd had back in the free-wheeling days, probably a higher, though more narrow range of expertise. You'd see fewer of the people who were "jacks-of-all-trades" and more of the specialists. I wouldn't run that into the ground, because you still have to be kind of a "jack-of-all-trades". Nevertheless, I think there is a valid distinction between the kinds of people that served up there.

When you get all of these subcommittees and staff people, then you've got all of these people looking for more and more work and involvement for their bosses. And more and more votes. I can't give you the exact count of how many votes we went from in the ’60s to the end of the 1970s, but I imagine it was several hundred more per session. Just the necessity to vote on many more issues, the necessity to be knowledgeable of a much wider range of issues— the new environmental issues, the consumer issues, etc. All of these developed during the 1970s which hadn't been there that much before the ’60s and the ’70s.
At the same time, you had the proliferation of all of these interest groups around the country that you had to learn to deal with. Not just the business lobbies, which had always been around but [had] developed more competence in this period of time. The grass roots lobbyists—the consumer groups, environmental groups, the Ralph Nader groups—who could generate a thousand cards and letters a day on the Panama Canal or the SALT treaties, food stamps, welfare, education, etc. All of those demands came in upon your office.

There was a tremendous change for the country, politically and managerially, up on Capitol Hill. When I got up to Capitol Hill, I think we had one so-called "robo-machine" to deal with everything and turn out multiple letters. There were no computers. Hollings was probably as much responsible as anyone when he chaired the Legislative Appropriations [Sub-Committee] and tried to bring the Senate into the modern period by buying some computers and getting us oriented toward dealing with all of these new demands that were coming upon Congress.

That's probably an area of his leadership that hasn't been heralded all that much. He took that Legislative Appropriations Bill very seriously—the computerization, the modernization of Congress, the preservation of the West Wing. You're probably familiar with the big battle that raged over the West Wing of the Capitol. That's the love of history and all of that. It took a lot of time, but they were good and valuable issues. They weren't the Vietnams and things like that of the world but they were, nevertheless, very substantive and important issues.

HARTSOOK: Other Congressional staff talk about the greater interest in substantive legislation from constituents with the birth of C-SPAN. They could see a dramatic change in the questions and comments regarding bills.

COPPS: Yes. At the same time there was probably a diminution of the quality of the rhetoric in the Senate. On balance I'd say it's nice that we have C-SPAN and can tune in, but we don't have some of that old debate that we used to have in the Senate. Maybe I'm just getting old and reminiscing, but I do believe the quality of the debates and the level of rhetoric that we had back in the early `70s was much better. You had not only Fritz Hollings there, but people like Frank Church, Senator Fulbright, and all the great debaters in that period of time in the Senate. You could probably name twenty-five people in the Senate who were more than competent
debaters back in that time. They engaged one another in substantive debate, and tended to listen to one another a little bit more and put some real stock in that rhetoric. Now they talk at one another. It's more what’s going to work in the sound bite. They don't care that much about the speech. I think the quality of debate has suffered.

HARTSOOK: I get the impression Senator Hollings really enjoys pitting his intellect.....

COPPS: Oh, he does. He loves a good debate. He's built for it, with a mind that quick and the ability to put ideas into very picturesque language that people can not only remember, but [also] understand. That's a real art. If I had those skills, I would love debate, too. It's not just debate for the love of debate, but I think he sees politics as inherently an educational process. I think a lot of politicians in this day and age think that would be a very quaint and antiquated notion. [They'd probably say—] "Isn't that nice, that politics can be educational. Too bad it doesn't work that way."

I think he still believes that one of the duties of a public servant is to educate. That's why he wrote those very detailed newsletters. That's why he engages in the debate and all. I think he really believes that his obligation is to help educate. You represent your constituency, but you help educate and lead your constituency, too. That old Edmund Burke quote that he is so fond of— ‘the public servant owes you not only his industry but his judgement, too.’ I'd have to dig out the whole quotation.

HARTSOOK: Do you think when Ashley Thrift followed you that he modeled his role as A.A. on yours?

COPPS: I think much of the role is given to you because you have to manage the office. By that time the senator had some chairmanships, so you had to spend a lot of time coordinating. You had to make sure lots of things were done day in and day out. As I said before, every A.A.'s emphasis is a bit different. Mike's was more political and outreach [-oriented]. Mine was more toward the policy in [the areas of] trade, foreign policy and defense, so far as specific issues went. Ashley had much better knowledge of the legislative process, the arts and crafts of passing legislation, and a tremendous interest in education. I think he tended to put those things a little
more up front than I did. Again, it comes down to the fact that it was the senator who set the agenda. I think it makes some small level of difference [depending upon] what the emphasis of the current chief of staff is on the issues, on what papers you get through to the senator.

**HARTSOOK:** What are the characteristics essential to working successfully in the Hollings office, particularly at the level of a legislative aide?

**COPPS:** Certainly above-average intelligence to deal with Senator Hollings. The ability to turn work around very quickly. He's impatient to have the information that he wants, as quickly as he possibly can have it. He understands that by pushing extra hard, you can get a decent turn around. I suppose a lot of people think that maybe the push was too hard to get information really quickly, but when you're in that position you need information really quickly. As I explained earlier, we did not have the internal resources to develop a lot of information back in the early `70s. We had to go outside for it, and inevitably that took longer. You had to develop your own networks to get information. That's still true although he had more in the way of staff to help him when he was chairman of the committees. Now that you're back in the minority you lose some of those staff resources.

The loyalty is essential. As I said, that worked both ways, but politicians admire loyalty and I think have a right to expect loyalty. That was something that he and I looked for. [We looked for] people that would keep their differences within and fight the good fight internally, but when a decision was made, to go along with the decisions. Those are some of the traits, [along with] just trying to develop a good personal relationship with Senator Hollings, which I don't think is very difficult to do but requires some sensitivity.

**HARTSOOK:** The hunger tour and his book are still receiving a great deal of attention and his effort to focus attention on hunger and poverty seemed quite bold. You go back and read the statements made by other political leaders in South Carolina, some of them were obviously outraged at what they felt was bringing attention on a generic American problem and focusing it on South Carolina. How is that perceived by the staff?
COPPS: I got there towards the tail end of the book. When I came up to visit with him in March of 1970, the book had been through a couple of drafts. He had me take a look at them to see what I thought of them, but there was not going to be a lot of rewriting done at that particular time. I suppose that was one of the things that really attracted me to accepting that offer. I remember that I had dinner with one of my friends from graduate school at Chapel Hill when I came to Washington for the interview. He didn't know much about Senator Hollings and said—"Well, there's another old hide-bound conservative senator from the South." I was able to talk about this book and the hunger tour. He didn't know that. So it made me feel kind of good that I was going to work for somebody who had that kind of creativity and willingness to lead on a very controversial issue.

Yes, there was lots of controversy in South Carolina. I guess it was Mendel Rivers who called him "Hookworm Hollings". There were many other such "accolades" that came his way, but he really took that very seriously. That was a process that really impacted him, going around with his nun friend and others and becoming aware of that problem, deciding to do something about it, coming back here and having the willingness to work with the Hunger and the Nutrition Subcommittee and George McGovern ['s Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs] was a true profile in courage politically.

HARTSOOK: Were you active at all in '71 with the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee [chaired by Hollings]? 

COPPS: I wasn't active every day with regard to that. Mike Joy ended up spending a good bit of his energies looking at some of that, along with Nordy Hoffman. That was a formative time. One of the speeches that Senator Hollings worked hardest on was probably that short speech that he delivered at the end of the big fund raising dinner in 1972 at the Senatorial Campaign Committee. It was a damned good speech. It was very much a Hollings speech—crafted of, by, and for Ernest F. Hollings. He worked hard, and got input from a lot of sources on it. That was a very credible performance. I don't remember what the exact figures were, but '72 was obviously a difficult year for the Democratic Party in the presidential sweepstakes. But we came out much better than anybody thought we would with regard to the United States Senate
campaign. He made a lot of new friends for himself, going around the country and raising money, campaigning for his colleagues. That was an interesting and very productive exercise.

HARTSOOK: In 1973 the Congressional Quarterly noted that during the previous session Senator Hollings voted against the majority of southern Democrats on forty-eight percent of the votes that involved a split between the parties two regional blocs. It went on to describe Hollings' shift from a practice of basically conservative politics as governor to a moderate politics, not far from that practiced by many national Democrats from the northern states. Was that something that you were aware of?

COPPS: I was aware of that kind of statement being made. I was not aware of that kind of change really being too much grounded in reality. Obviously, if you're talking about a fellow who's been in politics by then for thirty-some years, your horizons broaden and your perspectives change a bit from the 1940s up to the '70s, '80s or the 1990s. What is impressive to me is not what's changed, but what has remained consistent and continuous [such as] those issues I was talking about before. Many of the solutions that he's advocated—doing something on education, more money for teachers and for schools—remain consistent. The emphasis on international trade, and demanding reciprocity from our trading partners, and if we don't get it, dealing pretty toughly and boldly with them—that has remained constant.

The budget. He was a triple-A, balance-the-budget Governor of South Carolina, and he still is [as a senator]. He's no longer ranking on that Budget Committee, but he's as deeply immersed as anybody you'll find up there, and probably more knowledgeable than any on that budget just from having worked on it for so many years. What he's advocating now is basically what he advocated back in the early 1980s, with the freezes. Had we followed what he was suggesting in 1981, '82 and '83, we wouldn't be in the budget mess we have now.

I've seldom seen a poll on anything from anybody having to do with Senator Hollings that has him other than in the forty-five to fifty-five percent range. That represents a remarkable consistency of approach. He's also a hard fellow to get at through just looking at the weights of votes or gross votes. So many of these issue are more difficult to get at. Why was a certain vote important and what did it mean? You look at so many of the voting indexes that are out there and
they're shoddily put together. They don't really tell a story. I don't think the change has been radical. I think it's been remarkably consistent.

The thought occurred to me the other day that you could probably make the case that Fritz Hollings was the first "New South" Democrat. If the Republican tide would continue in the South, you might make the case that he is the last "New South" Democrat. He encapsulates the whole historical experience. I'm a bit more optimistic about what's going to happen in the future. Hopefully there will be other "New South" Democrats coming along, but he was there long before Jimmy Carter, Rubin Askew, Bob McNair, and John West, with this rather bold new leadership for the South. It wasn't typical Southern politics. If you look at [his] record as governor, on education, civil rights, and supporting Kennedy, it was not typical of the majority of Southern Democrats. He wasn't typical as governor or in the early `70s. He's not typical now.

HARTSOOK: Your first year as A.A. was pretty remarkable. Hollings played a prominent role reacting to, if not anticipating, the energy crisis. Was that an energizing issue for the senator and his staff?

COPPS: Very much so. Yes, that was obviously a big issue in the early 1970s. He had some opportunities to preside at hearings when Senator Magnuson was out. He got very deeply immersed in that. The interest was longstanding with him....

[Begin Tape 2]

COPPS: ....necessary, but not to provide incentives where incentives were no longer necessary for production. Supporting of the independents and their exploration, but notably less supportive of the big majors who were spending a lot of their money just diversifying into a lot of non-oil and gas and non-energy related activities.

HARTSOOK: Was that a situation where you all became quick-study experts?
COPPS: Yes. I didn't so much because I was immersed in so many other things. But we had a tremendous interest in the staff and the legislative staff. We built our expertise and competence in that area, so that became a very important issue.

HARTSOOK: I think it's always interesting about Hollings [that he] never just rails against a problem. He usually identifies the problem and offers a solution. He doesn't just say it's a bad budget, he says— "It's a bad budget, and here's...."

COPPS: "Here's what I'd do about it." Right. That's been the case on issue after issue. [On] education, as I said, trade, national defense, the SALT treaties and all of those things, he always had alternative programs to suggest.

HARTSOOK: Do you recall the 1975 alternative budget? He was one of six members of an ad hoc Democratic subcommittee to prepare an alternative to the Ford budget.

COPPS: No, I really don't all that much, because it was in 1974 that we instituted the Budget Act and the Budget Committee. Maybe this predates that. Maybe it was for FY `75, earlier in `74. So I don't remember too much about that ad hoc committee. I'd have to go back and dig for that.

HARTSOOK: He, with Ted Kennedy, proposed and saw passed in the Senate an amendment to the tax-cutting Bill to repeal the percentaged depletion allowance for major oil companies. Was that a major effort?

COPPS: Oh, yes. That was a big issue [that] grew out of the hearings that we talked [about] before. I think [the] feeling [was] that the major companies had more than enough incentives, and that the incentives and breaks that they had were not going back into the production and development of new sources of energy, but were going into a lot of non-related activities that the taxpayer should not be subsidizing. That was the reason for that. He worked long and hard on
that. It was very contentious. We had lots of visitations from the oil companies, as you can imagine.

HARTSOOK: Did Jimmy Carter's election as president have any significant impact on Senator Hollings?

COPPS: It probably doomed him from becoming president in 1984 [laughter]. I guess [it was a] long-range impact, because we had our chance with a Southern politician as president of the United States, and the public didn't like it. By the time Fritz Hollings was running in 1984, I think a lot of people said— "Well, we gave our chance to this New South Democrat and it didn't work out, so now we'll go off with John Glenn (D-Ohio) or somebody else." It had that long-term effect, but it had more immediate effects than that. It may have had a less-than-positive effect on his desire to be Majority Leader. If you were electing a "New South" Democrat as President, would the more liberal wing of the Democratic Party really want a "New South" Democrat leading the Senate, too? So it probably had that effect.

More positively, it meant that we had a friendly administration back in town, so we had a friendly executive branch to rely on. [This] was helpful from the standpoint of getting information about what was going on in the government, finding out a little more about what projects were going to come South Carolina's way out of the administration. We didn't learn too much about [that] during the Republican years of Nixon and Ford. And it was formative from the standpoint of the issues that Jimmy Carter chose to emphasize, one of which was the Panama Canal. [That] very quickly got Senator Hollings involved. That was another extremely contentious issue. His election in 1976 in many ways had a significant impact on Senator Hollings.

HARTSOOK: Was his stance on the Panama Canal debated among the staff?

COPPS: Yes. We went through one of those exercises like I talked about before, meeting with lots of experts and getting a diversity of opinion on it. I think the decision was pretty much taken. We had been rather crystal clear on our opposition to giving the Panama Canal back to the Panamanians back in the early years of my service up there. Then, the senator went down on one
of these trips, and listened, learned, looked, and assessed. I received word talking to him from the airplane. He called, indicating that he wanted to take a very comprehensive look at President Carter's treaties, possibly with an eye to supporting them. [He asked me] to set some meetings up. We did that.

He got back, and in fairly quick order convinced himself that was the right thing to do, that we were just going to have chaos, confusion, and bloodshed down there if we insisted upon going down the road we were on. He was the first Southern politician, to my recollection, who came out in support of the Panama Canal treaties. His support predated both Senator Baker's and Senator Byrd's coming out in favor of the treaties, and had much to do with their coming out in favor of them. He made a signal contribution to the lobbying effort of the Carter administration to get this thing through Congress.

Speaking very candidly, when the Carter legislative team came up to see us to explain their strategy, they had none. They didn't understand the dynamics of how the place worked, how you would go about changing votes, how you would appeal to a certain senator, or who he listens to back home, etc. Hollings was a walking encyclopedia on that sort of thing, so he became very critical to the Carter lobbying team in getting this thing through the Senate.

There was a political price to pay for that at home. I remember going down to the White House one day. Just staff were invited by President Carter to talk about the Panama Canal treaties. The President got up in front of this group. Of course, Fritz Hollings was Exhibit A, because this was early in the debate and he was one of the few who had come out in favor of the treaty. So he [the President] got up there and said— "It's not a big political risk for your bosses to come out in favor of this treaty. Senator Hollings has endorsed these treaties with political impunity in South Carolina." I sort of raised my hand quietly and made the case that he [the senator] was happy to come out in support of the treaties, but to imagine that was with political impunity in South Carolina was not accurately reflective of the state of politics in South Carolina at that time. I think there would not have been a Panama Canal treaty ratification without Senator Hollings.

**HARTSOOK:** Can you talk a little bit about the SALT treaties, especially the “guns vs. butter” aspects of that debate?
COPPS: I guess you start off with the Hollings premise that the safety of the people is the first obligation of the public servant. He said that probably in the 1940s before I knew him. He said it when I worked for him, and he's probably still saying it today. He was an acknowledged expert on national defense within a very short time of arriving in Congress. [He was] generally judged to be a hawk by most people, but if you look through his record over the years, you'll see that there were some very famous weapons systems like the MX missile, and some of the anti-aircraft guns that he opposed. He was always looking for maximum "bang for the buck". I think he was acutely aware of the trade off between guns and butter. He was looking for more creative ways to address that issue than just "either-or." I think he came up with suggestions on all of these things that were, by and large, constructive.

He just felt that there was a basic inequity in the SALT treaties in the number of missiles that you were giving to the Russians. SALT I, on the big heavy missiles, [allowed the Russians] sixteen hundred and eighteen ICBMs and one thousand fifty-four for us; nuclear submarines, something like sixty-two for them and forty-four for us. He just didn't see that as equitable, or insuring our defense. He saw that as seriously jeopardizing our defense. SALT II gave the Russians more heavy missiles. Again more testing and deployment rather than limiting the number of arms. He didn't feel that the country had an accurate picture at all of what SALT II was doing. He was one of the very few senators to vote against both SALT accords.

HARTSOOK: It's interesting that you talk about him being a hawk. We've tried to get him on a couple of occasions to talk at length about his World War II experiences. I understand from David Rudd that he talks about it often in private with staff, or at least that he had talked about it at length on one or two occasions. I don't think people realize that he served in the War.

COPPS: I think that's probably right. We have in the brochures that we put out at that time, the awards and medals and all of that. But he never went out of his way, certainly like Bob Dole is doing right now, to say this is the reason [he] should be a United States Senator, or President. I have not heard him talk in great detail about that. There would be references in the course of conversations to— "When we did this in Italy..." It never came out as a whole story. It was bits
and pieces over the years. I don't recall ever sitting down and having a half-hour conversation on his wartime experiences. That's interesting that he's done more of that, if, indeed, he has. It taught him a lot about human nature, leadership, and how to deal with people. [It] probably added to that innate sense of command that I think he was born with. I think experiences like these added to it.

HARTSOOK: Can we talk a little bit about what is considered a bitter row with Senator Magnuson over the allocation of the 1981 budget? Magnuson pressed his committee to transfer $4 billion from defense to fund social programs. Hollings said—“To adopt the draft allocation constituted sheer political deception.” Do you recall anything about that?

COPPS: I don't recall all the details of that. I don't know where the quotation "bitter row" comes from.

HARTSOOK: Probably Congressional Quarterly.

COPPS: Well, I thought Hollings and Magnuson got along surprisingly well. Magnuson was obviously a very dynamic person in his early years, somewhat less [so] in his later years, but very influential as Chairman of Commerce and then Appropriations. He actually farmed out to some of the younger people the responsibilities to chair hearings. I think Hollings was one of his favorites. There was a good working relationship between the two of them. Sometimes even a little deference was called for with regard to the Chairman. They had some different priorities from time to time, and Hollings was more defense-oriented. I wouldn't say that Magnuson was oblivious to that, with Boeing and all of that. Nevertheless, I can understand that there was a serious debate over where certain funds would go and what the priorities would be, but I would not read too much into that "bitter row". I think they got along by and large pretty well. I would also say that back in 1981, $4 billion was not the greatest amount of money in the world and would not have been something that would have occasioned a bitter personal dispute. It's a lot of money but it probably counted for less then than it would now.
HARTSOOK: When did you first realize that he had national aspirations and might mount a bid for President?

COPPS: When you meet somebody that just looks and acts like he could be President, and always seemed to be one step ahead politically, I think you start thinking early on— "Maybe there's a way that events will develop that this guy will be President." When [did] he start thinking about it? I don't know, but certainly a couple of factors probably motivated it. Like I said, he was tremendously appalled by the leadership that we had [during] the Nixon years. I think he was appalled by the diminution of public service in the eyes of the citizenry.

I think he was appalled by what he saw as incompetence in the executive branch and sufficiently confident of himself that he knew that he could do just as good, if not a hell of a lot better, job than most of the people that were running. Certainly, by the time he was Chairman of the Senatorial Campaign Committee I think the idea that there was really a need in the country for a new kind of leadership— dynamic, candid, something to restore the faith of the people in their government—must have suggested itself to him. That's why I think he was optimistic about Jimmy Carter at the outset, although that was never delivered on during the Carter years. I think by then he was thinking about it. I think he really felt that he had an understanding of the issues, that he had an issues priority. He knew what issues were the ones that should be addressed, that needed to be addressed from the standpoint of the future of the country, and he felt he could do it as well or better than the others.

HARTSOOK: Unlike the criticism today of Bob Dole for not being able to explain why he wanted to be President, what he'd do, Hollings had a very clear....

COPPS: He really did. Another speech that he spent a good bit of time on was his announcement of why he was running for President of the United States. It's really excellent. It lays it all out.

HARTSOOK: And even though his campaign was unsuccessful, he did, to a degree, set the parameters of the debate.
COPPS: I think so. I think the more discerning members of the media appreciated that. It's difficult to say what went right and what went wrong. The candidate was obviously the right candidate. He had the intelligence and the personality. I don't know that those who were responsible for organizing or running the campaign ever really understood how to market the personality because it was a different personality. This was something that the media was not used to seeing. Most of that personality was very positive and could have been marketed very positively from the standpoint of the candor, the intelligence and the wit that the fellow brought to a campaign and the integrity that he brought with it. Overall, the campaign did not do a good job in marketing that.

Maybe it got bogged down too much in some of the campaign minutia, but you have to realize that it was a small campaign with not a lot of money. The money would have come later, following upon some success in the primaries. It was basically over before it could become a full-fledged campaign. Had we been better able to focus at the outset on the personality of Fritz Hollings, I think you would have had people in the press, George Will and others on the conservative side and some on the liberal side, too, who would have been willing to help spread that message. Not from the standpoint that they were for us, but just because they would have been attracted to it, had that been what we were emphasizing. They already saw it there and they wrote some articles and pieces about it. We needed to keep that going and I don't know that we did a very good job of that.

HARTSOOK: The national media certainly seemed attracted to him as a candidate. I think they respected his ideas. He did get some pretty good press.

COPPS: It played well in the state, too. I think there was a real concern at the outset. You run for President and they're going to say—"Old Fritz has got Potomac fever." Once they think you've got Potomac fever, you're dead in the water. You're never going to be elected to anything again. That did not turn out to be true at all. Maybe there was some adroit work involved, but I think there was a lot of pride in South Carolina that one of their sons was really being considered for President. One thing that helped in South Carolina was that when Hollings was portrayed in the national media, it was usually among the more moderate to conservative Democrats, rather
than liberal. So many political opponents in South Carolina over the years were trying to sell this idea of the liberal Fritz Hollings—[his stance on] food stamps, the war in Vietnam, and the Panama Canal. To some extent, some of that started to take.

I think it actually helped when they turned on the national news in 1984 and heard—"Here's Fritz Hollings, who's a hawk on defense, running for President," because they had been hearing from the Republicans downstate that he's not a hawk at all. From that standpoint, the campaign for President actually ended up helping in South Carolina. I don't think any of us would have said at the outset that we saw it as something that was going to help us in South Carolina. I think everybody thought there would be damage, but there wasn't. I must say that right after his egress from the campaign, he went back home and did a lot of traveling—touring, speaking, meeting and greeting so that everybody could see he didn't have Potomac fever. That was a big help. That's about the period when the town meeting idea came up. Fritz and Ashley Thrift hatched that idea, which was a very good, creative idea.

HARTSOOK: That finishes up my formal questions. Is there any question I should have asked you, or anything you want to add for the record?

COPPS: Well, we didn't talk about the Muskie thing you mentioned earlier.

HARTSOOK: In 1980, Senator Hollings became chairman of the Senate Budget Committee for seven months only, taking over from Ed Muskie who resigned to join Carter's cabinet as Secretary of State. At the time, some expressed grave concern as Muskie had been a very strong advocate of fiscal responsibility, and these critics viewed Hollings as a proponent of heavy military spending and reductions in funding for domestic programs. House Budget chair, Robert Giaimo (D-Conn), offered that a Hollings chairmanship might make it more difficult for the Senate and House to reconcile their budgets, but "we've all become more conservative..." Can you tell us about this?

COPPS: I don't necessarily agree with some of those premises in there. Of course, you have to realize first of all that he was Chairman of the Senate Budget Committee for a very
abbreviated period of time. I remember sitting in his office the day that Ed Muskie was tapped to be Secretary of State by President Carter. We were sitting there discussing some of the ramifications of this. The telephone rang and it was Pete Dominici calling to congratulate Senator Hollings on being selected as Chairman. Kind of flippantly, Senator Hollings said—"Well, who knows, Pete. In five of six months you may be Chairman of the Budget Committee." In five or six months Pete was Chairman of the Budget Committee because we had the Republican landslide, so there was a rather brief Chairmanship. Bob Giaimo (D-Conn) was a pretty aggressive fellow. If he offered that a Hollings chairmanship would make it more difficult, he was a pretty partisan fellow himself and very outspoken.

I think that committee was really set up under Ed Muskie and all the precedents were established under him. Muskie did an awfully good job in getting it going. Some people would maybe have liked to have seen it move faster than it did, but it was a big institutional change. [They were] stepping on the toes of the Appropriations Committee and the up-and-coming Finance Committee at that period of time, so you had to go slow. You were really walking on coals every step of the way, but I think he did a good job of instituting it. He and Henry Bellmon (R-Okla) had a good bipartisan relationship, and I think Hollings and Dominici had a good bit of that, with Hollings briefly as Chairman and then very briefly with Dominici as Chairman.

In 1981, when Reagan came in the Budget Committee was relegated off to the side. Basically, [Senate Majority Leader,] Howard Baker (R-Tenn) and the [Reagan] administration were making their decisions on what the budget was [going to be]. It became a leadership function and the Budget Committee didn't count for that much. I think had we not had that, if we'd had a Democratic Senate and Reagan as President that Hollings and Dominici would have gotten along pretty well. I think there would have been a lot more bipartisanship. Maybe we would have made some progress on that budget, but as it was it was just taken out of the hands of the Budget Committee.

That's probably one reason why Hollings was willing to give up the opportunity to be Chairman there, and to move over to Commerce. I think had he thought that he really could have had the opportunity for substantive input, and that the people in the White House were listening on that budget, that the Budget Committee counted and had some input with the leadership, then he probably would have stayed there and done that. But that opportunity was gone. So then he
went to Commerce where he thought he could have an influence and has done amazingly well. Back in the Reagan-Bush years and now under a Republican Congress [he] has done amazingly well from the standpoint of being a minority and still being able to be a major player in telecommunications, and a lot of these other things.

HARTSOOK: Given the circumstances, he's really had a remarkable 104th Congress.

COPPS: Yes. I can't think of another Democrat that really comes close in being able to be active, informative, and have a solid, substantive input to what's going on in the Congress.

HARTSOOK: He seems to be one of those people that, the tougher the environment, the better he performs.

COPPS: I think when the last landslide came, he took it much more in stride than even some of the folks who knew him and used to work for him, or even some of those who still work for him up there. They thought the worst was at hand, but I think his opinion was— "I've been through this before. I know how to be a minority, too. I don't enjoy it as much, but I know how to push the levers and get things done. I can have some fun and make some substantive headway in this situation, too, if I have to." And he's done that.

It's been a remarkable career. Again, I would just go back to the beginning and the end, the consistency and the continuity, the focus on really substantive issues that he's had through those years.

[Interview ends]