Cokie Roberts

Congressional Correspondent and
Daughter of Representatives Hale and Lindy Boggs of Louisiana

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript

May 25, 2017

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

"And so she [Lindy Boggs] was on the Banking Committee. They were marking up or writing a piece of legislation to end discrimination in lending. And the language said, 'on the basis of race, national origin, or creed'—something like that. And as she told the story, she went into the back room and wrote in, in longhand, 'or sex or marital status,' and Xeroxed it, and brought it back into the committee, and said, 'I'm sure this was just an omission on the part of my colleagues who are so distinguished.' That's how we got equal credit, ladies."

Cokie Roberts
May 25, 2017

Table of Contents

Abstract

On May 25, 2017, the Office of the House Historian participated in a live oral history event, "An Afternoon with Cokie Roberts," hosted by the Capitol Visitor Center. Much of the interview focused on Cokie Roberts' reflections of her mother Lindy Boggs whose half-century association with the House spanned her time as the spouse of Representative Hale Boggs and later as a Member of Congress for 18 years. Roberts discusses the successful partnership of her parents during Hale Boggs' 14 terms in the House. She describes the significant role Lindy Boggs played in the daily operation of her husband's congressional office as a political confidante and expert campaigner—a function that continued to grow and led to her overseeing much of the Louisiana district work when Hale Boggs won a spot in the Democratic House Leadership. Roberts also shares her thoughts on her mother's decision to run for Congress, her unique qualifications as a newly-elected Member, and how she promoted legislation to increase women's rights.

As a longtime congressional correspondent, Roberts had the opportunity to closely observe not only her mother's career, but those of other women in Congress. She discusses the evolving role of women in the institution, including the early organizational efforts which led to the formation of the Congresswomen's Caucus in 1977. Roberts also recalls her time as a journalist, changes in reporting about Congress, and the obstacles women reporters faced during the 1970s and 1980s.

Biography

Born Mary Martha Corinne Morrison Claiborne Boggs on December 27, 1943, in New Orleans, Louisiana, "Cokie" Roberts is the youngest of the three children of Thomas Hale Boggs, Sr., and Lindy Boggs. Roberts' brother, Tommy, invented her nickname when, as a child, he could not pronounce her given name, Corinne.

Cokie attended private Catholic schools—the Academy of the Sacred Heart in New Orleans and Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart in Bethesda, Maryland. In 1964, she graduated from Wellesley College with a degree in political science. She married *New York Times* correspondent Steven V. Roberts in 1966; they raised two children, Lee and Rebecca. The couple lived in New York, Los Angeles, and Europe for 11 years before returning to Washington, D.C.

Cokie Roberts came of age in the shadow of the Capitol. Her father, Hale Boggs, first won election to a term in the U.S. House in 1940 but lost re-nomination in 1942. After serving in the Naval Reserve during World War II, Boggs was re-elected to the House in 1946. He served from January 1947 until October 1972, when his plane disappeared while he was on a campaign trip to Alaska, and he was presumed dead. During his final decade in the House, Hale Boggs became a powerful member of the leadership, serving as Majority Whip (87th–91st Congresses) and Majority Leader

(92nd Congress). Lindy Boggs succeeded her husband in a special election in March 1973, shortly after his seat was declared vacant. A member of the powerful Appropriations Committee, she became an advocate for women's economic rights, serving until her retirement in January 1991.

Roberts began her radio career as a foreign correspondent for CBS in the 1970s and started covering Capitol Hill for National Public Radio (NPR) in 1978, reporting on the Panama Canal Treaty. Beginning in the early 1980s, she was assigned to Capitol Hill full-time serving as the network's congressional correspondent for more than a decade. Roberts co-anchored ABC's "This Week" with Sam Donaldson from 1996 through 2002.

A senior news analyst for NPR and a political commentator for ABC News, Roberts has won three Emmy Awards and was president of the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association from 1981 to 1982. She is the best-selling author of several books about American women's history including, *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters* (1998), *Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation* (2004), *Ladies of Liberty: The Women Who Shaped Our Nation* (2008), and *Capital Dames* (2015).

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is <u>underlined</u> in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer

to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, http://bioguide.congress.gov and the "People Search" section of the History, Art & Archives website, http://history.house.gov.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:
"Cokie Roberts Oral History Interview," Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, May 25, 2017.

Interviewer Biographies

Matt Wasniewski is the Historian of the U.S. House of Representatives, a position he has held since 2010. He has worked in the House as a historical editor and manager since 2002. Matt served as the editor-in-chief of *Women in Congress, 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006), *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008), and the *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–2012* (GPO, forthcoming 2013). He helped to create the House's first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of current and former Members, longtime staff, and support personnel. He earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from the University of Maryland, College Park, in 2004. His prior work experience includes several years as the associate historian and communications director at the U.S. Capitol Historical Society, and, in the early 1990s, as the sports editor for a northern Virginia newspaper.

Kathleen Johnson is the Manager of Oral History for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. in history from Columbia University, where she also played basketball for four years, and holds two master's degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create the House's first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of Members and staff. She co-authored two books: *Women in Congress: 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006) and *Black Americans in Congress: 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008). Before joining the Office of the Historian, she worked as a high school history teacher and social studies curriculum consultant.

— COKIE ROBERTS —

A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

PLEMMONS: {applause} Good afternoon. Welcome to the United States Capitol. We're delighted to have you here today. My name is Beth Plemmons, and I'm the CEO here at the Capitol Visitor Center, and I'd like to recognize, first of all, Karen Haas [Clerk of the House]. She's with us today. Thank you so much for being here. Today's program is a joint effort between the Office of the Clerk of the House and the CVC [Capitol Visitor Center]. And it's always a pleasure to work with you and your team.[1]

I also want to welcome back to the Capitol former Representatives Cathy [Catherine Small] Long {applause}—there she is; Dennis [Mark] Hertel; {applause} Jim Chapman; {applause} and Bob [Milton Robert] Carr. {applause} We're delighted to have you back up on the Hill. It's nice to see you today. And I also have a special welcome to the entire Blyth-Templeton school. So we're glad to have you here today. {applause}

This year we reflect on 100 years of women in Congress. We could have no more thoughtful and appropriate speaker than Cokie Roberts. An author and journalist, Cokie Roberts is a legend. She is a respected TV political analyst, winner of Emmy awards, author of books, and daughter of two Members of Congress. Cokie grew up in the shadow of the Capitol. Her father, [Thomas] Hale Boggs [Sr.], served as House Majority Leader. Later, her mother, Lindy [Corinne Claiborne] Boggs, served on the House Appropriations Committee. Cokie speaks with us today as part of the House Historian's oral history project. This wonderful program teaches us about the history of the House of Representatives through the voices of those who lived it. So please join me in

welcoming Cokie Roberts, House Historian Matt Wasniewski, and Oral Historian Kathleen Johnson. Thank you. {applause}

WASNIEWSKI: Thank you, Beth, and thanks for hosting us today. This is wonderful. It's great to see such a large audience. And, Cokie, thank you for joining us.

ROBERTS: Great to be here. Thank you.

WASNIEWSKI: Yes, we're going to make you a regular if you don't watch out. {laughter}

ROBERTS: I thought that had already happened. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: Thank you, in the audience, for coming as well. Kathleen and I are as eager as you are to get to the conversation with Cokie, to hear about her perspective on her mother's career, her perspective as a journalist on Capitol Hill for many years, and also her thoughts on the subject of women in Congress and how they changed both the House and the Senate over time.

Before we get to that—one business item. When you came in, you were handed a note card and a pencil. Kathleen and I plan to speak with Cokie for about 35 minutes, 40 minutes, asking her questions. And then we'd like to turn it over to you. So if you have a burning question that you would like to ask our interviewee, please write it on the note card—legibly. {laughter} Send it to the aisle. At about 3:25, the ushers will come through and collect the cards, and we promise we will try to get to as many questions as we possibly can. Okay?

And with that, I'm going to turn it over to my colleague and the House Oral Historian, Kathleen Johnson. And she's going to kick off the interview here with Cokie Roberts.

JOHNSON: We're almost to you, Cokie. {laughter} Our oral history program started 13 years ago, and we've conducted nearly 300 interviews. This will be our 298th. And a couple of those early interviews were with Cokie Roberts, nearly a decade ago now. For the past three years, we've been working on a special project that has been referenced: to talk to former women Members and staff and family of women Representatives. And this is in honor of the centennial of the election of the first woman Member to Congress, Jeannette Rankin. So today's interview is part of that series that we call *A Century of Women in Congress*. We're so pleased to have Cokie Roberts here today as part of that project.

ROBERTS: Well, it's wonderful to be here. I was re-reading about Jeannette Rankin as I was sitting in the Albany airport for hours today because I lead a very glamorous life. {laughter} And she was such an interesting character, of course, coming to Congress from Montana, elected in 1916, when Montana let women vote because they needed more people to become a state. And she is famous for having voted against both wars. But, of course, she was incredibly famous when she arrived in Congress as the first woman and realized what a terrible burden it was for her that everything she did would be watched. But it, among other things, had its advantages. She was asked to make speeches for a lot of money—$500 in 1917—and write articles. But she also got many marriage proposals, and that she didn't do. {laughter}

JOHNSON: So when we did those initial interviews, a decade ago now, you told us some great stories about living at the Capitol and how the Capitol was your playground when your father, Hale Boggs, was a Member. So we thought, since the theme of today is for the centennial of the election of Jeannette Rankin, we were wondering if you had any female role models, either Members or staff, when you were young at the Capitol?

ROBERTS: Well, certainly not Members, because when Mama came in 1973, she was the 16th woman in the House of Representatives. So there were 16. And in the Senate, at any given time, there were either none, one, or two. So that was the way it was for, really, all of time. In 1992 when we finally did have the "Year of the Woman," which we'd been predicting, {laughter} miserably, for years before that, more women were elected to the Senate than had served in the Senate before, in all of history.[2] So there were no women Members.

Certainly, staff was very female-heavy, and there were wonderful women working in my father's office. They were known as the "Boggs' Belles." {laughter} But some of that was, of course, there were always Louisiana parties and balls and all of that to show off their beauty. But they were very, very efficient and smart women. And so, certainly, that gave you a sense that there were people other than men who knew what was going on in government. That's certainly true. I hadn't really thought about it until you asked that, but that is the case.

WASNIEWSKI: And as the daughter of two former Members, can you describe, a little bit, that unique political partnership that your parents had? You were telling us, in the green room, stories about them coming in 1940.

ROBERTS: Well, so they—my parents met in college, at Tulane and Newcomb. Daddy was the editor of the paper, and Mama was the women's editor. But they got very involved in politics. It was the Huey [Pierce] Long successors' era. Cathy [Long] knows about that. And it was a terrible time. These people were not only corrupt, they were ready to kill you. My parents—I always joked that they were reform politicians in Louisiana, something of any oxymoron. {laughter} But they were, and they were very involved, as young people, in this whole reform movement, which succeeded in 1940 with the election of Sam Jones as governor, and then Daddy in the House of Representatives,

which was a very surprising thing. He was 26. Mama was 24. My sister and brother were brand new and one and a half. And they came up here. I think about it now, you know, that. Now you're on your parents' insurance until you're 26, right? {laughter} It was a different 26 then.

But it was pre-World War II Washington, and the rules of the city were as they were in the history books that I write, in the early 19th century, where you had to go calling on people. And so you called on—I'm making up the days—but the Supreme Court on Monday, the Cabinet on Tuesday, the Senate on Wednesday, the House on Thursday, received on Friday. You were expected to do that in a very formal fashion. Now, Mama was lucky because the first day she had to go calling, the horn honks outside and down she runs, out of the apartment, into the car, which was being driven by Lady Bird Johnson. And in the other seat was Pauline Gore. That was really indicative, though, because those women—and many others . . . I was at Mel [Melvin Robert] Laird's funeral the other day, and everybody saying to me, "You know, B [Barbara Masters Laird] and your mom were so close." And Betty Ford, also very, very close with the family.

And they ran everything. They ran their husbands' campaigns. They ran the political conventions. They ran the voter-registration drives. They were advance people on presidential trips. Along with the African-American women in Washington before home rule, they ran all the social-service agencies. So I saw them as these very powerful women, and they were certainly partners with their husbands. And that became even truer once the war broke out. The stories of Lady Bird Johnson essentially running Lyndon [Baines] Johnson's [congressional] office much, much better than he had—which he had to admit—when he went off to war for 15 minutes {laughter}, they are terrific stories. She tells them in her oral history, actually.

But so it must have been just a time where the sense of everybody being in it together was so strong. And so it was men and women together. But, of course, Mama tells in her book the story. So they were these kids in college, and then in this reform movement, but they were very much pacifists. And then they come up and start learning what's really going on in the world in a much more intelligent way, and the Lend-Lease hearings start. Daddy called Mama and said, "You've got to come. You'll never understand it if you don't come to the hearings." And that's her famous story about *Washington Through a Purple Veil*, which I recommend to you. It's her book, and that's the title. He wanted her to be part of his education as a Congressman because they were such a pair.

WASNIEWSKI: So how did those experiences—campaigning, being a congressional spouse—how did they feed into your mom's later career?

ROBERTS: Totally, because not only was she very involved in everything going on here in Washington, but she was very involved in the district. And one of the things that was true—it sounds funny now—at that point, Louisiana was a Democratic state. And so there were no Republicans. It's true. So the elections were primaries. There were huge factions inside the party, as you can imagine, particularly in the city of New Orleans. But Daddy, generally, had the backing of all the factions. But that made it so that he had to have a campaign manager who wasn't from any of the factions. So that meant Mama was his campaign manager, and she always was.

The records that I have found of her managing campaigns are quite remarkable. Now, of course, they're written on the back of laundry slips and some such, but they are so organized and so just ready to win this election. She knew the district very, very well. And then, when he went into the [House] Leadership, she really was running the district with the staff. When

his plane was lost, there was just never any question in anybody's mind that she would run for the seat and serve.[3] She was probably the best prepared freshman to show up, ever.

JOHNSON: Well, that's a perfect segue into something else that we wanted to ask you. When reflecting on her decision to run for Congress, at one point your mother said, "The only thing that almost stopped me was that I didn't know how I could do it without a wife."

ROBERTS: Well, because Lady Bird said that to her. {laughter} She called Lady Bird because she didn't want Mrs. Johnson to read it in the newspaper. And so she said, "Bird, I'm going to run for Hale's seat." And Lady Bird said, "Well, I think that's wonderful, Lindy, but how are you going to do it without a wife?" {laughter}

JOHNSON: But privately, to you or to your siblings, did she ever express any reservations or concerns about this new public role?

ROBERTS: No, but she wouldn't have. That was not her style, no. Her view was you put one foot in front of the other, and did what you had to do when you had to do it. She felt very strongly about that, and I must say it's a good way to approach life.

JOHNSON: How did she make that transition, though, from being behind-the-scenes to the public role?

ROBERTS: Well, she wasn't that much behind-the-scenes because everybody knew who she was. But the hardest transition—and my sister is the person who said this to her—"What you're going to really hate about being in Congress, Mom, is that you have to vote because there's no maybe button." {laughter} And the truth is that she had always been the person who went around sort of after

my father and smoothed over any rough edges and made everybody think that she was on their team. And as Cathy [Long], and Jim [Chapman], and Bob [Carr], and Dennis [Hertel] can tell you, she did it with such charm and "darlings" coming out of her mouth that, of course, you thought she agreed with you. But then, when she had to vote, you'd actually see how she came down, and that was hard.

But other than that, I think she really enjoyed—very much enjoyed—being in the position where she was the person making the decision. It's one thing—and I've thought a lot about this and written a lot about this—women who are not holding the title can have tremendous influence. And often, many times in our history, the most powerful woman in the country is the First Lady because she has enormous influence over the most powerful man in the country. But the fact is that having influence is different from being the principal and being in the room and being there, able to have the direct power. And she liked that. She liked being able to be the person who could use her influence actually to accomplish something herself rather than try, indirectly, through someone else.

WASNIEWSKI: I want to just follow up on an aspect of that. For many decades, a primary route for women to get to Congress was being a widow.

ROBERTS: Widowhood, yes.

WASNIEWSKI: And there were, generally, two camps: You either filled out your husband's term, and you made your service a memorial to his career and memory; or you struck out on your own. How did your mom fit into that long tradition of widows in Congress?

ROBERTS: Well, she was definitely on her own. She certainly talked about fulfilling Hale's mission and all that. But one thing that I think that anybody who

stays past just that filling-out-the-term business . . . Of course, in the House—I don't know if all the students know this—in the House of Representatives, you have to be elected. No one is appointed to the House of Representatives. So any person who is here has won an election.

But she discovered, as do most women in Congress, that not only do you represent, in her case, the Second Congressional District of Louisiana, you find yourself representing the women of America. And that's true for African Americans in Congress and Asian Americans in Congress, Hispanic Americans because people feel comfortable coming to you and telling you of their needs and what their particular problems are. That is something that women in Congress have been very, very important—in making sure that they keep an eye on, is that they do represent the other half of the human race and make sure that their voice is used to put priorities on issues that are important to women.

JOHNSON: In our project that we're doing, *A Century of Women in Congress*, a lot of the women have talked about that—something that we call surrogate representation. Was that something that your mother embraced, that particular role?

ROBERTS: Oh, yes. She liked that a lot. But it's interesting to me to see how different people do respond to it. One of my favorite stories about this, actually, was in 1981, when [President Ronald W.] Reagan had been elected, and it was just such a, sort of—it was somewhat similar to now, except for it wasn't quite as chaotic. But you had this sense of this cowboy coming in from the West and bringing in the "Reagan Revolution." And the Senate became Republican for the first time in decades. In the House, the Republicans, working with Southern Democrats, had a working majority. And it was just all kinds of change going on, all the time.

One of the people who had won in that election was Bobbi Fiedler, a very conservative Republican woman from California, who had defeated a longtime Democrat, Jim [James Charles] Corman. And so she was kind of a star among the Reaganites as someone who had carried their message into the Congress. There's a longer story about [President James Earl] Jimmy Carter's concession, but that's another story.

But, at any rate, she was appointed to the Budget Committee as a reward for this. And so the Budget Committee is meeting, and there was something that they were zeroing out about women in science. She said, "Wait a minute. Stop. Don't do that. We can't get rid of that." And they said, "What are you talking about? You're supposed to be the big fiscal hawk here." She said, "Look around the room." And still they didn't—because they don't get it. {laughter} And finally she said, "I'm the only woman in the room. And if I don't protect this program—which I have learned, since I've been here, is a very valuable program—then nobody else will." That role is, generally, embraced by women in Congress and sometimes to their surprise.

WASNIEWSKI: Having grown up on the Hill and seen how women Members were treated in the press and having your mother elected and then you, also, being a journalist, what's your perception of the changing manner in which women were treated by the media over the years?

ROBERTS: Well, I don't think it's ever been great. Start with Dolley Madison, having "unsexed" her husband because she was "overly sexed." {laughter} That was in the press. But a lot of it was either, "Oh, the little lady," or just ignoring whatever a woman was doing. Or if a woman was pushing something forward, like Martha [Wright] Griffiths getting sex included in the employment section of the civil rights bill—she and then Margaret Chase Smith in the Senate. That changed the lives of every American woman, but

the response to something like that, of course, was that "shrill, aggressive"—all of those words that are considered negative words about women. I think now it's a much more normal coverage, that women are not—by and large, that is not true of women running for President and Vice President. But for women serving in Congress, I think they're treated much more normally than it used to be.

Look, there are still questions. You know, "Who's going to take care of the children?" Now, this particular one drives me up a wall. So there has never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever been a man running for Congress who's been asked who's going to take care of the children. And most of them are, in fact, dads. So it is something that is commonly still asked of women. Pat [Patricia Scott] Schroeder—who was really the first person who came with little-bitty children—and she had this answer that she thought would work. {laughter} Which was that she would say, when she was running, "The children? Oh, the children. The children are fine. Jim and I give them a very healthy breakfast, and then we put them in the freezer, {laughter} and we go to work, and then we get home and defrost them. And they're very happy, and we have a lovely dinner together." She thought she could tease people out of these questions, but no.

JOHNSON: We also wanted to ask you some questions about your own experience as a journalist, a congressional correspondent. Did you face any particular obstacles because of your gender?

ROBERTS: Well, probably, but the truth is you walk around the Capitol with a microphone, and you end up using it as a weapon—"Down, boy!"—because it is something appealing to many Members of Congress. {laughter} I actually felt that the thing that mattered was not, sort of, what came before your name—Ms., Mrs., all of that, Miss—but what came after—ABC, NPR. And

you could really be three-headed, and if you had those initials after your name, you could probably get a good interview, and somebody would say, "Do you want a cup of coffee or perhaps three?" So, it's much more a function of the power of the institution you represent.

JOHNSON: Did you have any mentors when you first started off as a journalist?

ROBERTS: My husband was my mentor when I started off as a journalist. I had never planned to be a journalist, and we were just kind of moving around the world and the country. And it was easier to switch than fight. I had always been a good writer, and so I started reporting and writing. He was a big help to me, and we did a lot together.

WASNIEWSKI: How did your experience as a congressional reporter change over time?

ROBERTS: Well, of course, the coverage of Congress changed over time. And now, of course, with the 24/7, it's very, very different. When I was first here in the late 1970s, and then throughout the '80s, you could spend some time sitting with a Member of Congress and really getting to know him or her, and talking through an issue. Now it's just file, file, file, file, file, and that's very, very difficult. So you don't have the same kind of ability to know someone well and to know the issue as well, frankly.

But the great thing about covering—well, there's so many great things about covering Congress because it's just a fun institution. Covering the White House—any White House—is, to me, an idea of hell on earth. {laughter} Seriously, you just sit in a filthy, dirty room with dead food, and they bestow news on you, and you don't get to go ferret it out yourself. {laughter} Although, lately, there's been enough news that it's okay. But here, if somebody is floating a trial balloon or trying to give you a bunch of baloney, you just, literally, can walk down the hall and get the other side, get the

balloon popped, get the facts of the case. It's a much easier place to cover in a fairer way.

JOHNSON: When you were covering Congress, especially in the 1980s and into the 1990s, what were some of the obstacles that you saw, that women Members faced?

ROBERTS: Well, it's all the same business about clothes and hair and all of that. And actually, at that point—Cathy [Long], right? You weren't allowed to wear pants on the House Floor, women weren't.[4] Then they changed that. I remember Claudine Schneider showing up in harem pants one day. But see, I remember that because clothes and hair . . . so, there's just a different approach to how they look, how they behave, all of that. But I think the biggest obstacles they faced is that there weren't enough of them.

They organized into what was originally the Congresswomen's Caucus. And then, when the rules changed and said you couldn't have outside money for a caucus, it became the Congressional Caucus on Women's Issues so they could get men in to add to the coffers. They organized, actually across party lines, to—at the beginning of each Congress—to take certain pieces of legislation and make them the priorities for that Congress and take them into various committees. It was very much something that was thought through and cooperative. But their problem was that there were so few of them, that they weren't on a lot of the major committees and certainly not the major subcommittees. And so that was certainly the biggest obstacle: that they just needed more people to be able to carry the issues that they were trying to promote.

WASNIEWSKI: Can I get you to dive a little bit deeper on that, because your mom was a founding member of the Congresswomen's Caucus in 1977. How important was that group for women in the institution?

ROBERTS: At that time, I think it was terribly important. Now the partisanship is such that it's much harder. Again, there were so few of them that they really did sit down, and they put aside the things that divided them, which was abortion; and they said, "Okay, we need mammograms covered by Medicare. Who's going to carry that? We need public housing to have childcare facilities. Who's going to do that?" It was very strategic. And so they would meet regularly.

There was the women's—I don't know what the title of it was, but there was a support group that was outside that worked with them and helped them with some of the legislative language and all of that. But it was very much women in Congress coming together to press for issues that they heard—from women in the country—were important to them.

And, of course, {laughter} what ended up happening was that they had no place to really meet. And, of course, there was also no bathroom anywhere near the House Floor. Finally, Mama got Tip [Thomas Philip O'Neill, Jr.] to give them that space that was Henry Clay's Speaker's Office—the room where [then Congressman] John Quincy Adams died, which was appropriate because he wasn't great to his mother. {laughter} But that room then became the Lindy Claiborne Boggs room. And that was the Congresswomen understanding that, in the glow of her departure and everybody saying lovely things about her, this was the moment to grab that real estate and hold onto it. So there it is. It's the only room named for a woman in the Capitol.

JOHNSON: Your mother was an incredibly effective legislator. And one of our favorite examples as historians is her involvement in the Equal Credit Opportunity Act. Can you explain to everyone what her role was?

ROBERTS: Well, so that was right after she got here. So when my father's plane went down, and not only . . . What happened to most women at this point in time was that if you lost your spouse either to death or a chippie, you also lost your credit. And in her case, it was particularly difficult because there was no death. It made it harder. She came to Congress in March of '73 and said to Tip—who owed her—she said, "I want to be on the Banking Committee." He said, "Well, the Banking Committee is full." She said, "I want to be on the Banking Committee." And so she was on the Banking Committee. {laughter} They were marking up or writing a piece of legislation to end discrimination in lending. And the language said, "on the basis of race, national origin, or creed"—something like that. And as she told the story, she went into the back room and wrote in, in longhand, "or sex or marital status," and Xeroxed it, and brought it back into the committee, and said, "I'm sure this was just an omission on the part of my colleagues who are so distinguished." {laughter} That's how we got equal credit, ladies. {applause}

JOHNSON: It's a great story and that's one of our favorites. But do you think that's just a really good example of her legislative style while she was a Member of Congress?

ROBERTS: Yes, yes, her style was certainly one where she flattered as many people as she could into doing what she wanted. And, actually, it was quite interesting at her funeral because the eulogies were all about how wonderful she was but also how persistent she was, which is a word that's become relevant. {laughter} She persisted. And, basically, she would not take no for an answer.

And at some point, it was just easier to say yes. I mean, why go through that? {laughter} As her child, I can assure you that's the case. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: And a great example of having women's perspective on as many committees as possible.

ROBERTS: Right, absolutely. That's right. No, that's right. There's a story about getting mammograms covered that I probably shouldn't tell in a mixed audience. But it did involve saying to a man on the Health Subcommittee of Ways and Means that he really needed to bring that in because there was no woman on the committee. And he said, "I did the last girl thing," you know? She said, but "This is about breasts." And so he did it. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: Well, we've got a few more questions, and then we're going to move to the audience Q and A. If you had to summarize your mom's legacy as a Member of Congress, how would you sum her up?

ROBERTS: Well, I would say that she was a great custodian of the institution, to start with. This was an institution that mattered enormously to her. She spent her entire adult life in and around this institution, and she was such a lover of history and a teacher of history. We haven't touched on the fact that she was head of the Bicentennial of the Congress, and of everything else. My sister would say to her, "Mom, this is a great gig. Everything's going to turn 200 at some point." {laughter}

And, in fact, when the Congress went to Philadelphia to celebrate the bicentennial, she was the person in George Washington's chair. Her feet didn't touch the ground, but she was in George Washington's chair.

So the institution was tremendously important. And I think that we need more of that today. More people who understand the value of the institution.

But also, she was someone who cared deeply about civil rights and women's rights and knew how to accomplish getting those rights into law in the most—generally—the most civilized way. But she made sure that it happened.

JOHNSON: Would you consider your mother to be a pathbreaker with what she did in Congress in her career?

ROBERTS: Yes, yes, certainly. She felt very strongly about women's rights. And, of course, the Equal Rights Amendment [ERA] was all part of this conversation, as well, and the extension of the Equal Rights Amendment. {laughter} In my last interview with President [Gerald Rudolph] Ford [Jr.], he said, "I got a lot of heat on that at home." And he said, "It was very controversial, Cokie." I said, "Really?" {laughter} But Betty Ford won out on that one. I think that she certainly found a way to push forward things that were, in many ways, were groundbreaking but did it in a way that made it easier for people coming up behind her.

JOHNSON: And a lot of her focus tended to be on economic equality, which was not something that was typically brought up during that period.

ROBERTS: Well, and that had a lot to do with representing a district that was heavily African-American and then became majority African-American. And in the end, she was the only non-African American representing a majority African-American district. But the fact is that African-American women were desperate for economic equality. All women were, but in their cases it was that—there was so much further to go to get there. And she was keenly, keenly aware of that.

WASNIEWSKI: You mentioned early in the interview that your mom, when she came in 1973, was one of just 16 women Members. So if you step back—and I

looked at the numbers—there had only been about 85 women who had preceded her in the House and Senate, going all the way back to Jeannette Rankin. Now we have 325 women who have served in both chambers, so a lot of that story, even though we're celebrating the centennial, has happened in the last three or four decades.

ROBERTS: Well, not even three or four decades. It's really happened in the last two. It's really happened in the last 25 years.

WASNIEWSKI: What's contributed to that, in your opinion—the increasing number of women in Congress?

ROBERTS: Oh, thank God. It's still pathetic. {laughter} What has contributed is—was the changes in society, you know? The majority of graduates from colleges are women. The vast majority of graduates of graduate schools are women. Women are in every aspect of American life. To me, actually, the question is the other way around: Why is it still so few? I feel that way about all kinds of parts of American life, but particularly in politics. And we know that there are lots of answers having to do with how difficult it is to move here and to deal with family in two places, and all of that, and the expense and the horrors of fundraising for a campaign. The fact is that women still do not have the same networks of funders that men do.

But it's also true that we hear, anecdotally, that women are hesitant to run because it's so nasty. And, of course, that becomes a vicious circle because they're the people who are less nasty. If they don't come, it makes it worse. So that's something that we really need to encourage them to say: "Come on, you can go, and you'll survive and make it better."

The one piece of good news is that we are seeing—at least right now, and whether it lasts up through 2018, there's no way of knowing . . . But right

now, we are seeing that the workshops that train women candidates—bipartisan or partisan—are showing many, many more women signing up. Now, whether they actually run is another question, but at least that interest and engagement is there at the moment. I hope that it does translate into candidates.

JOHNSON: We never show our questions in advance as oral historians, but Cokie is so good that she seems to anticipate all of these questions that we have. {laughter} So the way that we always finish our interview is we like to ask—our women interviewees that we've done—is for the 150th anniversary of the first woman being elected to Congress, how many women do you think will be in Congress at that point? And you've talked about some of the hindrances or the obstacles, but how do you think we get to that point?

ROBERTS: Well, in some ways, we get to that point just by time passing. Although we have seen a sort of leveling off in the state legislatures. So what we saw for a while was the state legislatures, every election, increasing their percentages of women. But it's pretty much leveled off at about 21, 22 percent. Now you are seeing more women in leadership positions, but it's still low. So I think that the answer is to have a lot of people encouraging—and a lot of institutions encouraging women to run and the parties encouraging women to run. And then women coming and having the experience where they think they are making a difference.

Because what we know about women in politics and in philanthropy and all of that is that the thing they care most about is efficacy. Does it work? Can I make it happen? And showing women that they really can have a tremendous impact, I think, is the best way to get more women in. But it's a battle. It really is a battle. And I think that it does require kind of institutions encouraging women to do it.

JOHNSON: And right now we have 88 women serving in the House. So do you want to take a guess, in 50 years, how many there'll be?

ROBERTS: I would see that doubling. But still, what would that be—170 out of 435. Isn't that great? {laughter}

JOHNSON: But better.

ROBERTS: Better, right.

WASNIEWSKI: Well, we've got just a little more than 15 minutes left, and we have questions from the audience.

ROBERTS: Great.

WASNIEWSKI: So now the really hard questions, Cokie. {laughter} I'll go ahead and start. Do you think it's a good idea that some Senators and Reps don't bring their families to DC? Do you think that returning to the district and state almost every weekend has contributed to the hyper-partisan nature of Congress?

ROBERTS: Yes. Yes is the answer to the second question, and no is the answer to the first question. Bob Carr's class is the reason this happened. {laughter} It was the Watergate Babies, and they were elected from—a bunch of Democrats elected from districts that had no business electing them, and they decided that the way they'd hold onto their seats was to go back every weekend and have district offices and spend a lot of the time in the district.[5] And so they got the Congress to up the number of trips that were paid for, and then it became what people did. There was a lot of back and forth.

And then there was this whole kind of running against Washington and running against the swamp and Washington kind of portrayed as Sodom on the Potomac, which cracks me up. I don't know about you guys, but I sure

haven't seen it. {laughter} And that if you bring your family, you're somehow going native and all of that. It's become both a political problem for Members and, for many of them, a financial problem. And so it's hard. And I get that it's hard. When we were kids, we went to school a half year in each place, and my sister used to always say, "It's great. You know, just as they'd catch on to you, you were gone." {laughter} I do think it makes a big difference in terms of comity in the institution. People not having time to spend with each other just see each other in normal situations.

When I was a kid, all the moms—and it was the moms—were in the PTA together. One of my very best friends growing up—and she's still a good friend—was Libby Miller, whose father, Bill [William Edward] Miller, was a conservative Republican from upstate New York who became chairman of the Republican National Committee and Barry [Morris] Goldwater's running mate in 1964. And here we were, two little girls playing Clue in the basement. And there was no way to demonize someone in that situation. You knew who the families were. You knew you could disagree. You could think somebody was wrongheaded, but you didn't think they were evil. I think that that's the big change, and it's a very unfortunate change for the country.

JOHNSON: Both you and your mom have had glass-ceiling-breaking careers for women. What part of her experience in particular inspired you?

ROBERTS: Well, I just think she inspired me by her example. She was just so able to do anything and not make a fuss about it. For my wedding, there were 1,500 people at my wedding, and my mother cooked for the whole thing. Come on! That's just ridiculous. {laughter} And I remember coming in—and, of course, it didn't even occur to me that it was ridiculous because it was Mama, and she was doing it. Years later, when my daughter got married in the same

spot, and it did not occur to me to cook, {laughter} I said, "Why did you do that?" And she said, "Well, it was cheap." {laughter]

Then I said, "Why did we have 1,500 people?" It was fine for me because we're still living off the wedding presents 50 years later. Although Steve [Roberts] just broke the Mike [Michael Joseph] Mansfield plate. They all look like you stole them from their offices. {laughter} But she said, "Well, what happened was I got Daddy on a bad night, and I kept saying to him, 'Hale, you've got to tell me who in the House of Representatives you want to have at this wedding.' He didn't want to answer. You know, he was grumpy. And he said, 'All the Democrats.' So that was right after the '64 landslide. There were, 300-and-some Democrats in the House. And so by the time we had them and some friendly Republicans and some Senators and the entire extended family and people we actually liked, {laughter} we were at 1,500 people."

And I came in one day after work, and my sister had moved in for the summer. Her husband was in Latin America. She had a baby that you couldn't put down—you'd just move him from hip to hip. And Daddy's garden was in full bloom. It didn't know I was getting married. And so she [Lindy Boggs] had to deal with the garden. I came in, and the oven said, "Take me out at 6:00, take me out at 7:00," for the cooking. And she's standing at the stove, stirring some pickles from the garden, and she's got the baby on the hip, and she's got the phone under here, and she's dictating a speech into the phone while she's stirring, [holding] the baby . . . She could do anything. So how did it inspire me? It just made me feel somewhat inadequate {laughter} but certainly ready to try.

WASNIEWSKI: Some great questions. Can you provide a time when you felt the disadvantage of being a woman and how you overcame it?

ROBERTS: Well, the time continues. But certainly in the early years, it was very blatant. I referenced the '64 Civil Rights Act. Well, I graduated from college in 1964, so it was legal to say, "We don't hire women to do that," which was said all the time, usually with the hand on your knee. And the help-wanted ads were male, female, white, colored.

And it was a woman in the House and a woman in the Senate who basically stuck sex into the civil rights bill and changed the world. But it took a long time for employers to understand that it was illegal for them to say it, and it took brave women bringing suit in many institutions. In my case, in my field, it was women at CBS and *Newsweek* and the *New York Times* who did it and then affirmative action remedying it. But so it was very, very blatant, very direct discrimination.

Then, as time went on, and you got jobs and did well, there was still always, "Well, but we don't really want to ask. We don't want to ask you to do that." Ask me, {laughter} and I can make the decision of whether it's something I want to do or not. And so it continued. Then there would be the, "Well, we've got our one woman. We don't need another one." And often I was the one woman, and that was uncomfortable because I would then feel that others were being excluded. So I spent a huge amount of my career trying to help out other women and bring up other women. But I've been very lucky too because I've been in workplaces where there's been tremendous cooperation among the women, and we've had each other's backs.

JOHNSON: Was that something that your mother also did—mentor some of the younger women?

ROBERTS: Oh, absolutely, sure, sure.

JOHNSON: What's the best piece of advice you were given as a young professional?

ROBERTS: I can't really think of one. The one I give other young women is "duck and file," by which I mean don't get all involved in all of the shenanigans in the office or whatever. Just go about your business; do your work; do it as well as you humanly can. And that will work better for you than a lot of the other stuff.

WASNIEWSKI: Another great question: You talked about female Members of Congress being surrogate representatives for all women. Do you see yourself as an extension of that as a female journalist?

ROBERTS: Yes, yes. As I just said, I do very consciously help young—I help young men too, but particularly younger women—and particularly, I'll notice things that other people might not have noticed because I can see what's going on. So there might be a couple of young women who have rabbis of sorts inside the institution, and then another who doesn't. I will make it a point to see what her needs are or what her situation is. I think that any one of us sort of older women, who knows what it was like to have been there, tried really hard to help other women coming up after us.

And in answering the question, I was too brief in answering the question—that's unlike me—of Mama and helping others come after. Throughout the last years of her life, any time we were any place in public, here or in New Orleans, the number of people who would walk up to us and say, "Oh, Mrs. Boggs, you helped me so much. You did this. You did that." It was extraordinary. And it was legion.

JOHNSON: What was the hardest part of being a child, growing up on the Hill as a daughter of a powerful legislator?

ROBERTS: It was great. {laughter} Seriously, because our parents felt so strongly that this was important work. And this is another reason that families should be here,

so that the children can see what their parents are doing and why they're taken away from them for periods of time. We came here all the time to listen to debates, so we really knew what was going on in American government.

We also just loved the building and had free run of it—none of this security. The only subway at the time was the little wicker car between Russell and the Capitol. Russell was called the Old Senate Office Building. Actually, it was initially just the Senate Office Building, so the towels all said "SOB." {laughter} But it was the only subway, and there were times when the guy running that subway was babysitting me. But they were nice about it. But it was a wonderful place to grow up. It was truly a privileged childhood to be here, to be in this Capitol a tremendous amount of time.

Sam [Samuel Taliaferro] Rayburn was Speaker my whole childhood. Joe [Joseph William] Martin [Jr.] was, briefly. And they were friends. That whole business of why the Speaker's Office is where the Speaker's Office is. But the kindness of those men to the children was enormous, you know? And so they would give us the Speaker's Dining Room for a birthday party and stuff like that. It was very, very familial.

JOHNSON: I just wanted to ask a follow up to that. You've mentioned in oral histories that we've done with you, and certainly other places too, that you had a lot of these Members that you're talking about that came to your house for dinner. Did you have a favorite Member that came to your house?

ROBERTS: Well, there's a famous story that I remember quite well. The dog ate my chicken. And we were having a burial, and my brother started singing "Dragnet" at the burial. Sam Rayburn had showed up, which he would do. He would just show up. I went running inside, sobbing, because my brother

was singing "Dragnet" at the chicken's funeral. And "Mr. Sam" came out and sang, "A Closer Walk." {laughter} The chicken had a proper burial.

But they were all around. I was saying earlier I was at Mel Laird's funeral the other day—a beautiful event at Arlington. Of course, after he was in Congress, he was Secretary of Defense, so all of the services were there and what a moment. They all were friends, and so it was fun to be with them because they were all funny and irreverent and effective. I missed Bob [Robert Henry] Michel's service. I was out of town. But there was nobody better to be around than Bob Michel. He was just one of the most gracious and kind and funny men that I've ever known. And that was the time, you know? People were just nice. They could be vicious in a debate, but then they'd be nice to the children. And we were here, so they couldn't ignore us.

WASNIEWSKI: This is a budding historian who wrote this. You've written a number of best-selling books, but what books have you read that have changed your life?

ROBERTS: I should say the Bible or something. {laughter} And if I were running for office, that's what I'd do. {laughter} But I can't really think of a book that's changed my life. I've learned, of course, an enormous amount from lots and lots of books. The books that I read for pleasure tend to be books by southern authors who just write wonderfully. Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* is a spectacular book. Any short story by Ellen Gilchrist is terrific. But I do find that I read more history than anything else, but that's because I'm always writing history, so I'm always having to read history to write history.

JOHNSON: You've touched upon this today, but this—

ROBERTS: I will say this. Books that are meaningful: *The Emperor Has No Clothes*, a very good book. {laughter} Excellent for covering politics.

JOHNSON: A specific question from the audience here: To what extent did your parents work with Members from across the political aisle?

ROBERTS: Well, we've sort of referenced it. So in that last interview with Jerry Ford, when he was talking about the ERA, he said to me, "Cokie, I don't get what's going on in Washington." And that was well before it's anywhere near as bad as it is now. And he said, "You know, when I was Minority Leader, and your dad was Majority Leader, we would get in a cab together"—which was an exaggeration; they had drivers—and he said, "We'd go someplace like the Press Club, and we'd say, 'Okay, what are we going to argue about?'" He said, "It was a genuine debate. We genuinely disagreed about means to an end. And it was partisan. For God's sakes, we were the leaders of our parties in the House of Representatives. But then we'd get back in the cab and be good friends." And that's true. In fact, when Daddy's plane went down, the Fords were there constantly. I was a eulogist at Mrs. Ford's funeral because she wanted me to talk about those days—which would have been terrifying except she told me exactly what to say. {laughter} So it made it easier. But so there was much, much, much more camaraderie. Now they barely know Members of their own party, much less people on the other side.

JOHNSON: We have time for one more question today, and we see there are some children here, and an entire school is here today. So, for the young people that are in the audience, if one of them were to ask you some advice on a career in politics or in public service, generally speaking, what would your advice be?

ROBERTS: I would say, "Please, please, please, please do it." We need public servants. We need to carry on the great tradition of this great country that is one of dedication to the institutions. We don't have anything that makes us a country except these institutions. We don't have a common ethnicity or

religion or even language. America is an idea, and it's an idea of being governed—government by consent. But that involves participation. And so the people who are wanting to make this a country that is as special as it's always been, and keep it that way and have it continue to be the shining light in the world need to be involved and need to be—have our best kids involved and our best citizens involved because that is the way that America stays America.

WASNIEWSKI: Cokie, thank you so much for sharing your memories. {applause} And with a sense of humor. {laughter}

ROBERTS: Thank you all for coming. Thank you very, very much.

WASNIEWSKI: We three would like to thank the Capitol Visitor Center for hosting this event and also thank you, the audience, for coming and participating and giving us some great questions. On your way out, I want to remind you that you can pick up a free copy of the book, *Women in Congress*, in the atrium. Please take a copy. It's free. Otherwise, Kathleen and I are going to have to drag them all the way back to the O'Neill Building. {laughter}

JOHNSON: You can take more than one.

WASNIEWSKI: They have essays and biographies on many women in Congress—including Lindy Boggs and Jeannette Rankin.

ROBERTS: They're terrific. They're great.

WASNIEWSKI: And with that, I want to thank everyone again, and say have a happy Memorial Day Weekend.

ROBERTS: Thank you all. {applause}

NOTES

[1] The interview was a live oral history event, "An Afternoon with Cokie Roberts," hosted by the Capitol Visitor Center (CVC) on May 25, 2017. Beth Plemmons, the CEO for Visitor Services at the CVC, introduced the event.
[2] Reference to the 1992 elections which the press dubbed the "Year of the Woman" because a record 24 freshman women won seats in the House of Representatives and four new women joined the Senate in the 103rd Congress (1993–1995).
[3] On October 16, 1972, a plane carrying Majority Leader Hale Boggs and Congressman Nick Begich disappeared during a flight from Anchorage to Juneau. The two Democrats were en route to a campaign stop for Begich's upcoming re-election bid.
[4] According to a 1969 *Washington Post* article, Congresswoman Charlotte Thompson Reid of Illinois was the first woman to wear pants on the House Floor.
[5] Reference to the 75 Democratic freshman Members elected to the 94th Congress (1975–1977) in the wake of the Watergate scandal and the resignation of President Richard Milhous Nixon.