INTERVIEW WITH DALE BUMPERS

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Interviewer
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Riley: This is an independent project. It is funded by the Clinton Foundation, but the Miller Center has been doing Presidential oral history work since Jimmy Carter’s time, so I’ve done interviews on Presidents Carter, [Ronald] Reagan, [George H. W.] Bush 41 and now Clinton, and we’ll probably announce in the next couple of weeks a project on Bush 43. The Clinton project has been the biggest one we’ve done thus far. The ground rules remain the same throughout. That is, we’ll do the interview here. You’re not just speaking to me, you’re creating an archival record that will be available through our Web site and through the Clinton Library for people who 40 or 50 years from now will want to come back and try to understand this Presidency as it actually was.

We know that the press accounts will have flaws, and some of the contemporaneous memoirs will. But you’ll be given an opportunity to review the transcript after we’ve talked. I don’t know that we’ll talk about anything that you consider to be sensitive, but if we do please speak candidly with the understanding that you can come back and hold on to anything that might be in any way sensitive from your perspective. Do you have any questions for me?

Bumpers: No, no, that’s fine. I’ve done this a number of times for other people. Not on Bill Clinton, necessarily.

Riley: I’m looking for a clock. You promised me an hour, and I don’t want to overstay my welcome.

Bumpers: I appreciate that.

Riley: This is the Senator Dale Bumpers interview as a part of the Clinton Presidential History Project. Again, thanks. We just talked about the ground rules for the interview. I want to go back. I’ve looked at your memoir and you say there the first time you recall meeting Bill Clinton was listening to him speak when he was running for Congress I guess in 1974.

Bumpers: Yes, 1974 is right.

Riley: Although most of what we’ll talk about today relates to his Presidential years, I wonder if you could go back and tell us a little bit about your relationship with Bill Clinton before he became President. You were both politically active at the same time. You said after this speech that you sort of silently whispered to yourself, “I hope I don’t have to run against this fellow.”
**Bumpers:** It wasn’t silently; I told my two aides that.

**Riley:** Did you consider him a threat, or was he a friend?

**Bumpers:** All politicians consider anybody that has—I don’t know what the precise word is, but any politician who sees another politician with a lot of talent, speaking ability, intelligence, social mores, customs and so on can’t help but worry about the future. On the way home, I said to one of my aides, “I hope I don’t ever have to run against that guy.” We were discussing Clinton’s speech at the Democratic rally in Russellville, Arkansas, on the campus of Arkansas Tech. I had never laid eyes on him, but I had heard quite a bit about him, about how brilliant and charismatic he was. He was handsome. He had a good speaking voice. He had everything that a politician needs.

He was running against John Paul Hammerschmidt, who had been in Congress (the House) several years and was very popular in northwest Arkansas. I’m quite sure that at that time he was the only member of the Republican Party in the Arkansas delegation.

When Bill spoke that night—if I’m not mistaken he spoke last. I was Governor at the time running for the Senate. But he was the kind of person who didn’t leave anything to chance. So his staff, or an aide, probably, made sure that he got the choice spot to speak, which was last.

**Riley:** That would be a violation of protocol, wouldn’t it?

**Bumpers:** I suppose, but if I’m not mistaken, that’s the way it happened. So he came last and everybody was really a lot more excited about him than they were about me or anybody else, because the word had gone out that this new star had come on the scene. But most of this was at a Democratic rally, so we were already for him. I was most anxious to hear him because I’d heard so much about him. He’d been teaching at the university law school. I think I shook hands with him and met him before he spoke, but an awful lot of people speak at those things, so I can’t be absolutely sure.

So he stood at the podium without a sign of a note or a prop and talked to the audience. He talked into the microphone but he looked that audience over all the time he was talking. He did everything precisely the way you’re taught to do it if you ever go to a speaking school. It was beautiful. Every sentence followed the other one perfectly. I could not believe that he could deliver a flawless speech like that without a note of any kind. But after it was over some of his staff who were with him were standing at the door handing out copied of the speech. He had written the speech, memorized it, and delivered it from memory. It was roughly, I’d say, three to five minutes, which at most political events is quite long enough.

I can remember later speaking at the California Democratic Party convention and I spoke for 15 minutes, or maybe a little longer than that, and as I walked off the stage Dave Broder said, “Senator, let me tell you what Ted [Edward M.] Kennedy once told me.” I said, “What?” He said, “He told me that any political speech over ten to fifteen minutes is long wasted.” I said, “I’ll remember that,” and I did. But back then, youngsters like me who think they have so much to offer, they have to give it all to you in one dose. I learned a lot from what Dave Broder told me that day. I learned to stop at five or ten minutes. You don’t ever insult an audience because your speech is too short.
But anyway, back to Bill Clinton. He scored heavily that night. John Paul Hammerschmidt, who had been in office quite a while, was very popular, and the only Republican. I just thought if anybody could take him on, Bill Clinton could. But northwest Arkansas was all Hammerschmidt territory. Republicans, and most of the states of the north of Arkansas were sympathetic to the North, to the Union, and had remained Republican almost ever since until Bill Clinton came along. They spent a lot of time—I told Bill Clinton one time, I guess in the category of now it can be told, I said, “Bill, you’re spending entirely too much time in north Arkansas.” But he knew that was his weakest spot, and I think he felt for that reason that he ought to spend most of his time there.

You know, it’s a rule in politics that you lead with your strength. If you’re just picking a place to go, you pick someplace where you know you’re going to have a sympathetic crowd, a big crowd, all that sort of thing. As I said, that’s what happened to Bill. Bill spent entirely too much time in northwest Arkansas. Later on he spread his time more evenly.

But back to the speech in Russellville. That was a defining moment in my political life and Bill Clinton was going to be looking over my shoulder in the future. I knew he didn’t want to be a Congressman. He wanted to be President. In order to be President he almost certainly had to run for the Senate. He’d already been Governor. So the rest is history.

Riley: Right. Did you feel vulnerable to Clinton? Were there occasions where it appeared that maybe he was going to try and take you on and unseat you? I can’t remember my Arkansas history well enough to recall if there—

Bumpers: He took a poll, at least I was told that he took a poll, I want to say in 1988. I’m not sure. But he toyed with the idea. I just heard it through the grapevine that he had taken a poll. Apparently the poll showed what our own poll showed, that we were in good shape. So when I started to run for President, I believe it was in 1984, Bill Clinton wrote a letter for me to use. He was Governor at the time. It was one of the most beautiful letters I’ve ever read in my life. I guess I’ve still got it somewhere. I certainly wouldn’t have thrown it away voluntarily.

Having said all of that, Bill Clinton and I have known each other since 1974, and during that time we have never had a cross word. We became friends early on and have remained steadfast friends ever since. He has been a tremendous asset for Arkansas. I strongly felt that the impeachment trial was totally, politically inspired. If one reads Article II Section 4 of the Constitution, the impeachment clause, you won’t find anything even touching what Bill Clinton was tried for in the United States House of Representatives.

Riley: Let me ask you a question about his detractors. For those of us from outside Arkansas, we look in and it appears that he was, for a very long time, the object of a lot of political venom within Arkansas. The stuff that later exploded on the national stage had its roots in your home state. It is a puzzle trying to figure out what the origin of this was. Obviously you’ve given thought to this. Can you help those of us outside understand?

Bumpers: I wish. I know, as you obviously know what you’re talking about, that question has been posed many times, many ways, and no one can answer totally satisfactorily. You can only guess what was going through the minds of the people that brought you to that conclusion. I
could go back and give you a partial answer to it, because when Bill and Hillary [Clinton] came here, they taught at the law school and people accepted that. But when they got into politics, people began to become wary of them.

At that time there were a lot of political differences, but there were other new and different dress styles, different music. I forget what the movement was, but people were dressing quite differently, beginning to talk differently, think differently politically.

**Riley:** This is in the 1960s?

**Bumpers:** I think a little later. Hillary was a strong champion of women’s right and spoke forthrightly about it. Well, that’s not who we want living in the Governor’s mansion. They also hired people from out of state to work in the Governor’s office, I think perhaps college friends.

**Riley:** Right.

**Bumpers:** All those things congealed at the same time, and were not well enough understood to be readily accepted, and created considerable antipathy. I never knew whether Bill fully understood the magnitude of it at that time. There was absolutely nothing wrong with it but it surprised us. There was nothing immoral about it, there was nothing to be ashamed of. It was just the way they thought. They were both very keen thinkers, and usually way ahead of the crowd.

**Riley:** Sure.

**Bumpers:** Hillary had a very astute mind, but so did Bill. I mentioned a moment ago that Bill and I had about a 30-minute conversation last week. We always engaged our minds and we didn’t hold back. He just called out of the blue. I told Betty [Bumpers] when I hung up, “You know, I sometimes forget what a great mind Bill Clinton has.” I told Betty, “You know, sometimes I think I misjudged his intellect and his sharpness.” The truth of the matter is he is one of the most brilliant men I have ever known.

**Riley:** Do you mean that across the board? Are you talking book smarts or political smarts or a combination of those?

**Bumpers:** Both. When you’re talking about books, he’s read everything there is to read. It is absolutely uncanny how he served as President and yet continued his avid reading habits. I think most Presidents talk about books they’ve read but which they never read, or at least not fully. George W. Bush comes to mind, but occasionally he’d allude to some book to prove that he had read it. Bill Clinton one could tell, he had read that one and a lot more. He was unbelievable. And incidentally, he could never understand why anybody wouldn’t like him, just because he had a temper.

**Riley:** You saw this?

**Bumpers:** Oh, I’ve seen his temper, yes, but really not at its zenith. I’ve just seen him when he was upset about something. But he was not slow to anger. But his anger wasn’t contrived, it was something his genes required of him; to let it go, to explode. That was a genuine feeling. It was
not contrived. The ones who did know about his anger were forgiving about it because he was under tremendous pressure all the time.

Recently he’d been in New York. I guess he was raising money and he wanted to tell me a story. I was happy to listen. In the 35 years, as I mentioned a moment ago, you think about Bill and me along with David Pryor pretty much dominating politics in the state for so long, and all three of us really close friends, never uttering a cross word between us.

There are times when I’m speaking out of state or places where I’ve been before, and the question is always posed: “What is there about Arkansas that produces people like you and David Pryor and Bill Clinton?” That’s when I give my Chamber of Commerce speech.

Riley: Well, what is it, the short form of the Chamber of Commerce speech?

Bumpers: I’ll tell you one of the things it is. I think we all had the same ambition, and I think it was a very healthy thing. We were very ambitious to improve our state. It was not one of those things where anybody would say, “I’m filled with ambition to be Governor before I die.” Rather, it was, “I want to be Governor because I want textbooks to be free for high school as well as grade school,” and that sort of thing. When we spoke we always spoke from the heart. Occasionally there would be politics mixed in, of course. But we garnered an awful lot of enthusiasm for the state. We believed the state had been treated unfairly because of Orville Faubus. We had been, and we had paid an enormous price for it.

The reason I had to wait until I was 44 years old to run for Governor was because I could never run for anything as long as Orville Faubus was on the scene. So the time finally came when he was going to run, and I decided that it was time that I ran too. So we just hooked up. It turned out my timing couldn’t have been better. Even so, when I started out, nobody in the state knew who I was according to our first poll. I had 1 percent name recognition. But the people knew that it was time for Arkansas to shine. They knew that we had been treated unfairly because of Orville Faubus. It turned out exactly as we had believed it would then—you know, the little school, the little town rose up and did the right thing. When people ask me why I ran for Governor; I would tell them “to get off the school board.” That was the worst job I ever had.

But it had also fallen my lot to be the only lawyer in town, which gave me an opportunity to give an awful lot of advice on short notice about the Brown [Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka] decision.

Riley: Right.

Bumpers: If you read my autobiography, or if you studied history well, you know that our little hometown of Charleston was the first town in all the eleven Confederate states to fully integrate its schools.

Riley: Is that right?

Bumpers: We didn’t plan it that way. Nobody even knew of the historical event until it was all over. But it was a remarkable thing. We didn’t have any help. We just did that locally. The
superintendent of schools ran *Life* magazine off the campus because he didn’t want any publicity about it. That was the best way in the world to get it torpedoed.

**Riley**: Sure.

**Bumpers**: We took good notice of what we thought was the proper time and we didn’t let *Life* magazine and all those people run the show for us. We just did it on our own.

**Riley**: Exactly.

**Bumpers**: I’ll share a little vignette with you. It’s not totally on target. I was trying to practice law and not taking in enough money to pay the electric bill and Betty was teaching third grade for $125 a month. Two years ago we went to an annual alumni day at Charleston High School and saw an awful lot of old friends. Betty had taught third grade. She had stood in the window of the third grade classroom and watched the bus pull up and black children get off, all of them on the same bus of course. Four of those women were in the third grade when Betty was the teacher. Of the four, three of them attended the reunion. They hugged because they hadn’t seen each other in many years. Two of the three women who were there held Ph.D.s, which shows what a terrible waste of talent this nation, the state of Arkansas, and the entire South, indeed the nation, had wasted on their hatred, their venom.

**Riley**: I’m from Alabama, so I know.

**Bumpers**: Are you from Alabama?

**Riley**: Yes, I grew up with George Wallace there.

**Bumpers**: Well, I grew up a little bit with George myself. We were Governors at the same time.

**Riley**: Let me ask you about that, because you had your own experience with Presidential politics. When Bill Clinton was thinking of running for President, did he come talk with you about this?

**Bumpers**: I can’t remember precisely what was said or anything, but yes, we talked about it. We talked about it a good deal when I started to run. He was anxious for me to run because that would have left the Senate seat open. That’s politics. Nothing wrong with that. It didn’t disturb our friendship one iota.

**Riley**: Let me ask you a hard question. He had a little bit more success at the Presidential level than you did. Why is that the case?

**Bumpers**: First of all, he figured out what kind of a campaign he wanted to run and how he wanted to run it. To be brutally frank with you, I didn’t really think at the time that it was a well thought out campaign. It turned out he was right, and I was wrong. People bought it. When he went to New Hampshire everybody in Arkansas went with him. Again, that was Arkansans just yearning to be noticed, to be recognized. So I went up there too.

**Riley**: You went to New Hampshire?
Bumpers: Yes.

Riley: Do you have any memories of it?

Bumpers: I think seven was the biggest crowd I had.

Riley: Seven?

Bumpers: We all know New Hampshire. You couldn’t draw a crowd up there. Incidentally, I’m mistaken. I didn’t go up there for Bill Clinton I. I went for Wes [Wesley] Clark just as I’d gone for Wilbur Mills long before that. But getting back to the point, Bill built a really good organization.

Bill’s personal life surfaced as an issue, but I never discussed that with him. That was a personal matter. Even when I did the impeachment speech for him, I never discussed it with him. He’d been a good President, and as I said, back to the impeachment language of the Constitution—there was absolutely nothing in there that would cover personal accusations.

Riley: You said a moment ago that you thought the ’92 campaign conceptually wasn’t that sound a campaign. What was your criticism of it?

Bumpers: I don’t know what it was about that campaign that I thought made him unprepared. It wasn’t personal, it wasn’t volatile or anything like that. It’s just that I thought that there were places where he could have spent more time. There were two or three times when, for example, I thought the “don’t ask, don’t tell” thing was going to be lethal, and it was pretty lethal, but he pulled it off and it worked very well.

People are very forgiving if you’re wrong, or if they know you’re a person of conviction and you’re sticking with it. It may not be too smart sometimes, but they admire people who have the strength of their convictions.

Riley: Right.

Bumpers: So I didn’t run for President because I knew he was much better prepared. Bill and I later had a conversation in the Oval Office about a lot of things and I told him the reason I didn’t run was because I simply didn’t have the zeal. That sounds a little trite.

Riley: I understand. You were in Washington and had experience in Washington when he arrived in ’93. He had a rough year in ’93.

Bumpers: Boy, did he ever. You know in ’94 Democrats almost got wiped out.

Riley: Of course. Could you talk a little bit about that time? Did he or his Congressional relations people come to see you to help get introduced to Washington?

Bumpers: No.

Riley: Did that surprise you?
**Bumpers:** Not at all. I think Bill had probably offered Mack [Thomas] McLarty the position as Chief of Staff. Mack came to talk to me about it. We had been good friends. He had been elected to the legislature the same year I was elected Governor.

**Riley:** Is that right? I’d forgotten until this moment that he had served in the legislature.

**Bumpers:** And he is as fine as any man I’ve ever known in my life. Mack came to see me and told me Bill was considering making him Chief of Staff, which indeed he later did. I tried to talk Mack out of taking it. I told him it was a killer. Everything that goes wrong, which it does several times a day, the Chief of Staff gets full responsibility. The President doesn’t, you do. I don’t know what happened to Mack. He didn’t last very long in the job. It may have been a personal choice on his part, I don’t know. All I know is that the White House just eats people up and spits them out. If you survive it for any length of time at all you’re a genius.

**Riley:** I was asking you about the rough time in transition that he had and whether he sought out your guidance and counsel.

**Bumpers:** I’ll tell you this story. We were at the White House one day and he said, “Come on in the office.” So we walked into the Oval Office and started talking. This was in April after he was elected.

**Riley:** April of ’93.

**Bumpers:** Right. He started telling me, “You know, I wish I could say in a few words what I want to say about what this job is like. But I can tell you this: There is nothing to compare with it. By that I mean it’s almost indescribable. There’s a crisis a minute.” He didn’t say precisely that, but I felt I understood. You have to deal with it as best you can. But you have to deal with something, often a crisis, quite often.

I can tell you that Bill Clinton is younger than I am and could take it all better than I could. He’d been Governor a lot longer. He’d been through some really rough times in the Governor’s office and that made him better prepared for the Presidency.

During my time as Governor, I tried to keep faith with my deceased father who thought politics was a noble profession. When I say keep faith with my father, I mean essentially honoring what he had taught me; that politics was a noble profession. You have a chance to make a mark for good; for all of the people of the country or certainly the state. Dad ground that into us. He wanted me to go to law school and he wanted me to study Latin because he had this notion that you couldn’t be a lawyer unless you knew Latin. But he also wanted me to be a lawyer because he strongly believed you could hang up a shingle anyplace you wanted and in ten minutes you’re in business.

At the dinner table in the evening, if somebody had come to town running for Congress or whatever, and spoke on the courthouse lawn, we children were expected to be able to intelligently discuss it at dinner that evening. As Governor I was very sensitive about little things that went wrong, and in the Governor’s office that was frequent.
As looked back on it, if I had had a little more experience I would probably have run for President. I had a lot of encouragement. People who were pleading with me to run were probably mostly tired of Reagan. They wanted somebody new. I did too. I’d served with Reagan when he was Governor. But no point in getting into the Ronald Reagan thing. I knew many, maybe most of his flaws. But, as I say, everybody wanted somebody new. They knew that the country had strengths that were not being fully utilized and we had opportunities that nobody had ever seized upon. But people were looking for somebody who was smart, energetic, and determined. In my opinion we got that person with Bill Clinton.

In Bill Clinton’s eight years in the Presidency, he was subjected to a lot of talk about infidelity. We could continue that talk, but it would serve no purpose.

**Riley:** Sure. Looking back at the first couple of years in particular—

**Bumpers:** In the Senate?

**Riley:** Of the Presidency, ’93 and ’94 in particular. Were there any episodes there where you were helping them lead from the White House on Capitol Hill?

**Bumpers:** Of course we passed the Budget Reconciliation Act of 1994. That’s when Bill Clinton used up all the strength he had to pass by far the most important bill that had been passed in a very long time.

**Riley:** The budget resolution.

**Bumpers:** Yes. In Bill Clinton’s two terms, believe it or not, he produced a $600 billion surplus previously considered unthinkable. It was just magnificent. I couldn’t sleep for the exuberance I felt about that. Yet I knew the Republicans were going to chastise everyone who voted for it because it carried a tax increase. That’s anathema to a Republican no matter the benefit. They couldn’t stand the thought of it, no matter how meritorious the justification. It also presented a political opportunity. They could convince the people of this country they were going to go broke because of this massive tax increase the President had imposed on them. The truth of the matter is, prosperity wasn’t just around the corner; it was immediately in front of us. And the reason was because of the confidence level people had reached as much or more than anything. While the Republicans were livid about the tax increases, they could hardly wait to get their hands on the money.

I can remember three or four people that I always had a lot of respect for, and I lost all the respect I had for them because they fell into this last category.

The President called me one day during the debate and said, “Do you know so-and-so?” I said yes. He said, “Do you have a good relationship with him?” I said yes. “Can you talk to him?” I said, “I can sure try.” So I called him on the phone.

**Riley:** This was a Republican?

**Bumpers:** No, it was a faltering Democrat. I talked to him. I thought I was making some headway, but apparently I wasn’t, because we didn’t get his vote. We passed the bill anyway.
But then we just got wiped out in the 1994 election because of the tax increase and the Republicans took control of the Senate. What a tragedy. One of the best things that ever happened to this country, and yet we paid a huge price for it.

**Riley:** What was your assessment after 1994 as to the main reasons that the Democrats lost? The budget package gets some mention. Some people say health care was mixed up in it. Guns—there were some gun bills.

**Bumpers:** The answer is very simple. The Republicans were able to keep people’s attention riveted on the tax increases in the budget.

**Riley:** Right.

**Bumpers:** Even though the years of deficits began to turn into surpluses, and there were probably a few other things that played a role in our 1994 defeat. There were other things that one might think, *Well, this looks little,* but it wasn’t. The whole thing I think at one time—and I’ll say this advisedly—the one time Bill could have communicated with the people of this country better, and saved himself an awful lot of trouble, was after the passage of the 1994 budget bill.

**Riley:** After the budget.

**Bumpers:** Yes. It was a tough thing for him to do. But rich dividends lay ahead.

Now, in light of all this, you talk about people thought he was a little bit weak and didn’t have the strength of mind to really be a good President.

**Riley:** Right.

**Bumpers:** But I know of no President, other than Abraham Lincoln, who ever had the strength to do what Clinton did in 1994. It was paying off beautifully until George W. [Bush] became President. He disposed of that $600 billion surplus in nothing flat. That’s what we have always had a tendency to do in this country. This is a little off the subject, but this was a time when we could have economically ensured ourselves as a nation for years to come. But what did we do? We let the Republicans convince people this tax increase was going to spell doomsday for everybody. The ordinary layman out there was not sophisticated enough to sort it out, so that’s what happened.

**Riley:** Can you talk a little bit about the receptivity of the Washington that you had become a part of to a New Democratic President in 1993? Was there a lot of enthusiasm about this, or was there anxiety?

**Bumpers:** I think there was a strong feeling of apprehension. I think they were willing to give Bill Clinton a chance, but not willing to organize any political advantage they might get. They were willing to look and see if he could produce, because they knew he was capable. They knew he was talented. The question was whether or not he was a realist or an opportunist. They decided to give him a chance of being a realist and leveling with them. For some reason or other, people, especially Republicans, didn’t seem to understand what had happened. So that began to
erode his popularity. What a tragedy when somebody makes a mammoth correct decision that’s almost nation-saving and yet pays a big price for it. It was nauseating.

I suffered some, but not as much as many of my Democratic colleagues.

**Riley:** You came out in ’98, so you would have run in ’92.

**Bumpers:** We didn’t pass that bill until ’94. So we passed it after I returned in 1993.

**Riley:** That’s right.

**Bumpers:** Talk about not ever regretting anything. If there’s anything I never regretted, it was voting for that budget bill. The Panama Canal Treaty vote in late ’87 was easily the most controversial vote I ever cast. We were getting 1,500 to 3,000 phone calls and letters a day in our office. Several Senators lost their seats for voting for that treaty.

**Riley:** Were you at all involved in the health care reform effort in ’93 or ’94?

**Bumpers:** No, but Betty, like Hillary, didn’t want to bake cookies and pour tea, and she quickly discovered that Arkansas had one of the lowest childhood immunization levels of any state in the country, and she immediately took on the effort to solve that problem. So that’s when she and Rosalynn Carter went to work on raising the levels in Arkansas and Georgis. They have been at it ever since. They still have an active organization called Every Child by Two. Betty and all her volunteers immunized 300,000 children in Arkansas on Saturday in 1972.

I was always supportive of their work to make sure the vaccine programs were fully funded. Betty and Rosalynn have now been at it for almost 30 years.

**Riley:** So that gets us to ’94. What was it like around Capitol Hill and around the Senate after that ’94 midterm?

**Bumpers:** It was very volatile, very mean-spirited. It was just unpleasant. The Democrats lost heavily in the ’94 elections. I thought I didn’t want to hang around. A lot of people with perhaps more fortitude than I had would have just stood up and said, “I know this is unpopular—” but just make the case and just keep making the case. I learned in trial practice, if you have a really good point don’t turn it loose.

You know, it’s an interesting thing. I watched audience after audience sit and listen to an introducer, not introduce me necessarily, but others, kindred spirits, and the audience would be almost unreceptive. They didn’t applaud wildly when we said we had a big surplus; they didn’t seem to understand the meaning. The magnitude of it was indescribable.

**Riley:** Exactly.

**Bumpers:** So they were going to make somebody pay for it. The Republicans made sure that a totally different meaning was attached to it. They didn’t tell them that this deficit we’ve all been talking about for the last 30 years is coming under control. It was always “We’re going to cut your taxes.”

D. Bumpers, October 13, 2009

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Riley: Senator, do you remember any Democratic meetings on the Hill to try to recuperate after '94? Any caucus meetings? Did you go up—were you called up to the White House? I would assume that they must have been scratching their heads trying to figure out what do we do now?

Bumpers: No. I was not asked. I didn’t participate in that, nor was I asked to. I wasn’t a committee chairman and the ranking members are always the ones that everybody calls on, which is kind of tragic because often times it’s a committee chairman who caused the damage.

Riley: Exactly, but you were from Arkansas and you had a relationship with this President. Did that get traded on at all when you were on Capitol Hill? How often did the President call you?

Bumpers: Not often. In all fairness, Bill had an awful lot of very talented people and they worked hard, were purely motivated, and they were friends. If he had a really heavy issue he knew whom to call. I thought sometimes he was overly impressed with some people.

Riley: The general tack of the administration after ’94 was to be a bit more conservative, at least that was the impression. Welfare reform was dealt with in ’95 and ’96, for example.

Bumpers: Bill made the best of that. He was a liberal. He believed in treating people fairly and making sure everybody had an opportunity. He was strong on education, which, after all, you can say it a thousand times, and nobody pays any attention to it, but it is the key to everything. No education leads to ignorance, ignorance leads to poverty, poverty leads to crime. By the time you get to the end of it, people are snoring.

Riley: That gets you outside the ten minutes you’re allotted.

Bumpers: That’s right. When I quit in 1998, I announced almost a year in advance that I wasn’t going to run again. It was a very difficult decision. Friends were moaning with disappointment, carrying on about it and I guess the best way to put it would be something like this: What did you go to the Senate for? Did you accomplish it? Are you satisfied with your 24 years of service?

I can remember people coming up to me after I spoke in Bill’s defense at his impeachment trial. “I guess, Senator, you want that to be your legacy, don’t you?” My answer was “No. I want my legacy to be that I voted against 38 amendments, either Constitutional amendments or other amendments that could lead to a Constitutional amendment. I never voted for anything that could even lead to a Constitutional amendment. All those prayer in school amendments and all the things the hard core conservatives could think up drove me crazy. It irritated me that we were even talking about such things. The Founding Fathers must have been turning in their graves. But what was even more irritating was that people were listening and making big political issues out of it.

I was not a Constitutional scholar, but I believed Arthur Schlesinger when he said the greatest assemblage of minds under one roof in the history of the world met in Philadelphia in 1787. I agreed with him. When one goes back and reads the Federalist Papers it’s impossible to reach any other conclusion. When you think about where we were when Bill Clinton left office, you’ve got to say that guy really performed. Bill’s successors have had a tough time sorting it out.
That’s not really an indictment of people. They just have a difficult time sorting it out to some degree.

Riley: Did you think the tone in Washington changed over the course of your career?

Bumpers: Yes.

Riley: More negative.

Bumpers: No question about it.

Riley: Have you given thought to what the root causes of that were?

Bumpers: Well, I shouldn’t say this, but the people can be fooled. They can be led down the wrong path. Sometimes that path is just disastrous. It can take a lot of years to undo, but at the time everybody is euphoric about doing it. They just have a wrong idea about the whole thing. It doesn’t work the way they think it does. But you go ahead and ratify it, because it’s popular. Being reelected, you’ve heard this a thousand times, that’s uno numero, being reelected. It’s everything. It never ceases to amaze me how captivated people are once they become politically successful. In the Senate, “Old Salts” used to wonder how they got there. Later, they wondered how everybody else got there.

Riley: This President got himself reelected. Was that a surprise to you?

Bumpers: No, he didn’t get himself reelected. [Robert] Dole got himself beat. You know, I think if [Albert, Jr.] Gore had listened to his chief of staff and if he had just continued to fight that court battle out, he might have made it. You’ve seen that movie, I’m sure.

Riley: I have not, but I know what you’re talking about.

Bumpers: You should see it. That guy—I forget his name—was just terrific. He understood and believed that the court should have named Gore President.

Riley: Did you have a good relationship with Gore?

Bumpers: Yes.

Riley: Throughout?

Bumpers: Almost. He and I were seatmates for a long time.

Riley: Tell us about that. That’s an important piece of this puzzle too, how he fit in.

Bumpers: His relationship with Clinton was fine for a while, but I have heard that it turned sour. I’m not sure what all was involved in it, but it was tragic for the country because they were both fine men, both very intelligent.

Riley: They are two different kinds of people, I think. Different personalities. I want to throw that out to see if you’d comment on it. They seem to me to be two different kinds. They’re both
very bright, but maybe bright in different ways. Was Gore somebody who could be useful to the President in the Senate?

**Bumpers:** Rarely is being presiding officer important.

**Riley:** Right. But Gore was somebody who had experience in the Senate, and I wondered if—

**Bumpers:** Oh, yes, he knew that body like the back of his hand.

**Riley:** Was he well received there still?

**Bumpers:** Yes, I think most Senators liked him, and he was not incapable of casting a courageous vote.

**Riley:** Of course.

**Bumpers:** Al was not seen as a star. He was seen as important on rare occasions when he presided and his vote was very important. I thought he should have won that election for President, but people were in a foul mood.

**Riley:** What happened, from your perspective?

**Bumpers:** I think the main thing that happened was the Republicans were able to convince the country that things had not gone right under Clinton-Gore and that they would straighten it out. I don’t think people understood what the Republicans were talking about. They always returned to the 1994 budget reconciliation act and the Democrats didn’t answer effectively—namely that we had a surplus.

**Riley:** Sure.

**Bumpers:** And people would think, *They raised my taxes and I’m no better off now than I was before.* That kind of rationale. All those things played a hand in making Gore seem inadequate. I think when you put Gore and Clinton up together and compare their records, and their personalities, I think despite the fact that Clinton had some tough times his second term for all those reasons, I think that they still preferred his strength to Gore’s. I don’t think Gore ever impressed them as a guy who could, say, “call out the troops.” If Bill got sound enough advice from people he respected, he’d take it.

**Riley:** He wasn’t the political star, didn’t have the political instincts that Clinton had. Was he as smart as Clinton?

**Bumpers:** Probably, but perhaps not as analytical. I don’t know how to make that comparison. They were both very bright, both consummate politicians. I remember Gore, when the Democrats coalesced around not going into Iraq the first time, to liberate the Iraqis. Gore was right on the firing line for going in. Of course that was immensely popular. I voted against it and it was a very unpopular vote back home. They thought going into Iraq—going to war is always easy. It’s always popular with people until their sons start getting killed.
Gore was hot for it. I asked him one day to give me his rationale for it. He did, and his answer was perfectly rational. We were totally justified in going in. We had nothing against Iraq, we just wanted to kick Saddam [Hussein] out. So from that standpoint you can’t fault Gore for voting for it.

**Riley:** Was Gore somebody you thought before he went into the Vice Presidency he was somebody who could get elected President on his own?

**Bumpers:** No. I liked Al a lot. As I said, we were seatmates. We had good times together. It might have been his voice. It might have been something else about his demeanor. He never seemed to show the strength or the rationale for his decisions that Bill did. Don’t misunderstand me. He is a consummate politician, first, last, and always. There was just something about Bill Clinton that people respected and liked even though they might not like *him*.

**Riley:** There are a couple of chapters in your memoir about the impeachment business, so we won’t spend a lot of time on it, and my time is running short, but you didn’t want to give that speech at the end.

**Bumpers:** That’s right.

**Riley:** You tried to talk him out of it.

**Bumpers:** It wasn’t that I didn’t want to give it. I didn’t feel that I had the capability of doing the kind of job that needed to be done.

**Riley:** They came to you after—your suggestion was George Mitchell.

**Bumpers:** That’s right. When Bill said, “He won’t do it,” I knew I was second choice. I think that there was a fairly good movement to get John Glenn to do it, but John was in Paris and I don’t think he was asked. People like Harkin. They were obviously looking for someone who was well respected. George Mitchell was immensely respected, but not by Republicans.

I had always had something of a reputation as an adequate orator in the Senate. But the Democrats wanted somebody who could speak, not just to the Senate, necessarily, but to the American people. That’s really what I hoped to do. I had some help from people like Carl Levin, who had a suggestion, which I rejected at first. I said, “Carl, I’ve just got 48 hours in which to get this done. Don’t bother me with that.” He said, “Will you shut up and listen to me?” I have a lot of respect for Carl. He’s a very intelligent guy. He had a paper in his hand. I forget exactly what all was in it, but it was apparently a part of the grand jury transcript where Monica Lewinsky was testifying. It was most interesting, so I shut up and let Carl talk.

**Riley:** You also were consulting with the White House counsel and the Congressional affairs people.

**Bumpers:** Yes.

**Riley:** But in the end you say you shut yourself up in your study and wrote your speech.
Bumpers: I just wrote notes, I didn’t write a speech. I could never read a speech in a place like that. I learned in trial work that humor was often appropriate. I knew generally what I wanted to say and the points I wanted to make. As I was talking, I thought of a humorous story, and humor is almost always appropriate in jury trials. I had already told two or three little stories. I had long since known that juries love jokes and funny stories.

Riley: You were treating this like a jury?

Bumpers: Yes. I knew that everybody there was listening to me and they were looking for those cogent points that they hoped somebody would bring out. I remember saying, “Bill Clinton is not perfect. You aren’t either. Nor am I. None of us is perfect.” Then I told the story about the country preacher. He challenged his audience. He said, “Is there anybody in this congregation that has ever known a person with anything like the perfect qualities of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior?” Finally, one attendee slowly stood up. The preacher challenged him to share it with the congregation. Finally, the parishioner said, “My wife’s first husband.” Chief Justice [William] Rehnquist almost fell out of his chair laughing. I believe he laughed longer than anybody in the audience. I didn’t know how the Chief Justice would take something like that. That’s where trial practice experience comes in handy.

Riley: But it’s interesting that you were treating them like a jury. I guess Constitutionally that’s what they are, but you don’t think of the Senate in quite those terms.

Bumpers: But that’s exactly what they were. That’s the reason I told that story. There were several stories in there. For example, I remember the Republicans were always saying, “Clinton should have thought of that before.” I said, “You know, Adam and Eve should have thought about it before too.” George McGovern thought that was the best line in the speech.

Riley: You got a lot of feedback from this speech, I take it.

Bumpers: Oh, yes, many letters and calls. It was amazing. The speech was about 58 minutes long. I started at four PM and finished at five PM. I’m reluctant to say this, but the Senators were very attentive.

Riley: Were you nervous?

Bumpers: Everyone seemed to be on edge. But in all candor, I wasn’t nervous. I was nervous preparing it sometimes, debating with myself. I was constantly asking myself, “Does this really fit, and is it powerful enough to inject here?”

Riley: Were there pieces that you pulled out because on reflection you didn’t think they were strong enough?

Bumpers: I’m quite sure I did.

Riley: Did you read the speech to your wife before you gave it? Did she give you feedback on things like this?
**Bumpers:** I may have tried out two or three lines on her or somebody else. I just don’t remember. But I learned a long time ago that if you’re not original enough, intelligent enough to pick up a line and use it, you probably shouldn’t use it. Over time I’ve learned what would play and what wouldn’t. So I wasn’t really worried. There were some things obviously much funnier, much more powerful than others. Henry Hyde sat in front of me with his legal pad on his knees, on his lap. I don’t believe he looked up during the entire hour. It was a most interesting thing.

**Riley:** Do you have any other recollections—because we’ve gotten your account of how you developed the speech and we’ve got the speech to look at. From your perspective do you remember any other people that you were seeing there?

**Bumpers:** John Chafee, who was a Republican. John was one of the finest men I ever knew. I watched him on the 10 o’clock news that night. He was being interviewed. He said, “I think in light of Senator Bumpers’ speech, all of us need to rethink our positions.” That was probably the most powerful thing anybody said. And John voted against impeachment.

**Riley:** Did you talk to the President himself afterward?

**Bumpers:** Yes. My phone was ringing when I got home. [*laughter]*

**Riley:** Can you share with us—

**Bumpers:** No, I can’t share that.

**Riley:** He was pleased.

**Bumpers:** Immensely pleased.

**Riley:** And others on the White House staff were also immensely pleased. Looking back, what would you say, I’ll ask you from your career—I’m out of time. What was the highlight for you in Washington?

**Bumpers:** You know, there were many. In 24 years so much happened, one forgets some of the most important things. I think of some really poignant moments, some of the time it was bedlam. But there were also very poignant times. There were not many people in the Senate who could speak with enough clarity and sincerity that one would want to hear them very often.

Abe Ribicoff, the Senator from Connecticut, comes to mind. He and the New York Senator, Jacob Javits, were both eloquent.

**Riley:** But it’s an institution in which you’re proud to have served.

**Bumpers:** It’s very difficult to predict the future. Some of the wisest Senators will soon be gone. There are two or three newcomers that I think will be great additions.

**Riley:** There’s also a void because of their inability to work both sides of the aisle.
Bumpers: There’s a shortage of clear thinkers, logical thinkers, and brave thinkers who don’t mind sticking their necks out for something they know is really important. There are not too many of those. Because, as I say, this idea of being reelected has become the driving force. That’s the reason we must curb campaign spending. I don’t know what is going to happen if we don’t, but I feel a very dangerous time coming up.

Riley: Well, to bring this to a conclusion, those of us who are on the outside looking in and we see profiles in courage from some people who are there. I always tell my students that one of the advantages of my having the opportunity to meet so many public servants to do these interviews is a great appreciation for the very high quality of people who do serve. Contrary to conventional wisdom, which is that politics is full of scoundrels and I’m sure it has its share of scoundrels too, but there is something encouraging about having the opportunity to meet you and your colleagues and to listen to you talk. You feel like the country is in a lot better hands when you have that chance firsthand than you do otherwise.

Bumpers: You’re kind to say that and I’m inclined to agree with you. I’ve served with some bright, brave people. We just need a stable full of them, that’s the only difference.

Riley: Exactly.

Bumpers: It’s terribly discouraging at times. I almost didn’t run for a third term. I just felt that—when you think of who is going to replace you, you think of three or four possibilities and you think, No, I’m going to replace me. So the first thing you know, you talk yourself into running again. If you’re just going to go up there to vote to be reelected, the country would be better off if you’d stay home. The opportunists do more damage to this country than anybody. As I said, I can remember hearing some of those people wax eloquently about prayer in school. The idea of some Senator telling me that my child is going to have to pray in school is anathema to me. Praying or not praying is a right under the Constitution.

Riley: That’s correct.

Bumpers: Just think how full the prisons would be if we locked everybody up that burned a flag.

Riley: At the Miller Center at the University of Virginia we have a very broad conception of public service, which includes contributing to historical memory by doing this, so let me conclude by thanking you, on the record, for taking the time to let me come talk to you.

Bumpers: You’re very kind. I enjoyed letting you listen to me.

Riley: I appreciate you doing this. As I said, there’s a lot of rich material that people for decades to come will find useful for understanding politics as they actually are, so thank you.

Bumpers: I enjoyed visiting with you, Russell.