

KELLY D. JOHNSTON

Staff Director, Senate Republican Policy Committee,

and Secretary of the Senate

1992-1996

Oral History Interviews

July 29, 1996 to February 10, 1997

Senate Historical Office

Washington, DC

Deed of Gift

I, Kelly D. Johnston, do hereby give to the Senate Historical Office the tape recordings and transcripts of my interviews between July 29, 1996 and February 10, 1997.

I authorize the Senate Historical Office to use the tapes and transcripts in such a manner as may best serve the educational and historical objectives of their oral history program. I also approve the deposit of the transcripts at the Library of Congress, National Archives, Senate Library, and any other institution which the Senate Historical Office may deem appropriate.

Effective immediately, the tapes and transcripts may be opened for the Secretary and the Assistant Secretary of the Senate, on the condition that the contents of the tapes and transcripts are not to be copied, cited, revealed or disseminated in any form without my express written authorization.

Effectively immediately, the Historian or his designee may open all or parts of the tapes and transcripts to anyone except employees or representatives of news organizations or any other non-governmental entity which distributes information that is made available to the general public, with my express written permission, and on the condition that the contents shall not be quoted, cited, or otherwise revealed or disseminated in any way without my express written authorization.

Under all other conditions, the tapes and transcripts are sealed until January 1, 2009. In making this gift, I voluntarily convey ownership of the tapes and transcripts to the public domain.

Kelly D. Johnston

Accepted on behalf of the
Senate Historical Office by:

Richard A. Baker

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Preface

A political sea change of historic proportions took place in November, 1994, when Republicans won the majority in both the United States Senate and House of Representatives for the first time in over forty years. Since World War II, Americans had become accustomed to long periods of divided government, with Republican presidents confronting Democratic congresses, but it was a decidedly rare occasion for a Democratic president to face a Republican Congress. The 105th Congress saw repeated clashes between Republicans in Congress and President Bill Clinton that resulted both in a shutdown of the federal government and in sweeping legislative programs, most notably the welfare reform bill and an agreement to work for a balanced budget.

Beginning with the first congressional campaign he worked for in 1978, Kelly Johnston had devoted himself to the election of Republicans to Congress. He served on the staffs of both the National Republican Congressional Committee and the National Republican Senatorial Committee, as well on the staffs of three Republican representatives. When Democrats returned to the White House and controlled the majorities in both houses during the 103rd Congress, from 1993 to 1995, Johnston was staff director of the Senate Republican Policy Committee, where he helped coordinate the Republican resistance to President Clinton's economic stimulus and health reform proposals. The defeat of the health plans contributed to the Republicans' landmark victory in 1994.

Senator Bob Dole, the new Majority Leader and the frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination, designated Johnston to become Secretary of the Senate in 1995. The Senate then formally elected him to the post. As Secretary, he oversaw much of the day-to-day operations of the institution, from the Senate floor to the support staff in a variety of offices, ranging from the Disbursing Office to the Stationery Room. Having long worked to make Congress more accountable, Johnston as Secretary of the Senate became a key official in implementing the Congressional Accountability Act of 1995, which significantly changed employment practices on Capitol Hill. He also became closely involved in a major revision of lobbying registration.

Kelly D. Johnston was born in Edmond, Oklahoma, on August 27, 1956, to Carl D. and Carol Elizabeth (Robbins) Johnston. He attended the University of Science and Arts of

Oklahoma, where he won election as student body president. After graduating in 1976, he worked as a reporter and editor for the Donrey Media Group in Oklahoma from 1976 to 1978. Johnston's family had been Democrats, and as a college student he had worked for Oklahoma Senator Fred Harris' campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. But as many traditional Democratic areas in the southeast and southwest began to shift party allegiance in the 1970s, Johnston became a Republican. In 1978 he worked for a Republican candidate for Congress from Oklahoma, who was not elected. That experience, however, brought Johnston to the attention of Representative John Paul Hammerschmidt, an Arkansas Republican, who hired him as his news secretary. Johnston moved to Washington and worked for Hammerschmidt from 1980 to 1981. He then served as communications director of the National Restaurant Association from 1981 to 1983.

On May 26, 1984, Kelly Johnston married Adrienne Annette Cordova. They later had two sons, Gavin and Garrett. At that time, Johnston had returned to politics as a field manager for the National Republican Congressional Committee, working with Republican representatives from New York to Oregon. In 1987 he became administrative assistant to Arizona Republican Representative Jon Kyl. Senator Don Nickles of Oklahoma persuaded Johnston to join the National Republican Senatorial Committee in 1989. He handled campaigns mostly in the South, but also in South Dakota and Nebraska. After the 1990 election, Johnston became deputy assistant secretary of Transportation for public affairs, under Secretary of Transportation Samuel Skinner, in the Bush administration.

Johnston returned to Capitol Hill in 1992 as staff director of the Senate Republican Policy Committee, then chaired by Senator Don Nickles. He emerged as a familiar face around the Capitol as the anchor for a weekly cable television program to inform Republican senators and staff about upcoming issues and legislative scheduling. When Republicans resumed to the majority, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole appointed Johnston as Secretary of the Senate in 1995. However, when Senator Dole resigned the next year to run for president, the new Senate Majority Leader, Trent Lott, preferred to select his own team as Sergeant at Arms and Secretary of the Senate. Senator Lott invited Johnston to continue as Assistant Secretary of the Senate to assist with the transition and to await his appointment to the Federal Election Commission. But his nomination became embroiled in an end-of-the-session contest between the parties over judicial nominations, and he was not confirmed. By

then, Johnston had accepted the post of executive vice president for government affairs at the National Food Processors Association.

In July 1996, while he was Secretary of the Senate, Johnston agreed to give an interview to the Senate Historical Office to provide information for a fiftieth anniversary history of the Senate Republican Policy Committee. That interview is included as an appendix to the larger oral history that he participated in after stepping down as Secretary of the Senate. In these interviews, Johnston shares his observations of the people and the political movement that changed the national political scene so dramatically in the 1990s.

About the Interviewer: Donald A. Ritchie is associate historian of the Senate Historical Office. He received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Maryland. His books include *Press Gallery, Congress and the Washington Correspondents* (Harvard Press, 1991), *The Young Oxford Companion to the Congress of the United States* (Oxford University Press, 1993), *Doing Oral History* (Twayne, 1995), and *History of a Free Nation* (Glencoe, 1997). He also edits the *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Historical Series)* (Government Printing Office). A former president of the Oral History Association and of Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region (OHMAR), he received OHMAR's Forrest C. Pogue Award for distinguished contributions to the field of oral history.

Transcribed by Michele Manon