Jackie Cottrell: This is October 14, 2025. Hi, I'm Jackie Cottrell, former chief of staff to Senator Pat Roberts. With me is Mike Seyfert, Senator Roberts's former staff director of the Senate Agriculture Committee. We are at the U.S. Capitol to conduct an interview that is part of the Kansas Oral History Project's collection of Notable Kansans who in the last quarter of the 20th and the first decades of the 21st centuries have contributed to public policy.

Mike Seyfert: The Kansas Oral History Project is a not-for-profit corporation created to collect oral histories of Kansans who are involved in shaping and implementing public policy. Recordings and transcripts of these oral history interviews are accessible to researchers, educators, and other members of the public through the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library of Kansas and on the Kansas Oral History Project website, ksoralhistory.org. This project is supported by donations from generous individuals.

Today we will interview Senator Pat Roberts who was first elected to the US House of Representatives from Dodge City in 1980, representing the big first Congressional district. After serving sixteen years in the House, Senator Roberts was elected to the U.S. Senate. Roberts's earlier service in the US Marine Corps after graduation from Kansas State University.

JC: Public service to the people of Kansas and to the country really defines Pat Roberts with more than forty years in service. During his tenure, he worked on significant pieces of legislation from health care to national security to tax reform, and, of course, coming from Kansas, agriculture, including a record eight farm bills. Senator Roberts, thank you for agreeing to be here and contributing to this oral history.

Pat Roberts: It's my privilege. Thank you to this organization which is doing a lot for Kansas.

JC: Well, we have a lot of ground to cover so we're going to get started. But first let's go back to the beginning. You're the son of Wes and Ruth Roberts. You were born in Topeka, grew up in Holton, are a proud K-State Wildcat where you studied journalism before joining the Marines. So from that, how did you wind up in politics?

PR: Jackie, I think it's probably a family tradition in our blood. My dad was involved in politics big time. So, I got to witness a lot of things. I went to the '52 Republican National Convention, met Eisenhower. I think at one time I figured out I was the only senator who actually met Eisenhower. But my dad was very active in Republican politics. He first worked for Governor Payne Ratner a long time ago. I used to be a little guy that ran around the office. Let's see, state chairman and then finally national chairman of the Republican Party under Eisenhower. I think obviously I was very familiar with politics. Perhaps that gave me the impetus to keep going with it.

MS: Senator, you've made a lot of marks in the history books over the years, but one of the biggest by far is being the only member to ever chair both the House and the Senate Agriculture Committees, a really remarkable feat and a major boon for Kansas. Can you talk a little bit about your leadership for farmers and ranchers over the years?

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PR: Well, it was a privilege, Michael, and thank you for what you did for me being staff director for the committee. We had a lot of experiences, actually as you look back on it, a lot of fun as well. When you come to Washington to serve in the House, you're not appointed to the House Ag Committee, you're sentenced to it. But for me, it was a pleasant sentence. I had worked for Senator Frank Carlson. I had worked as chief of staff for Keith Sebelius who was a wonderful representative for agriculture on the House Ag Committee.

So, it was a natural fit. I learned right off the bat that the most important thing that you can do in representing farmers and ranchers is to listen. We had wonderful farm organizations that helped us out. We had an awful lot of farmers that I knew, and working for Carlson and Sebelius, it was sort of a natural fit. And I drew the short straw on seniority. So that helped a lot.

MS: A quick follow-up. As a farm kid growing up in Kansas, I distinctly remember every spring at some point Dad putting me on the back of the pick-up with the measuring wheel because we had to go mark off the amount of wheat that we needed to tear up that we couldn't harvest because we had planted more than the government told us we could plant and harvest that year. You really changed that with some landmark legislation in 1996, the Freedom to Farm, if we can say those words, and I'm proud of them. Agriculture in Kansas has really changed because of that.

And then the risk management tools that you created with crop insurance. You really changed how farmers farmed and how they managed their risk. Can you tell us a little bit about your thinking behind that, what you're proud of about that?

PR: The circumstances were right. All the stars were right on the constellation, not of my making. By the way, there is no "I" in this. It's a "we." I was blessed with a great staff. But what happened to us is the Gingrich revolution when we first took over and I became chairman. Kika de la Garza was the minority for the first time in many years.

But it was John Kasich who was in charge of the budget. We usually spent, and you can correct me, about 18 billion dollars for a farm bill during those days. It's increased now to a great degree. John Kasich decided he would give us nine billion, half of what we needed. I argued with him and argued with him. Newt stood behind John. So, there we were, presented with literally no money to keep going with the current farm bill.

I'm having a meeting in Dodge City, Kansas with a wheat grower, Leon Torline, a great farmer. He's sitting in the back, listening to all of these suggestions, and he says, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Why don't you just give me the freedom to farm my own land according to the way I want to do it and take all of these regulations and all of these things that we have put together with the Farm Bill, get rid of all that. Give the farmers the freedom to farm."

A little light goes off in my head when he said, Freedom to Farm. It's got a ring to it. And if we would have—and you know what we did. We had direct payments over the six years spread over a different time so it was a little tougher. Those direct payments would go up, and that's what got us Freedom to Farm. It was an historic change, and a good change.

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MS: And a legacy.

JC: A huge legacy.

PR: I would like to think that's the case. And crop insurance, as I explained to President Trump when I first got into seeing him the first week, he had it cut by OMB, and one of the people from the Freedom Caucus who is in charge of that. They were cutting crop insurance.

So, I got in to see him. He didn't even know who I was because nobody told him. So, he called me Farm Guy. That lasted for about three years. That's fine by me. I told him that cutting crop insurance was—that was the #1 issue of concern for farmers nationwide, regardless of crop or region. He bought into it, and he called the OMB director and said, "Mike, we're not"—not you, Mike, but the other Mike—"we're not cutting crop insurance." At the end of that, he said, "Sir, we're not cutting it. We're reforming it."

So, I sounded off. I think I said something that represents a lot of what we have in the Dodge City feed lots, Mr. President. He agreed with me, and we didn't cut crop insurance. We had a lot of help with crop insurance with a lot of members. It is now the #1 issue. It's a real concern that we have to keep that where it is.

JC: You know, Senator, agriculture we know is your passion. Probably the other passion I think of for you is national security. Before you left the Senate, you were the most senior Marine in the Congress, and your service definitely impacted all of the efforts you did to support our military. We saw how dedicated you were to the men and women at Fort Riley, McConnell Air Force Base, with the National Guard. And you specifically led the charge to bring the Big Red One back to Kansas. Can you talk a little bit about that? Why is that important, and how did you get it done?

PR: Well, it's obviously important to get the Big Red One back home. It has such a tremendous economic impact for central Kansas, not to mention Kansas State University and Manhattan, Kansas, and the surrounding territory. It's a great base. It's a base that has all kinds of weather. It's a great training base.

Again, it's who you know. Just by happenstance, Jim Jones was the commandant of the Marine Corps. They called him the Intellectual Marine. He was then in charge of NATO, and where NATO was going under the circumstances, some of the areas, some of the nations were upping the costs of having our troops there. So, they decided to move east. He told a group of us when we were over on a trip to Europe, and of course, we met with Jim Jones. This was Old Home Week because I had known him in the Congress, and we became personal friends. He said, "We are going to move east, and we're going to be sending some of our units back to the United States." And he looked at me and he said, "Roberts, I think you'd probably be interested in that."

The next phone call was to Ned Seaton of the Manhattan Mercury newspaper. I said, "We're coming home." That shows you the relationship is who your friends are, who do you get to know, who do you get to know that make a major impact. Now, that just happened, but it seemed to happen to me a lot more when I was in the Congress, and good things happened because of it.

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JC: You saved Fort Riley and Fort Leavenworth from the Base Realignment and Closure Committee. That was based on a lot of work you did over the years to plus up those posts.

PR: We would always have the person in charge of BRAC to come out to Manhattan and to Junction City and have a public meeting. These folks knew up and down and backwards the value of Fort Riley, not only to the area, but the mission that they had and how that training base fits that particular mission.

So, it wasn't easy because every once in a while, we go through a BRAC. I think with this president now, we're not going to do that for obvious reasons. Peace through strength. So, Fort Riley is there. We took care of it, and again it was who you know and how you conduct yourself. It's a "we" thing, and it worked out for us.

MS: I think Sir, folks forget and may not realize, there had been talk of moving the Command and General Staff [College] out of Leavenworth to Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Because of the investments you made, the discussions went from that to "Should the Army War College move out of Carlisle to Leavenworth?" That obviously didn't happen, but I don't think folks realize how much of a discussion that really was both ways and the investment you made over the years to really position Leavenworth to the strength that it still has today.

PR: Well, I still remember the first meeting that we had with those in charge of making that decision. I didn't elucidate very much. They tended to be short, jerky sentences. We were extremely upset. There's a lot of history with Fort Leavenworth. It's now called the Lewis and Clark Center. It's the intellectual center of the Army, and we have somewhere about 1,800 people who are lieutenants and company commanders, captains that are going to the next step to make the Army be all it can be. So, we were successful. It stayed in Leavenworth, and that's where it's going to stay.

MS: Senator, when we look back at your career, you held six major gavels over forty years. That's incredible. The two Ag Committees, as we mentioned, as well as leadership of the Senate Ethics Committee—

PR: Let me interrupt on that. Most people are sentenced to the Ethics Committee as well as appointed. They usually stay about four years. I have served on the Ethics Committee twenty-four straight years. I resigned. I won't tell you what Senator [Trent]Lott, the leader at that time, sent back to my letter of resignation, no four letter words in this interview. And then [Senator Bill] Frist later on, they wouldn't let me off. They kept saying, "No, we need somebody"—I had had experience in the House with all the things that were going wrong at that time. That was the bad check thing and the bank and all of that. So, they thought I had experience with that.

Then after you've served so much for so long, after ten years, if somebody—God bless the reformers. You always want to look behind the banner of reform to figure out what it really does. So, when somebody would come up and want to do something dramatically different, I would always look behind that banner and say, "Oh, my gosh. We tried that ten years ago. There's sixteen reasons that that's just not a good idea." So, I'd let everybody go ahead and make their speech with this. Then I said, "Just a minute. We tried that ten years ago, and it just doesn't work

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out that well." So, I think I preserved a lot of the rules of the Senate and how we operate here without some crazy reform.

MS: You were also the first chair of the Senate Armed Services Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee, which really began looking into threats against the homeland like the bombings of the USS Cole and then 9/11 happened. By 2003, you were chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. That had to have been an overwhelming responsibility after the attack. As we entered the war in Iraq, it wasn't always something easy for you to talk about back home. And Jackie and I know there were things you couldn't tell us. There were things we couldn't tell folks back home. Now that you can talk more about it, what really stands out to you in that period of your leadership as chairman of the Intelligence Committee?

PR: Well, the topic came up about the availability of weapons of mass destruction, a big one of the reasons we entered into the war with regards to Saddam Hussein. We started an inquiry that lasted about a year. We had over 300 analysts from every skiff all around—a skiff means a group of people that belong to an agency. The big guys didn't have any problem with it. They thought that he had it for sure. I'm talking about the defense intelligence, the CIA and others. It was the smaller skiffs that said, "Wait a minute. This isn't adding up."

But we determined in a bipartisan way—that usually doesn't happen today on the Intelligence Committee—but it did then. So, in a bipartisan way, we found that Saddam did not have the WMD. Now he thought he did. Nobody told him he didn't. If anybody would have told him that, they'd probably would have gone legs out in the room. But he thought he had them. One Republican guard thought the other one had it and vice versa. But clearly he did not have the WMD.

That was probably the toughest responsibility that I had was to go to the White House and tell President Bush and Vice President Cheney, "Do not endorse your national intelligence estimate. It is flawed. Saddam Hussein did not have weapons of mass destruction."

That was a tough deal. I'm overriding our committee working again in a bipartisan way. I found that that was just not the case. But it was, and it didn't change anything—Saddam was a bad guy. By the way, we always knew that Saddam was the big bully on the block. Now that's taken care of by a different president.

JC: I think people forget, too, all of this was happening right after 9/11. We were in red alert and orange alerts. We were evacuating the Capitol on a sort of regular basis. So, you really had a heavy responsibility, and sitting from the staff, I know that Mike and I used to talk about it, how much responsibility you had for the care and concern of this country, and it made the politics which were surrounding a lot of the weapons of mass destruction conversations I think extra difficult for you.

PR: I enjoyed that very much in terms of I know the responsibility was pretty heavy, but we had some excellent members on the Intelligence Committee. So, it was a together effort again. I remember going up when the president went up and a busload of senators went up, and we first saw that horrible sight. There the workers were working away, jackhammers cleaning it up,

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whatever. We got out of the bus, and here we are with a tie and coat, and these folks are operating in an environment that was very dangerous to them as well. They all quit and wondered who the heck we were.

I happened to come out of the bus first, and I just decided, "This is ridiculous." I climbed over a bunch of rocks and concrete and everything else to this guy with a jackhammer. I said, "We're senators to come up and say thank you for what you're doing. God bless you." He said, "Well, thank you, Sir. Who are you?" I said, "I'm Pat Roberts from Kansas, but we have a whole bunch of senators."

I did that. I probably shouldn't have done it. I should have waited for the leadership to go up, but they were still way back there. I decided it was the thing to do. That's when President Bush had that speaker, that loudspeaker.

JC: He got on the bullhorn.

MS: They all said, "We can't hear you," and he said, "Well, we can hear you, and the people who did this are sure as hell going to hear from us." But to see that total wreckage at that particular time, it's a searing moment of which you're experiencing in public office, or for that matter, in whatever you're doing.

JC: Well, now, blending your work in agriculture and national security, you led the effort very early on to bring a new national bio and agro defense facility, which we all call NBAF, to Kansas specifically on the K State campus. You worked on that effort for more than sixteen years. It brought hundreds of new jobs to the state, billions of dollars to the economy. There was an awful lot of competition to get that facility. A lot of states wanted to have that. How did you pull it off, and why did it take sixteen years?

PR: Well, with every monument on the Mall, there is always—you have to have the support of the family.

JC: We're talking about NBAF first. You're jumping—I know exactly what you're jumping to. Then we'll go to that one.

PR: Well, we didn't have any family opposition to NBAF. We did have Texas A & M.

JC: They were a big competitor. They wanted it badly.

PR: They were the biggest competitor. What that was about, let's go back to the Emerging Threats Subcommittee. I was over in Moscow. I had met with the general. By the way, somebody named Putin had just come in to office. The next day, we went to Obolensk, which was one of the secret cities. They had about twelve of them in Russia. Then they were falling apart. So, we were financing them to keep the scientists there, and we went to a place called Obolensk. That was the one that was using all sorts of poisonous thing to really take out a country's food supply.

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So, from that, I came back and really tried to lead an effort along with others to say, "Look, we've got to get on the ball here." We had a facility at Plum Island. It was degraded completely. We made a decision to have NBAF a national center for bioterrorism and all that.

It was pretty tough. We had a lot of support in Kansas. We had the legislature. Governor Sebelius was for it. We had the entire delegation working for it. I guess it just fell to me to take the lead.

Texas was our main competitor. This is where it goes back to knowing people. Guess who was in charge of making that decision? That same admiral that I saved from all the criticism in the Intelligence Committee. He said, "I know you. You saved me." I said, "What does this take?" He said, "It's going to be who really makes the best bid. It's called money."

So, the admiral kept advising me and working with the administration at K-State, working with the Kansas legislature, and working with all sorts of other people, we made our last bid. Then the legislature adjourned, but we didn't adjourn *sine die* which means really adjourned. You're still able to come back.

We let Texas go ahead. They made the highest bid. We expected that. After all, it's Texas. They made their final bid. We went back into session with the governor's help and the speaker and all of the folks that are in charge of that, we upped our bid by, oh, I guess, a thousand dollars more than Texas did, and we got the bid.

We have NBAF, and they've run into some problems recently, but they're getting back on the line. Senator [Jerry] Moran just went out there to NBAF and learned that it will be operational in 2027. It was supposed to be operational ten years ago.

JC: But you got it done.

PR: Yes, ma'am.

MS: You mentioned Texas A & M and Texas in the bid, but you remember, Jackie and I remember, after the bid was announced, there were at least two, maybe three times, sometimes at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, we found out Texas was trying to pull it back. They obviously had somebody sitting in the Oval Office, but you continued to fight that off.

I remember when they came out and did the site visits. The protocol was the DHS team isn't supposed to be alone with the member. Manhattan and Leavenworth both had sites, and you told the undersecretary, "Why don't you ride with me over to Leavenworth from Manhattan, and Mike, go ride with his staff." You got in with him, and I remember on the way over, his staff goes, "He wouldn't talk to him about this on the way over there, would he?" "No, that'd be very unlike Pat Roberts to do that."

JC: "Absolutely not."

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MS: I remember after he left, you got out and you said, "I think we've got a real shot at this if we do it right." So, you did a lot behind the scenes on this that was never really publicized.

JC: I think that's true of so many things you did.

MS: Absolutely.

JC: The challenges that came up in the dark of night on so many of this issues. I think people don't realize until they work here, it takes many, many years to get things done. It's not unusual to need to spend ten or twelve or fifteen years. It seemed like a lot of the projects you worked on were those long-term projects, and thank goodness, there wasn't term limits, or you wouldn't have been there to finish them, but it is not unusual, but you sure always stuck with it, and it was something I think Mike and I and all of the staff were very proud to watch you do. Every challenge, you were the Marine. You kept taking the hill.

PR: Well, we kept saying that. We would get in a bind on the Farm Bill or something like that, and I'd say, "Remember, we don't give up. We take the hill."

JC: Right.

MS: So, NBAF was sixteen years. So, that was a short-term project. Let's talk about a twenty-year project, the Eisenhower Memorial here in Washington, down near the National Mall. It's one of only seven presidential memorials in Washington. You were an original member of the Memorial Commission and chairman the final six years, and it seemed like that should have been an easy project to complete, but it hit a bunch of obstacles, and like a good Marine, you persevered. Why was that such an important project to you, and how did you get it done and get that monument?

PR: As I said before, my dad was in charge of the Citizens for Eisenhower during that campaign in '52. They were up against Bob Taft who was called Mr. Republican. Winning that primary was important at that convention. I attended that convention. I got to meet Eisenhower as a very young guy. I think I was a sophomore in high school. I had access to the floor. I was under the assistant sergeant of arms.

It was quite an experience for a young student at that particular time. Since Dad was national chairman under Ike and he comes from Abilene, Kansas, and we were able to get some money out there to Abilene to improve the museum and the office and everything out there. So, it was just a natural fit.

Unfortunately, we ran into a family dispute. It took a long time to get that done. I remember sitting in Bob Dole's office, and Jim Baker was our last hope to talk to Susan Eisenhower to get her to agree to a theme for the memorial. We originally had a theme, but that was vetoed by the family—not David, but Susan. So, we had Baker talk to Susan.

Baker calls Bob. I'm in the office. Jim Baker says, "Well, Bob, Susan has come up with Victory at Peace."

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JC: Yes, it was at peace.

PR: As opposed to the other one.

JC: She wanted Normandy at Peace.

MS: Yes, Normandy at Peace, and that's what the theme is. It's a pretty good theme really, if you think that what he did being the Allied Commander and preserve western democracy in Europe and for that matter here. That's no small feat. That was a good theme. It was okay.

Anyway, Baker asked Dole, he said, "Bob, what do you think?" And Bob said, "I'm not the chairman. Pat's the chairman." Well, wait a minute. [says in a low voice] "I'm not the chairman. Pat's the chairman." I said, "Jim, I don't care if we put Ike on a damn horse. Let's get this done." So, we did, finally.

I am sad that it took so long because we lost a lot of World War II veterans, and they couldn't come up after looking at the World War II Memorial, which Bob Dole did, and then come up and salute their commander. That was my hope. But we lost a lot of folks. Every once in a while, you come up with a World War II veteran, but not so much anymore.

JC: It's a beautiful memorial.

PR: Yes, it is.

JC: A nice tribute to a wonderful president and leader.

MS: Absolutely. You talked about your family history with President Eisenhower. But I know a story Jackie and I heard, I don't know if a lot of folks have, is that you mentioned you were the only senator you figured out who had actually met Eisenhower. I'm betting that meant you were probably also the only senator that was hiding in the back corner of the room with your dad and the then general when then Congressman Nixon was selected as the vice president.

PR: That's because California came on board. My dad suggested to—oh, gosh, there were the Who's Who of Republicans in that room that were for Ike. They were discussing how on earth they could push this over because Taft did have a lot of delegates. But in Texas, Alabama, and Louisiana, the Old Guard met by themselves and nominated and elected themselves as they had down through the years. The Citizens for Eisenhower which my dad was in charge of, made up of largely servicemen and women and then we also had a lot of women who were for Ike, "I Like Ike."

So, my dad said, "Let's have the Fair Play Amendment" because the people that met for the delegation for Ike met on the day they should have, and it wasn't in secret, and it's just a fair play that they had more delegates elected than the others. As a consequence, who could vote against the Fair Play Amendment? He said, "What's the downside? We are right where we are."

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Texas came on board. Louisiana came on board. Alabama came on board. California saw the writing on the wall. Boom, it was California. Guess what? Earl Warren was the chief justice of the Supreme Court, and Richard Nixon was the vice president. I'm not saying there's any relation to that, of course.

JC: Well, staff do love your stories. We've heard a few times, so I'm going to cue you to talk about President Reagan. You came in in 1980 with President Reagan, and you had some pretty good experiences, or I'll say some pretty interesting experiences. Can you talk about that?

PR: Well, I ran in 1980, and I was like George Bush I, "No increase in taxes." I made a declaration. I'm not going to go back there and vote for a tax increase. And, of course, Reagan came in, and of all things, he proposed a tax increase on the handshake deal with Tip O'Neill. For every dollar of the tax increase, we would cut three dollars during the first two years. Well, you know what happened. I think we raised the spending $2.69, and then we also had that tax increase.

But we had to march in unity on behalf of the new president. I was one of the ones who said, "I'm sorry. I can't do that. Until, of course, I went to the White House. There were six of us, and five were people I knew, and they were conservatives, and they all told the president who was sitting there, he asked every one of them how they were going to vote until I realized I was the last one, and it was a set-up. I thought, "Oh, my god. What am I going to say?"

So, I said, "Well, there's this 10 percent withholding, Mr. President, I'm a little concerned about that. The banks are, too. My mom doesn't understand it. She, of course, is worried about her savings and everything." I was just saying things off the top of my head. And then "I made this as a campaign promise. I just apologize for taking up your time."

And the president says, "Well, Pat, you're following your convictions and I understand that, but I hope we can change your mind." He was like a grandfather talking to you. Then all of my cohorts there, all of my colleagues looked at me like I was a leper.

So I arrived back to the office and the staff says, "Congressman, you're invited to go to the White House with your mother at 10:00 in the morning." So, I had to call my mom. She says, "What kind of trouble have you got me into?"

So, my mother and I go up, and he wants to talk to my mother about the problem she's having with this bank issue. She didn't know the first thing about it. I had to brief her. So, I'm in there, and everybody's in there—the vice president, the chairman of the committee of that particular time, influential senators, the press guy who chewed me out for taking the president's time and everything else.

A long story short, he charmed the socks off my mother, and he gave her a pin, and she says, "Well, I really wasn't for you in the primary. I was really for Bush." Of course, he was vice president. At any rate, then he turns to me, and it's just like radar. All the eyes were focused on me. I said, "Mr. President, thank you for what you've done with my mom. She'll remember this forever. I appreciate it very much, but I'm not changing my vote."

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JC: Wow.

PR: So, that was that, I thought, until the vote started. Then they said, "You have a phone call in the cloakroom," and it was Keith Sebelius, my predecessor, a dear, dear man. He unfortunately was not in good shape and probably on his deathbed calling me. He said, "Pat, what's this I hear? You're voting against the president. Do it for me. I never had the chance in twelve years to vote with the president. Please vote yes." There were tears in my eyes, and I said, "Thank you, Keith." I walked down, tears in my eyes, put in the voting card, hit yes. They never could figure out what really happened.

JC: I think Reagan was brilliant in his lobbying efforts, well known to be.

MS: He knew how to get it done. Let's talk about another native son, a Kansan. You worked very closely with Senator, leader, and Presidential candidate Dole over the years. We've heard some about it at the staff level, but tell us about some of your favorite memories and stories with Senator Dole.

PR: Oh, my. Well, I really didn't get to work with Bob on an equal basis. I was a staffer, of course, for a Congressman. We never let Keith Sebelius be on the same stage with Bob because he had that wonderful wit and could always rev up a crowd. He was just sensational.

Until I was a member of Congress, we used to play practical jokes on each other. I don't think they do that around here now, but at any rate, one time I called up his chief of staff, and I said, "Bill, where's my speech?" I could imitate Bob's voice pretty good. That staff looked all over everywhere for that speech until finally the gal that was on the floor that did all of his work said, "He doesn't have a speech," and they figured out it was Roberts. I said, "If the Dole office calls, I'm not in." And it went back and forth like that. That's just a story of some of the things we'd do. It was actually fun to be here. I'm not sure that happens today.

In any case, Bob and I, I used to call him twice a week when he was in his nineties. He was talking one time, and he said, "You remember the time" and he would relay a story. I'd say, "Yep, I remember, and I also remember we had a heck of a time dragging you out of the ice cream shop in order to make it." Anyway, he says, "You know, you don't hear much about that." I said, "Bob, we're the only ones alive that really remember that."

We became very close. It was sort of going from staffer to Bob to a member to Bob to, after he had retired, and I treasure that, and I guess I can say this, it's fair for elderly men to say this, but all of a sudden he said, "Pat, there's one thing I want you to understand." I said, "What's that, Bob?" He said, "I love you," and I said, "I love you, too, Bob." I teared up the whole day that day. He was a great man.

JC: And he asked you to do the eulogy at his funeral.

PR: Yes, that was a real—you helped me write that speech. I had written a very long speech, and you got it all cut down, talked about Kansas and Dole, which everybody else talked about other

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things. I think I did okay. It was at the cathedral. We had several thousand people. If I had to judge the speeches that I made in the past, I would rate that probably at the top.

JC: It was pretty spectacular.

MS: I remember after you gave that, I remember texting you and saying, "I think I've heard you give close to a thousand speeches over the years, and that was the best one you'd given." You did an amazing job with it.

JC: It was personal.

PR: Well, it was such a privilege. The president was there, etc., etc., etc. I recall that with great fondness.

MS: You know, Senator, you made it a policy to go to every county in the First District with Jean Eastman as your driver, and then later the 105 counties in the state as senator with Chad Tenpenny and Harold Stones. Jackie and I got to tag along on a lot of those, a lot of August and Easter recesses and other times. But you always seemed to be just completely energized after those trips, but you also really believed in the importance of them. Why do you think those listening tours and those town halls were so important to you in being able to come back here to DC to represent the people back home?

PR: Well, the first thing you learn, Senator Carlson told me, "You never get hurt by what you don't say." He said, "You always want to listen." And that's what we did. We listened. We had that down to over two weeks, and it was over 2,000 miles for the district, and, of course, 105 counties later, it took you longer. We would usually go to the courthouse. On several occasions, we didn't go to the grassroots. We went to the grass weeds. It was the non-county seat town. They really appreciated it—there were some stories there that we could go on and on. They were really hilarious.

MS: They're all still classified.

PR: Well, they're not classified so much—

JC: Oh, we're classified.

MS: They're classified.

PR: It was just a lot of fun. I would stop in at the newspaper, stop in at the radio station, so on and so forth. It was pretty high-profile stuff. But there wasn't any tour that we ever went on that we didn't learn terrible things or a different tack to take. But Kansas is very homogeneous. I'll exempt Wichita and Kansas City from that. Sometimes they get into different things, but it was a joy to do. You got to meet the same people, and then they would bring other people. So, we would have a good crowd every time. The stories I could tell, but we don't have enough time for that.

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That was the famous listening tour. I'm trying to think of one story, but if I start one, it will be impossible. I knew every granddad. I knew every dad. I knew most of the farmers and also the Republican women. By the way, there's a rule in politics. You give the list to the man, and the man gives it to the vice chairman, the lady. They get it done. I had a staff mostly made up of women simply because they're better at it, and they actually do the job. Here's a wonderful example.

JC: Well, I'm going to get a little sentimental now because as your chief of staff for eighteen years, I worked with you before that for over twenty, I watched your care and concern for the people of Kansas. Just to your point, It's a very big state geographically, but you always made it feel like a very small community. You walked into these businesses and cafes, and it was like you knew everybody and their grandparents. You were like the Taylor Swift of politics going into those Kansas communities.

But you could only have done that job so successfully if you liked people, and talk a little bit about the personal side of this job. You won twenty-four out of twenty-four campaigns. That's not nothing, and you made it look pretty easy most times, and you endured some pretty tough campaigns. But talk about the personal side and the people.

PR: I always enjoyed going to whatever county seat it was. I knew there'd be good friends that I had seen before. I had worked with Keith Sebelius. I'd been through that district twelve times, and then we did it sixteen times. So, it was like Old Home Week. We also had our critics that would always show up and give me a hard time, and after they would speak, I would say, "Well, it doesn't change anything." You could call him Bob. "Bob, I'll just have to put you down as undecided." So, if you kept your sense of humor, and people have told me I at least had that. I just enjoyed it.

The first thing you've got to learn in politics is to listen, and the second thing is there's no "I" in politics. It's a "we" thing. I had that with a great staff. I had that with the people I represented. It's very homogeneous in Kansas. In other words, it's small town America. It's like the cover of the Saturday Evening Post. They're wonderful people to represent, very easy to represent. Just do what they say. Sometimes I had to tell them I was a little bit at odds with that, but we just got along. We had a wonderful time. As I look back on it, I wanted to write at almost every stop that we were having about some of the extraordinary people that would come and some of the experiences.

JC: What's your favorite quote? "There are no self-made men or women in politics"?

PR: "It's your friends who make you what you are."

JC: And you sure stuck to that.

PR: Yes, we did that for sure, and we had a lot of friends.

MS: Loyal to your friends, loyal to your staff.

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JC: Yes.

MS: And you probably shouldn't have been at times. Let us get beat up a little bit. You know, Senator, in preparing for this conversation, Jackie and I were hard-pressed to get all of your accomplishments into this interview. We were thinking about South Lawrence Trafficway, helping to rebuild Greensburg after the devastating tornado it had and getting President George W. Bush not only to go visit, but to go back and speak at the graduation, the CRP [Conservation Reserve] program and other ag programs, the work you did for the general aviation industry that's so important to the Kansas economy, and then the numerous bills you did for supporting rural health care and rural hospitals, and even the work you did for reforms in the House as a House member when you found rampant corruption in the post office and others. What have we not touched on today that stands out in your memory from your service that you would really like Kansans to know about or what you were really proud of?

PR: Let's go back to Greensburg. I'm in Topeka. Harold Stones who is just absolutely wonderful in the job that he did being our top gun out there in Kansas and also on all the tours, he always wanted to take the county road. Invariably, the bridge would be out, and then we'd be late for the meeting.

JC: That's why Chad mostly drove.

PR: Anyway, Harold calls me at 2:00 in the morning. I'm in Topeka. He's waking me up. He says, "Have you been to Greensburg lately?" I said no. They have the world's largest hand-dug well. Every one of our county seats had something. It's very typical in rural America. He said, "Well, it isn't anymore. It just got hit by a terrible wedge tornado." He said, "How would you like to go to Greensburg?" I said, "I can't wait."

So, we stopped at an all-night store and got me some overalls and stuff like that. Off we went to Greensburg. We got there at daylight. Total devastation. What we were trying to do then afterwards, even in a helicopter ride, Fort Riley came on over and gave us a ride. The National Guard did in a helicopter. I couldn't recognize anything.

So, we had to get FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] out there, but FEMA always has to come out and inspect first to determine where they're going to put in extra housing and things like that, water, all the essentials, but there wasn't anything to inspect. So, I knew I had to get FEMA out the next day.

I decided to call the president. We went up to—what's the hamburger place?

JC: McDonald's in Pratt.

PR: I was up in Pratt about thirty miles away. I went in there. Both Jean and I sitting there on this big, wide seat, and I'm calling the president. He's at Camp David. He answers the phone. He says, "I know what you're calling me about. I'm from Lubbock. You got hit by a bad tornado." I said, "Yes, Mr. President, that's it, but we need FEMA next day."

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Usually they don't do that unless the governor requests it. I said, "Unfortunately, the governor is in Louisiana. She's not here." He said, "How would you like to be governor?" I said, "Well, for this issue, I'm more than willing to be governor." He said, "Raise your right hand." He repeated whatever he repeated, and I said, "Yes, sir," and whatever I do, what all. He said, "Okay, you're governor. Now what's your request?" "FEMA immediately, Mr. President." "Done."

Well, I didn't realize when talking in this round seat, but twenty-five people, farmers, others were standing there, listening to me. There's one old boy who hitched up his bib overalls, and he said, "Mama, I told you Pat was going to visit the president and get FEMA tomorrow. He's the one that can get 'er done." I looked around. There's twenty-five people watching us. We left with a victory there. Anybody there in that hamburger joint, they got a firsthand seat.

JC: And then the president came, too, with you. You flew out on Air Force One with him.

PR: Yes, I flew on Air Force One, and he gave the address—I gave the graduation speech. I called it "The Class of Faith and Hope." Then he gave a wonderful speech the next year. He was that kind of a person. I got along very well with Bush II.

JC: Well, I think it's safe to say Mike and I are very proud to have played small roles in your achievements for Kansas and the country. When you look back on it, what do you hope people will most remember about your public service or your legacy to Kansas?

PR: Oh, gosh. We got things done. We did it in a bipartisan way. A member of the Democrat Party might give a partisan speech on the floor, and you'd probably think, "Gee whiz. How can I work with this person?" But then you found out what they were like as an individual, and we did a lot more of that at that particular time.

We got a Farm Bill done with Kika de la Garza's help. He was the longtime chairman, and he was ranking when I was chairman. He cared more about getting the Farm Bill done than politics. That was in the House.

In the Senate, I worked with Senator [Debbie] Stabenow. I figured if you could get 80 percent of what you want, that was a win, sometimes 75. But we got 87 votes for the last Farm Bill, working with Stabenow and going into Congress and getting that done. That was not easy. I don't think they've had a vote on the Farm Bill ever since then. I doubt if they'd get 87 votes for almost anything these days.

Somehow we've got to get control of this ideology. If you're talking to somebody who's an ideologist, they're going to be right, and you're wrong regardless. You just can't really talk to them, and we have far too much of that. We're getting to the point of almost a meltdown in what the Senate used to be and the House used to be. That's a real concern to me. It's very sad. Good people are leaving because of it.

I worry that the kind of folks that are coming in, you've got to abide the rules. We used to have the Old Guard that used to insist on the Senate be running right. That's not the case now. I would

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hope that we could get back to a more bipartisan situation where you got things done. After all, that's why you're being there.

JC: I think with that, we'll say thank you for your service one more time and thank you for participating in this oral history project, Senator Roberts.

PR: It's my privilege. I've enjoyed it. Thank you, Mike.

MS: It was our honor and our privilege, Sir, to serve with you.

[End of File]

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