

Jim McLean: Hello, I'm Jim McLean, a member of the Kansas Oral History Project board and a former reporter for Kansas newspapers and public radio stations. Today is September 5, 2025, and we're at the Kansas Capitol to interview Leroy Towns, a journalist who covered the Kansas Statehouse for *The Topeka Capital-Journal* and Harris News before joining Governor Robert Bennett's staff to manage his media relations.

After Bennett lost his bid for re-election to John Carlin, Towns signed on to manage former Congressman Pat Roberts's first campaign as well as the next seven. He served as Roberts's chief of staff and continued in that role when Roberts moved on to the US Senate. After leaving the senator's staff, Towns taught [part-time] at George Washington University and later for several years at the University of North Carolina. There's much more to his story, and we'll get to that in a few minutes.

This interview is part of the Kansas Oral History Project's series exploring the contributions of reporters, editors, press secretaries, and others who inform the public about politics and policymaking. The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation that collects and preserves Kansans' oral histories. The project is supported by donations from generous individuals and occasional grants. As always, today our videographer is former Kansas Representative Dave Heinemann.

Welcome, Leroy. Thanks a lot for joining us. I've been looking forward to this conversation.

Leroy Towns: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

JM: So, looking over your resume, some fascinating—your career was so varied and wide-ranging, but it struck me—initially, your journalistic career started when you got credentialed, I think while in college to do some coverage of the Vietnam War, and you went to Vietnam. How did that happen?

LT: Well, we got—another student and I dreamed it up one time like students do late at night. We got credentialed and decided, "Well, we're now credentialed to cover the conflict in Vietnam. Let's just go."

JM: You got credentialed. Who credentialed you?

LT: The [U.S.] Army—the military in Saigon.

JM: So, you're a student at Kansas State University (K-State).

LT: Yes.

JM: You get credentialed. So, you're heading to Vietnam.

LT: Well, at that point we were just credentialed. We were intending to do a story. So, then we decided, "Well, we'll just see what it takes to go. First, we had to raise the money. We had to

have somebody sponsor us because part of the thing to get credentialed, you have to have a news organization promise to carry your remains back when you get shot up in Vietnam. So, the [Kansas State] *Collegian* did that, and the *Collegian* director came to us and said, "Now, I'm going to sign this." He said, "Don't get killed."

JM: And the *Collegian*, of course, was the student paper at K-State.

LT: The student newspaper, yes. Then we had to raise the money. We raised some from the Student Senate, some from the president of the university, and some from the Kansas Press Association, and some from the broadcasters association. We were still short. So, we got the bright idea that we would raise money from Rotary Clubs around the state and promised them a program when we got back, which we did. We raised several hundred dollars from Rotary [clubs]. When we got back, we went all around the state giving programs.

JM: Did you want to cover something specifically like Kansans who were—

LT: Well, we were basically concentrating on Kansans.

JM: Right.

LT: While we were there although we did a little of everything.

JM: So, you got there. How long did you spend in Vietnam?

LT: Close to a month as I recall, at least three weeks, a little over.

JM: Where did you go? Were you on the frontlines?

LT: We were all over the south. In those days, in probably the last war this will ever happen in, but reporters could go anywhere they wanted. Credentialed reporters had, I think, third or fourth priority for transportation in the country. The only people that had higher priority for transportation were general officers, medical evacuees, and maybe intelligence. After that, if there was still room on a helicopter, they would take you.

JM: Really? Do you remember any of the stories you sent back?

LT: We sent back several. We concentrated on the 9th Division, which had come out of Fort Riley along with the 1st [Infantry Division]. They did some operations up close to Cambodia, which we spent some amount of time on.

JM: What was your overall impression? What year would that have been roughly?

LT: I think it was 1967.

JM: So, the escalation had occurred. America was fully in.

LT: It was just before the Tet Offensive.

JM: What was your recollection of what it was like over there?

LT: At the time, I thought the whole thing was screwed up. It was a beautiful country being torn apart, and nobody could really define the reason for it. One of the questions we always asked officials of any kind was, "What are you doing here?" They had a hard time coming up with a definitive answer. "Well, we're protecting democracy, stopping communism." You couldn't see that.

JM: So, you went over there with kind of a young person's, a college student's impression of what the conflict was all about.

LT: Right.

JM: And what you saw there confirmed your point of view pretty much?

LT: It pretty much confirmed it although I may be simplifying it a little bit because it was a United States conflict. While we were Americans pulling for America, it still seemed a little bit of a sketchy operation.

JM: So, you came back from that experience and eventually became the editor of the *Collegian* at K-State.

LT: Yes.

JM: You graduated, and you moved on. First you came to Topeka to work at *The Topeka Capital* [-Journal] (*The Capital-Journal*)?

LT: I'd been an intern at *The Capital-Journal*, and after I graduated in '67, I went back and joined the staff at *The Capital-Journal* and spent a little bit of time as a general reporter and then I got assigned to the state legislature and covered that until about '72.

JM: Is that something you always wanted to do is cover politics?

LT: Oh, yeah. That was my goal from the very beginning. Politics was my biggest interest.

JM: So, you covered the legislature, and also you were the editor of the Sunday edition.

LT: Yes.

JM: Which in those days probably had a pretty robust circulation.

LT: It did. It had the Sunday magazine. What I liked about the Sunday magazine was we were able to weld together good stories and wonderful photographs. *The Capital-Journal* had a

world-class photography staff. We did multimedia stories before multimedia with that magazine.

JM: *The Capital-Journal* did have a rich history. Rich Clarkson went through there.

LT: Yes.

JM: Jim Ryan interned for Clarkson. Earl Richardson. Was Berne Ketchum there?

LT: Berne Ketchum was there. Berne Ketchum is a good friend. He and I still get together.

JM: I worked with Berne quite a bit. He was an amazing photographer. I call him “The Man for All Seasons.” He can do anything. He built steam engines to scale in his spare time.

LT: He was one of the first of that batch of photographers that got interested in covering state politics. He spent a lot of time around the legislature.

JM: I’ve seen his photographs. He captured moments like nobody I can recall.

LT: He did.

JM: You say, too, that you had great photographers there, and you had some really eager, young, talented reporters there at the time. You put that Sunday magazine out, and you really did probably do some groundbreaking work.

LT: At least it was groundbreaking in the sense that we fused together wonderful photography with at the time what we thought was good writing.

JM: I remember when I was at *The Capital-Journal* some series I think that won multiple awards about natural birth or something like that.

LT: Yes. Brian Lanker did a story on natural birth, photographed a story on that, and it was a great story. It won a Pulitzer. I was not involved in that story. He won a Pulitzer for that.

JM: I remember that one. So, you got your first taste of covering politics in the legislature. You went from *The Capital-Journal*—how did you end up then at Harris News?

LT: I’d finished, come to the end of what I thought was a challenging time for *The Capital-Journal*. So, I was looking around, and Harris offered me a slot covering the—they had not had a State Capitol correspondent before, but I became the State Capitol correspondent for Harris with the idea that at some point they were going to set up a management training program that I might be interested in. So, I spent two years, I believe as the Harris correspondent.

JM: So, you were the first of a series of really good reporters to occupy that position.

LT: That's right. Those were the days when the Harris newspapers were at their, I think at their height—good, strong editors, a bunch of good reporters around the state.

JM: Yes, I can attest to that. In fact, that was going to be my next question. In those days, those Harris papers really carried a lot of weight. They had powerful editors who did their own editorials. They weighed in on state politics pretty regularly, Clyde Reed in Parsons and Awbrey. So, you had the *Hutch[inson] News*, *Salina Journal*, *Garden City Telegram*, *Hays Daily News*, *Chanute [Tribune]*, *Parsons [Sun]*. [During review of the transcript, the interviewee noted that the Parsons paper was not a Harris paper when Clyde Reed was editor.]

LT: Ottawa and Chanute.

JM: *Ottawa Herald* and Chanute. So, those were the halcyon days for those newspapers.

LT: They were, and they were great editors. What they did to become great is they let reporters report. There weren't a lot of reins on reporters other than the usual "Be accurate."

JM: Yes.

LT: But there was a lot of latitude. That's one of the things that attracted me to the Harris papers was the freedom that they promised in reporting.

JM: So, you occupied that position for a couple of years. Do you recall any of the issues you covered for Harris? That was a long time ago.

LT: One of the issues I covered for Harris was Vern Miller.

JM: Oh, of course.

LT: Vern Miller was running rampant around the state. So, I went to an editors' meeting at one point, and I told the editors, I said, "Vern Miller is out of control in Topeka," and their comment to me was, "Do what it takes to stop it."

JM: Really?

LT: So, I went back and became a very crusading activist against some of the things Vern Miller was doing.

JM: Vern Miller, of course, was the attorney general of Kansas, the former sheriff in Sedgwick County, a really kind of rough-and-ready guy who earned his law degree by flying himself to Oklahoma City and going to law school at night. He was Sedgwick County sheriff, and then he was the attorney general. He later ran for governor.

But in those days, he was crusading against the drug infractions in the state. He was leaping out of the trunks of cars on university campuses and so forth and arresting people on trains and airplanes as they crossed Kansas.

LT: He made everybody a little mad. He had a crusade against [gambling in] Elks clubs, big slot machines, and American Legions, and VFW clubs, which is where he started. But after that, he went into the drug part.

When I first got involved with reporting on him, it was before he ran for governor. I had quite a group of defense attorneys in the state come to me and say that they had clients that were being railroaded by Vern Miller and his drug agents. So, I started looking into that. His main drug agent had been a federal agent at one point, and the feds had been after him for escaping out the back of a hotel room with about \$60,000 in federal drug buy money.

JM: This is the agent who Vern later hired.

LT: This is the agent. Vern Miller made him chief agent. This guy was going after kids around the state, young people, basically putting them in jail for simple pot smoking. He was using that pot smoking to widen the circle of people being arrested. I even had two young women who claimed they had been turned into prostitution and blackmailed to become drug agents. It was quite a time.

JM: So, you reported all this.

LT: I did.

JM: He was also dutybound to enforce the state's—the state didn't have liquor by the drink at the time. So, if people were drinking on a train crossing Kansas, he would stop the train and arrest people. If they were in an airplane flying over Kansas air space, he tried to enforce the liquor laws and gained a lot of notoriety I should say for those efforts. Then he did run for governor—

LT: He did run for governor.

JM: Against Bob Bennett.

LT: Against Bob Bennett, and I think some of my reporting may have been part of the reason that he did not win.

JM: That was a close race.

LT: It was a close race, 500 votes, I think.

JM: It was that close? I didn't realize it was that close. So, you're the Harris News correspondent at the time, and then Bob Bennett, Robert Bennett from the Kansas City area, is elected governor, and you surprise a lot of people by joining his staff.

LT: Well, I always admired—I covered the Senate and admired Bennett. He was smart and he was a little underappreciated in the state. He'd won the governor's race. I decided to take his offer to become press secretary.

Part of the reason I did that was because I was frustrated with print media. I wanted to be able to tell a story with various media, not just print. I felt awfully constrained by print. As press secretary, I could tell those stories, albeit they were propaganda pieces or public relations pieces, but I could tell them with radio, television, words.

JM: Let's go with public relations versus propaganda.

LT: Okay, sure.

JM: It was a tamer time than we're living in right now when I think propaganda probably is a more accurate description of what's happening now. So, you say you admired—he had been president of the Senate, and he was known pretty much as an intellectual and kind of erudite. Is that what attracted you to him?

LT: He was extremely smart. That attracted me. He was smarter than most politicians, and I thought probably more interested in doing the right thing. Like all politicians, that's not 100 percent true, but it was fairly true with him.

JM: So, it wasn't necessarily partisanship that led you to do that.

LT: No.

JM: You admired the man. You had an interest in politics, and you thought that that job would free you up to do more things.

LT: Those were different days in reporting than today in that reporters were often part of the process back then. That was before Watergate and before the constraints that have been put on reporting today. While reporters try to adhere to the reporting code of ethics, they were still more a part of the process than they have been since.

JM: Explain that, "a part of the process."

LT: I remember my first job in Garden City when I was an intern in Garden City. They were in the process of beginning the junior college, the community college. They usually met at night. Since I was single and footloose and trying to stay out of trouble, I would go cover these meetings at

night. Before the summer was over, I was part of the discussion of what the best way forward was.

JM: They were consulting you?

LT: I wouldn't say consulting, but I was at least part of it. I was as much a part of it as I was a reporter observing it. That happened to some degree through—later on in the state. Reporters and public officials used to fraternize more in those days than they do now. I can remember once right after I started with *The Capital-Journal*, I was at a party in Topeka with a number of reporters covering the Statehouse, and also the governor and some other officials may have been there. An argument started between a couple of reporters and the governor and some others. At one point, several of us had to intervene to keep a reporter and the governor from toppling over the balcony on the second floor. And nobody wrote a word about that.

JM: Really?

LT: That would not happen today. That was what I'm talking about being more a part of the process.

JM: Truly the fourth estate in the sense they were—I think I came in the tail end of those days, but I certainly got there post-Watergate. While you were there, Watergate was unfolding. All the ethical reforms and so forth that came in both politically and journalistically hadn't really hit yet.

So, Bennett served just a two-year term.

LT: Well, one four-year term.

JM: One four-year term. He went for re-election.

LT: And lost.

JM: And was defeated by Democrat John Carlin. Do you remember much about that campaign?

LT: Well, the campaign started out, Bennett was way ahead in the polls.

JM: Nobody knew who Carlin was.

LT: By the time it was finished, John Carlin had convinced Kansans that Bennett was responsible for the increase in utility bills, prisons were out of control, and it switched in the last two weeks of the campaign.

JM: John was speaker of the House, the first Democrat to occupy that position in a long, long, long time. He ran that campaign—I remember reading about the utility, the commercials he put on regarding utility rates. That had a pretty dramatic effect on the election.

LT: It did. A huge effect. As a matter of fact, I think doors all over Kansas got hung with door hangers alleging that their utility rates were high because Bob Bennett had made them high.

JM: When in fact—

LT: It was more complicated than that.

JM: It always is. What was your role in the campaign?

LT: Press secretary. I didn't really have an official campaign capacity.

JM: Yes, you were working for the governor. What was the mood like? Again, did Governor Bennett kind of take the approach that he was above it all? Did he respond? Did you consider it dirty tricks? How do you recall—

LT: I don't ever recall him being critical of any opponent ever. He was more philosophical than that. His philosophy was that good politics is good government. We're going to keep doing this good government, and the people will let us know if we get it right. I don't know that he was especially bitter even about the loss.

JM: Really?

LT: Disappointed, yes.

JM: So, you go to work for Governor Bennett. He loses rather unexpectedly, probably from your perspective. How did you then manage to make connections with Pat Roberts?

LT: I'd known Keith Sebelius and Pat Roberts for quite a number of years. After I left the governor's office, Roberts called and said, "I want you on the campaign," and I said, "Well, I'm not sure I believe in staff people becoming candidates, but I'll take a look at it."

I went out to Dodge City when he was making his announcement. He gave an announcement speech that was just a barnburner. I thought, "This guy has potential!" I liked what he had to say. I liked the guy. He became a good friend and mentor over the years.

JM: You mentioned Keith Sebelius. Of course, he was the Congressman from the Big First District. Pat Roberts was his chief of staff at the time?

LT: Yes.

JM: So, that's what you referenced about a staff person then becoming the candidate. I know Pat came from Republican royalty in the sense that his father was a national precinct committee member. Is that correct?

LT: That's right.

JM: From Holton, and he had some newspapers. He was a newspaper publisher, wasn't he?

LT: Right.

JM: So, Pat worked for Keith Sebelius and then was going to be the successor, right?

LT: Yes.

JM: And you signed on to manage that campaign?

LT: I managed the campaign, and he won. It was a good campaign.

JM: Yes.

LT: He won. I said, "All right. When you win, I'm not going to Washington with you." And he won, and I went. And I never looked back.

JM: Why did you say that?

LT: I just never had any real desire to be part of the Washington establishment. But I went and loved every minute of it.

JM: You went, and you served as his chief of staff from the get-go, didn't you?

LT: Right.

JM: And you managed media relations in that position, too.

LT: It was hard managing media relations for Pat Roberts because he was his own media relations guy.

JM: He was pretty glib.

LT: He was.

JM: He had a pretty good sense of humor.

LT: He was.

JM: He was known for that. What do you recall about those early years in Washington?

LT: Well, the early years in Washington were again different than they are today in that there were I think two Democrats in—Dan Glickman was in, and later there was a Democrat in the 3rd District. And staffs mingled back and forth all the time. They talked to each other about issues. Democrats and Republicans were conspiring together about everything. Of course, there was the partisan thing, but that changed later.

LT: It was a totally different time. It was a lot more fun. A Republican could walk into a Democrat's office and chat with him about the issue of the day.

JM: There were disagreements.

LT: Oh, sure.

JM: But there was overarching cooperation. I think if Dan Glickman was representing Wichita, maybe it was Martha Keyes? Was she the Congressman from the 2nd District?

LT: She was before I went back. She was there for a while.

JM: And then Jeffries followed her.

LT: Jeffries, then after that was Nancy Boyda.

JM: Slattery, then Boyda. I guess in the 3rd District in the Kansas City area, that at the time, I'm trying to remember who would have been—Jan Meyers.

LT: Jan Meyers was there, and then after her, I think it was—

JM: Dennis Moore.

LT: Dennis Moore followed her. [*Interviewer note: Republican Vince Snowbarger followed Jan Meyers as the 3rd District representative. Snowbarger was defeated after one term by Democrat Dennis Moore.*]

JM: We may have gotten some of that mixed up, but generally speaking, and then Slattery came in and represented the 2nd District in Congress for about a decade as well. The point is, the Kansas delegation in those days was mixed.

LT: Right.

JM: A couple Democrats, a couple Republicans. They eliminated the 5th District in those days. Bob Whittaker had occupied that seat. They eliminated it because of the census.

LT: Right.

JM: So, your experience in those early days in Washington was one of collegiality.

LT: Yes. Sure. There were always some partisan issues, but you could talk.

JM: Then Roberts, how many terms did he serve in the House?

LT: He served in the House from '80 until '96 when he ran for the Senate.

JM: He became very influential, particularly in agriculture issues.

LT: He was chairman of the Ag Committee.

JM: And you were his surrogate a lot on some of those committee assignments. So, you were pretty steeped in the policy debate at the time.

LT: Right.

JM: And then he eventually ran for the US Senate. We were talking before the interview started. That was kind of complicated. I'm not sure I followed it all because there were some interesting things going on at the time. For a while, both Kansas Senate seats were open because Bob Dole decided to run for president, right? But why did he eventually decide to move on to the Senate? Was it just time for him to step up?

LT: Well, of course, members of Congress always want to be in the Senate. He was pretty happy where he was as chairman of the Ag Committee in the House, but in the summer of '95, some of us including me became convinced that there was going to be at least one and probably two Senate seats open in '96.

JM: Because Nancy Kassebaum wasn't going to run for re-election.

LT: I thought that Nancy would not run again. I was pretty sure that Bob Dole would not. So, we started a campaign in '95 to position Congressman Roberts as the candidate to beat for one of those Senate seats. We had him out here. He was raising money, and it was going great.

In the fall, I think November, I was pretty satisfied that he was by far and away the leading candidate to run for the Senate. But he decided that he had a farm bill to finish as chairman, and he decided that he would not run for the Senate, that he wanted to finish the farm bill.

So, he dropped out of the possible race. He had a press conference and made an announcement that he would not be a candidate. So, that was the end of that little flurry of positioning for the Senate.

JM: He eventually got in.

LT: And after that, I was convinced, as were a lot of other people that by January in Kansas, having an open slot, because Nancy Kassebaum I think had said by then that she would not run again. I thought that given this Senate seat, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, there would be half a dozen candidates suited up and ready to go for that slot, but there was not one in December, not one in January, not even too much talk about who might run except the possibility that Sam Brownback was wanting to run.

JM: Who was just finishing his first term as a Congressman in the House. Early.

LT: First or second term.

JM: So, there was a lot of talk that he might be the one who eventually stepped up.

LT: And there were some Republicans who were not happy with that, which in those days would have been the more moderate wing of the party were not too excited about having Sam Brownback be senator. Governor Graves was one of those people. He was very concerned about Sam running and talked to me about it at one point. We decided that we'd make one more go at trying to get Roberts in the race. We did that, and Roberts then said yes, he would run. So, that took care of that seat. Then the Dole seat came along. That was another thing.

JM: The Dole seat came along, and Governor Graves appointed Sheila Frahm, his lieutenant governor at the time, to fill that seat. Then she ran but Brownback ran against her and beat her. In telling that story though, you and Governor Graves had some conversations and kind of started a Draft Roberts campaign, which he didn't know about at first the way you told the story until you'd already alerted the media. So, then he kind of had to make a decision.

LT: Well, yes. It was a Draft Roberts campaign. The governor said, "How can we get Roberts in this race?" and I said, "Well, at your next press conference, why don't you talk about Roberts being the best candidate for the race?" So, he did that. When I was called by a reporter and said, "Is there anything to the fact that Roberts might get back in the race?" I said, "Well, he might be convinced." That set off a lot of speculation that Congressman Roberts would get back in the race, and he did at that point.

JM: As I understand it, you orchestrated it even a little bit more than that, that you called up a friend of yours in the press corps and prompted him to ask the question that got the response from the governor.

LT: That's right. He got the response from the governor, and then he called me and my response—I was waiting by the phone actually—my response was, "He might be convinced." So, the stories the next day were "Roberts Reconsidering Race for Senate."

Congressman Roberts then called me and said, "What's going on?" I said, "Well, Congressman, there's a genuine grassroots draft, and you can't turn that down." He said, "Okay."

JM: So, you mentioned this was all happening at a time when politics was starting to change.

LT: It changed quite a bit.

JM: Nationally, locally, and the politics at the state level was becoming more national. What was it like then in those years as that collegiality began to evaporate?

LT: Well, it was all gone. It was not only gone I think with staff, but it was gone among the members themselves. Part of that I think happened when the movement started for members

of Congress to live in their district and not in Washington. So, they were always back in their districts most of the time. They didn't have a chance to play basketball with each other or party with each other. So, that connection got broken.

JM: If I'm not mistaken, Pat Roberts was kind of the exception to that rule. He spent a lot of time in Washington. When I interviewed him on his way out of the Senate, I did kind of an interview as he was leaving the Senate, he talked a lot about the basketball games.

LT: Oh, yes.

JM: And talked about how that did help you form relationships. He talked about Kika de la Garza who was the Democrat, ranking member on the House Ag Committee, about how well those two got along. So, that kind of proof of concept there in the sense that when you did spend time with your colleagues in Washington. You did form relationships.

LT: He did. Roberts did spend a lot of time in Washington. He was kind of old school in that regard. But he also spent a lot of time in Kansas. He [did] a 105-county tour [every August].

JM: Did he start the Big First Tour?

LT: I think Sebelius may have started it, but Roberts continued the Big First Tour. Then when he was senator, he did that for a number of years statewide. It was grueling, but it served him well.

JM: As that collegiality began to disappear in Washington amongst staffs and members, what changes did you see? How did that change the way Pat had to operate in the Senate? Did he become more partisan just by necessity?

LT: Oh, yes. He became more partisan. He had to get things done. Then during the Gingrich years, it was very necessary because it was a partisan House at that point. In that regard, I don't suppose it was too much different than the partisanship of the House in 1980 when Tip O'Neill was speaker. When Congressman Roberts was a freshman, he got assigned to the Personnel Subcommittee of the House Administration Committee, which is a backwater subcommittee that they stick freshmen on. You're not expected to do too much.

I recall many times at budget time, the chairman of the committee would call Congressman Roberts in who was the ranking minority person on the committee. They'd sit at this big, long table, and he'd pass down a sheet and he'd say, "We've got the budget on Personnel, and these are the patronage positions that Democrats are going to make this year." There'd be 200 names on the list. And he said, "But we've taken care of you, too." He'd pass down a list to Congressman Roberts. There'd be one name on it. So Republicans in those Tip O'Neill years got nothing, and it was very partisan, but it was still more collegial than it became when the shoe was reversed.

JM: You hear stories all the time about the Sam Rayburn years when he was speaker and everything else about how speakers and committee chairs who got there by way of seniority kind of ruled with an iron hand. Were the Tip O'Neill years substantially different from that?

LT: I think the Tip O'Neill [years] were just a continuation of that. A little bit of a difference was that everybody liked Tip O'Neill. He could stick a knife in you politically and make you like it.

JM: Famously, he and Reagan seemed to get along, two Irishmen, they seemed to get along. Then Newt Gingrich, of course, ran for speaker, I think it was mid-nineties, '94, and the Contract with America.

LT: '94.

JM: That really did nationalize politics. All these social issues became important at the national level right down through the ranks.

LT: It was the beginning of "We're going to burn the place down for our ideology."

JM: In other words, allow the government to shut down.

LT: They shut the government down in '92 or '4 and did great damage to a lot of parts of the government, but they didn't care. They were proving a point. I used to sit through meetings with Gingrich, talking about agriculture. He pontificated like a college professor, but he was very, very partisan. Everything that he did was partisan.

JM: He was a college professor.

LT: Oh, I'm sure.

JM: He taught history. And eventually you became a college professor. You left Senator Roberts's staff when? 2000—

LT: 2002, I believe.

JM: Then you taught for a while at George Washington and later.

LT: I taught part time at GW for a while. Then I went to the University of North Carolina and taught political management and political communication for six or seven years.

JM: How did you manage to have that come about?

LT: My wife was a dean. I was there with her, and I convinced them that I was with her and that they could use me. So, I taught. I started the [political communications] program actually. It was a great experience. If I'd known how much fun it was and how difficult it was, I would have done it earlier.

JM: Difficult and fun at the same time.

LT: Both.

JM: Yes. That's a good university.

LT: That's a great university. It was a great university at that time. And the journalism school where I was put, it was one of the top journalism schools in the country. I really enjoyed it.

JM: Charles Kuralt was an alumnus, was he not from North Carolina? So, you did that, and then after you left that teaching position, you and your wife retired to Manhattan?

LT: Back to Kansas. A brief interlude was in '14 when Senator Roberts was running for election against my better advice. So, I was persuaded to come help him in the primary, and you talk about nationalization of campaigns, that was a great example of nationalization of campaigns.

JM: How so? I don't recall much about that race.

LT: They ran it, the Senate.

JM: Oh, the Senate Campaign Committee out of DC ran his campaign?

LT: Right, they ran it.

JM: Why were you against him running for re-election in 2014?

LT: I thought it was time for younger blood. In addition, at that point, re-election, no matter who you were, started getting tougher. I thought he was going to have a tough time, and he did.

JM: Did he face primary opposition that year?

LT: Yes.

JM: But he did win re-election.

LT: He did.

JM: It's interesting, too, when I interviewed Senator Roberts, again he had decided he wasn't going to run for re-election. He was leaving the Senate. I remember Carl Bernstein, a former reporter for the *Washington Post*, had written a column. He talked about a large group of Republican senators who ostensibly supported Trump publicly, but behind the scenes would disparage him. Both Senator Roberts and Senator Moran, Jerry Moran's name were in that column. I remember asking Senator Roberts about that, and he deflected the question, of

course. He wasn't going to get into it. What do you recall? Did you have any contact with him in those years? Were those frustrating years for him?

LT: I did. I was very disappointed in those senators you're talking about. They would talk privately but not act publicly. That was especially true during the impeachment vote in the Senate. I talked to Senator Roberts about that. He pointed out one of the dilemmas in those kinds of votes, and that is he said, "Look, I had a farm bill. The only thing that was standing between the passage of that farm bill that was going to help everybody in Kansas and all throughout the country was Trump's signature. So, I had to weigh the future of that farm bill against my vote for impeachment." He said, "What would you do?" That's a good question. It's a tough, tough question.

JM: A practical question.

LT: Yes. Now things have changed in the Senate since then. It's a lot more clear about voting and not voting, but at that time at least, there was—you had to weigh those kinds of things. It's a kind of things legislators, all kinds, have to weigh every day.

JM: If you're in the majority in the Senate or in the House and your party also controls the White House and you have an agenda at all, you do have to think practically then about when you oppose the president or you criticize the president, is that what you're saying?

LT: Yes, or any other vote. Your job is to work for the state of Kansas. Senator Roberts's position, that meant pass the farm bill. Do all those things that farmers needed and expected, not only farmers, but the economy of the state. So, you have to consider that your first job.

JM: It would be unfair to ask you whether his attitude would be different now in the second Trump term, but you have kind of, to my way of looking at it, resumed your journalistic career on social media. Every time I open Facebook, I can count on seeing a post from you where you're still performing—you're pointing out issues, and you're making some commentary, but you're raising awareness about what's going on in Washington right now. You may be the most prolific person that I know personally on Facebook in particular. What prompted you to do that?

LT: Well, it was out of frustration, I suppose. Once you're a journalist and you get to express an opinion, you never stop.

JM: Yes.

LT: I don't like Facebook. I don't like social media much. It ends up being a talking to the choir every day. But I keep doing it because I think it's important to have a voice out there even if not too many people are paying attention. There's not a day goes by that I don't tell my wife that I think I'm quitting Facebook, and I end up not doing that.

JM: You have an insight into what's happening that few of us do.

LT: There are not very many ways that people can express an opinion, and Facebook becomes one of them. Unfortunately, their good opinions get mixed up with uninformed, bad opinions. So, it's just a big mish-mash. It ends up being sometimes very counterproductive, but at least it's a way of communicating.

JM: If you've got something that you want to say, it's a platform, an imperfect one at that.

LT: It is.

JM: And you're right in terms of preaching to the choir. You're talking to people who probably, generally speaking, agree with you. And the people who don't are reading somebody else. We've gotten so tribal in our politics.

LT: That's true. I have coffee very frequently with a bunch of former legislators, both Democrat and Republican, mostly Republican. When I tell them I'm ready to quit Facebook, they tell me not to do it, that somebody needs to talk about those things. In that regard, I think the *Kansas Reflector* is doing a great job covering Kansas and adding to that mix of different viewpoints of different voices.

JM: Let's have a conversation about that. In your day, when you were reporting for *The Topeka Capital-Journal* and the Harris News, then you were the press secretary to a governor, the media landscape was very different.

LT: It was.

JM: In those days.

LT: One of the things that the Harris group wanted me to do was spend more time out over the state, to write stories that people wanted to hear, wanted to see. One of the lessons that I learned that I've never forgotten was I spent one entire legislative session becoming an authority—I believe it was on school finance. That was the topic of the day, and I went in the weeds big time in that story and wrote two or three stories a day for three months over it. When the legislature was finished, those Harris editors convinced me to go on a tour around the state to see what impact the session had had.

So, I did, and I'll never forget the first day I walked into a cafe in western Kansas someplace, talking to an old boy there, and I said, "What do you think about that legislative session?" He looked at me. He said, "Oh, was the legislature meeting?" That was repeated the more I traveled over the state. It struck me that all this sound and fury out of Topeka with the media, nobody cared. Nobody was listening.

JM: I remember having the feeling when I first showed up at the Statehouse that I was in the center of it all, and that people were hanging on my every word out there. So, you were disabused of that notion pretty quickly. And those were the days—it's interesting that you say that. Those were the days again as we said, those Harris newspapers were robust. They had large circulations. The editors were informed and attempted to persuade their readers, and yet even then, people were paying scant attention to politics and policymaking.

LT: Even then, yes.

JM: So, what have we really lost in the current media landscape when that stuff isn't being reported at the level at which you did?

LT: I think what we've lost is local media. In community after community across this country, there's no local media to talk about road improvements or zoning or taxes or those other things that affect people right away.

JM: So, people may not have been paying attention to everything happening in Topeka, but when it came to local issues, they were pretty plugged in?

LT: Yes.

JM: And they're not getting the coverage they need at that level any longer.

LT: During my reporting career, I did a lot of stories that I thought deserved major attention because they were kind of important to people, and they did not get major attention, which was frustrating but also very illuminating. I did a piece during the legislature working for the Harris papers on private clubs, and it turned out that those were the days when you had Class A clubs and Class B clubs. Class A were the country clubs and the nonprofit-type clubs, and the Class B clubs were more profit. They were the clubs that you had to put your bottle up on the shelf when you wanted to drink there.

I discovered that there were a group of attorneys in the state that were scrounging through records to find defunct churches. They would get a charter for a defunct church. They'd find out who still was around on that board. They would go pay him a buck for the charter, and then they would turn that charter into a Class A private club. That's how private clubs kind of got started. This is before liquor by the drink. I thought when I wrote that story, "This is going to shut the legislature down. It's going to have far-reaching ramifications."

I wrote the story, went to the legislature. Finally, I asked a legislator, "Did you see that story?" He said, "Oh, yeah. Everybody knows that." A lot of stories like that.

JM: You said earlier that one of the reasons you went to Governor Bennett's staff is that you had kind of hit the ceiling in terms of what you thought were the limitations of print media. Is that one example?

LT: That's a good example, yes. I had a yearning at that point to tell stories through different media. I thought print journalism was very limiting.

JM: Looking back on your career, what are you the most proud of?

LT: Oh, I wouldn't change a thing. I loved the reporting. I still love it. I also loved working for two public officials that were both interested in doing a good job—Bob Bennett and Pat Roberts.

JM: Based on that experience, what's your assessment of the current political climate? Do you think that it's still populated by people who are there just simply to do a good job?

LT: No, I don't. There may be a few here and there, but I think the name of the game now is get elected, get power, then get elected and get power again. There's a lot less emphasis on doing something.

JM: You were there right at the fulcrum point, the pivotal point, in a pivotal job as that change began to take place in Washington. You were aware of it at the time that things were changing.

LT: Oh, yeah. You could see it coming. And again, it probably didn't start with Newt Gingrich. He was certainly the face of it at one point.

JM: It's been a pleasure to talk to you. I really appreciate you participating. You occupied several really important positions through your history. You're the first correspondent to report for the Harris papers at the Capitol. You moved on and served Governor Bennett. And then for many, many, many years, served the state in the capacity as the chief of staff for first Congressman and then Senator Pat Roberts. Again, as we mentioned at the beginning, I am still fascinated why—your impetus to get credentialed and go to Vietnam early on in your college career. Not many people at that age would have had that kind of gumption probably.

LT: I don't feel it's gumption so much as it was proving the point that you're young and stupid.

JM: And now you are what? No longer young.

LT: Older and wiser, I hope.

JM: Well, I can attest to that. Again, thanks a lot. I really appreciate your time.

LT: Thank you.

[End of File]