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Foreign Relations Committee

Interview #1
Years in Journalism
(Tuesday, September 9, 1980)
Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie

RITCHIE: When I looked over the brief biography of you in the Staff Directory, it struck me that you had a journalistic background. You're the first person that we have done an interview with whose earlier interest was journalism, and who came to Capitol Hill as a member of the press gallery before you became a member of the staff. I wanted to get some background information from you about where you went to school and how you got Into journalism in the first place.

HOLT: Well, I went to elementary school and high school in Gatesville, Texas, the small town in central Texas where I was born and grew up. My father was the publisher of the weekly paper there.

RITCHIE: What was the paper?

HOLT: It was, and still is called--it's not in the family any longer--the *Gatesville Messenger*. When I finished high school I went to the University of Texas and got a degree in journalism. I also got a B.A. degree with a major in economics, which has long since become obsolete.

RITCHIE: When you were growing up, did you work on the newspaper?

HOLT: My father's paper? Yes, summers in high school, starting in the back end in the print shop part of it. I fed hand presses and set type and that kind of thing.

RITCHIE: Was it basically a rural district?

HOLT: Oh yes, Gatesville is the county seat of Coryell County, and in those days--we're talking about the middle 19301s, I finished high school in 1936--Gatesville then had a population of about three thousand, I guess, maybe a little bit more. The whole damn county had about twenty thousand. So, as I said, I went from there to the University of Texas and worked on the student newspaper there, the *Daily Texan*. Then when I finished Texas I went to journalism school at Columbia University in New York and got a Master's.

RITCHIE: Was there anybody there in particular that you worked with?

HOLT: At Columbia? Nobody in particular. I made a lot of friends there, some of whom I still see at reasonably frequent occasions, classmates. The faculty was really quite impressive but I was not any particularly closer to one than I was to the other.

RITCHIE: What was your intention at that point? Did you plan to go back to Texas?

HOLT: No, I guess one reason I went to Columbia in the first place was to get out of Texas. Another reason was that in 1940, when I finished Texas, although you could get a newspaper job in the state, the going salary was around twenty dollars a week. I thought maybe I could do better in the East. So when I finished Columbia I was one of three students in that class who were given what was and is known as a Pulitzer traveling scholarship. These things were provided under the will of Joseph Pulitzer, who endowed the Columbia Journalism School. They carry a stipend of $1,500, with which you are supposed to spend a year abroad. In 1940, with a little luck and with a few odd jobs you really could spend a year abroad for $1,500. So I took this and got married and sailed off to Australia. The tradition with these scholarships had been to go around Europe. Columbia had a sort of an understanding with the Associated Press that people on these scholarships would be passed from one A.P. bureau to another, spend a few months in each: London, Rome, Berlin, Paris. Well, in 1940 that was no longer practicable! Really, the only two parts of the world open were Latin America, the Southwest Pacific, and the Far East at that time. A part-time faculty member at Columbia was a fellow named Abe Rothman, who was also the United States correspondent

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for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Through him I met a fellow, David Bailey, who was running the Australian government's information service in the United States. The Australians at that point were beginning to worry about the war, and their public relations in the United States, and so on. Bailey had come out of the *Melbourne Herald* to do this essentially wartime job in the United States, and he offered to arrange for me to have a job on the *Melbourne Herald* if I would spend this scholarship time in Australia. Since I wanted to take a new wife with me on the thing, I needed to supplement the stipend of the fellowship, and it sounded like good experience and a great adventure anyway, so that's what we did.

Our intention had been to spend several months in Australia and then work our way up the east coast of Asia to Japan and then come home. Well, after several months in Australia, Pearl Harbor intervened and that was no longer practical. So we hung around a little while. It wasn't easy to travel in those days. We finally found a Swedish cargo-passenger ship which was going from Australia to San Francisco and we got on that and came back. I then went back to New York to look for a job and found one on the Providence, Rhode Island, *Journal-Bulletin*,

where I worked as a reporter for a year or a little bit more when I went in the Army.

RITCHIE: Where did you work for the *Providence Journal*?

HOLT: In Providence.

RITCHIE: Doing local reporting?

HOLT: Yes, most of the time I covered the federal beat, the federal building in Providence, which was mainly the federal court, the remnants of the W.P.A., the F.B.I. office there. As the war developed there got to be a proliferation of federal agencies: the O.P.A., there was a land-acquisition office.to expand the Naval base and the military installations in general, that kind of thing.

RITCHIE: The Providence Journal used to be the old rock-ribbed Republican paper, at least in an earlier period. Was it still that way when you were working for it?

HOLT: Pretty much. A piece of the folklore around the paper was that Franklin Roosevelt had once said to Sevellon Brown, who was then the editor and publisher: "Goddamn it Brown, you are a Democrat three and a half years out of every four, except for the six months of a presidential campaign!" Mainly due to the drive and character of Sevellon Brown, the *Providence Journal* in those days was a hell of a good newspaper and an exciting place to work. It was a monopoly newspaper, but that didn't matter to Brown because

he competed against his own standards, which were very tough competition to meet.

RITCHIE: So you then went from Providence into the Army.

HOLT: Into the Army.

RITCHIE: Was that by choice or by draft board?

HOLT: It was by the draft board.

RITCHIE: What did you do in the Army?

HOLT: Well, I ended up in Japanese language training program in Georgetown University here in Washington, and from there I went to Arlington Hall in an

outfit called the Second Signal Service Battalion, which was part of the office of the Chief Signal Officer. It was concerned with signals intelligence.

RITCHIE: Was some of this because of your experiences in Australia?

HOLT: No. It was, well one hesitates to be too precise why any Army assignment is handled the way it is, but in basic training in the Army, and what was then the old Army Air Corps in Atlantic City, New Jersey, did very poorly on the mechanical aptitude test. I think the Army was reasonably impressed with the fact that I had a Master's degree; they weren't seeing too many new

recruits in 1943 with that. I was young enough then so that I did pretty well on the Army general classification test. So from basic training I was put in something they called the Army specialized training program and shipped off with a bunch of other people to City College in New York, where they tried to decide what to do with us and gave us a bunch of other aptitude tests.
I did very well on the language aptitude test. They were impressed by the fact that I had three years of college French as well. They said, "Gee whiz, we'll put you in French and then you can be a telephone operator when we reinvade the Continent." I said to them, "Look, I know I had three years of college French, but I'm pretty good at knowing how much I learn in a course, and I learned damn little French." They gave me some further tests and agreed with me that I knew damn little French. Then they said, "Well, how would it grab you to start out fresh in a totally new language?" And I said, "Well, that sounds all right." So they said Japanese, and off I went to Georgetown and then to Arlington Hall. And that's where spent the rest of the war.

RITCHIE: So then you were here in Washington for the duration of the war?

HOLT: I was in Arlington, Virginia, for the duration of the war.

RITCHIE: Once you finished studying Japanese, what were you doing?

HOLT: Well, it was a terribly sensitive secret in those days; I guess it's less sensitive now. Mainly, I was translating Japanese radio intercepts. Also from time to time I worked on cryptoanalysis, trying to decode them.

RITCHIE: Did you get a good grasp of Japanese while you were doing this?

HOLT: Well, at that time--but in the first place this was totally reading oriented, there was no spoken Japanese. I never learned anything beyond the most rudimentary elements of speaking the language. At one time, by 1945, I guess I knew maybe two thousand Japanese characters and could translate or read it

with some facility. But the point needs to be emphasized that what I was reading and translating most of the time was pretty stylized military language in which the pattern was pretty much the same. The same thing would follow the same thing. We would fool around over there some trying to translate captured diaries that Japanese soldiers had kept, and at my level anyway that was just a hopeless task. In the first place it was handwritten, and in the second place it was unfamiliar content. But

the routine kinds of messages about damage reports from American bombing raids or assessments of Japanese bombing raids, how many planes they had lost, how many planes they had shot down, how many ships were in a convoy that was sailing from Yokohoma tomorrow night, that kind of thing I did pretty well with.

RITCHIE: But by the time the war was over you wanted to get away from Japanese, I gather.

HOLT: Well, not necessarily. But I wanted to get away from the Army.

RITCHIE: Was there any chance they might have sent you to occupied Japan?

HOLT: I wanted in those days to go to Officers' Candidate School. I was accepted for it but I busted the physical because my height-weight ratio was inappropriate, the Army felt. By this time it was getting on into 1945 and I resigned myself to finishing the war as a sergeant. I figured that the prospect of a sergeant getting out of the Army was better than the prospect of a commissioned officer. But some of my contemporaries over there who did make it through OCS were sent to the occupation and indeed some of them made a career out of it, not in the Army but in the CIA.

RITCHIE: Did you have any contacts with the CIA then?

HOLT: Well, the CIA in those days did not exist, it was the OSS. I had no contacts with them, this was strictly a military signals intelligence operation. We did deal with some Japanese diplomatic traffic, that is, Arlington Hall dealt with it. I did not very much because again the complexity of it was a little beyond my language ability.

RITCHIE: So you were discharged then in 1945?

HOLT: In ‘46.

RITCHIE: And you were here in Washington at the time?

HOLT: I was.

RITCHIE: Had you followed what was going on in the federal government? You were a journalist and you must have had some curiosity.
HOLT: Oh, yes. I was then. I had been since, at least I was in high school, interested in public affairs. I read the newspapers and that kind of thing.

RITCHIE: So you decided to stay in Washington?

HOLT: Yes. The *Providence Journal* was legally obligated to rehire me. They asked me to come back; I think they probably would have even without the legal obligation. I liked the paper but neither my wife nor I liked living in Providence. Jobs were real easy to get in those days. So I ended up with Congressional Quarterly News Features--as a matter of fact in hose days it was called Press Research. I got involved, actually in the summer of 1945 I found a part-time job moonlighting with an outfit called Trans-Radio Press, which was a little one-horse wire service aimed at small radio stations that were too poor or too stingy to afford A.P. or U.P.I. I used to go in there and rewrite press releases and put them on the ticker and what-not, on the weekends.

Then I noticed a blind ad in *Editor and Publisher* which said something like "liberal Washington news bureau seeks writer. It gave a post office box number and I answered the ad and in due course got a letter from Nelson Poynter, who had established Press Research in 1944. He asked me to come in and see him some time. Well, by this point we had gone through V.J. Day, or at least we had dropped the Bomb and V.J. Day was imminent. The Foreign Service of the State Department was heavily recruiting in the Army, particularly in places like Arlington Hall. It seems just incredible now, only thirty-five years later,

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that the description they posted in plain sight of everybody for the kind of people they were looking for were "white males, college graduates, age between 23 and 27, either unmarried or without children." All of which fit me precisely. But can you imagine a government recruiting on that basis now! It's incredible!

Well, anyway, the thing that really attracted me about this was a promise that if you were accepted in the Foreign Service you would be discharged from the Army forthwith. So I beat a hasty path down to talk to the Foreign Service. They were very receptive, except that part of the deal was to stay for at least two years and go to whatever Godforesaken place they sent you. And that didn't appeal to me too much. I was going to get out of the Army in a matter of months anyway. However, in walking back to the bus to go back to Arlington after this Foreign Service interview, I coincidentally went by the address of Press Research. I thought, what the hell, I'm here, I might as well go in and talk to them. So I did,

and we hit it off pretty well. They hired me either on the spot or pretty soon thereafter. I started moonlighting for them while was still in the Army.

My job for them, which I did at home and went into the office with the results of it every week or two, was to read the *Congressional Record*, for which I was paid a dollar and a half an hour. I read the *Congressional*

Record and I charted votes and I kept track of amendments and things like that. I thought it was the greatest thing that ever happened. In the first place because the *Record* fascinated me, a fascination which I lost after having read it for twenty-five years--it changed a lot in the meantime, in those days it was more nearly a record than a collection of junk. But the only thing I liked about this job was that although by that point I was a staff sergeant I still had to do K.P. at intervals at Arlington Hall. There were a bunch of guys in the guard battalion out there who would do K.P. for you for ten dollars. Well, I could pay one of these guys ten bucks to do K.P. for me, and I could work eight hours at home reading the *Congressional Record*, which was less time than it took to do K.P., and make twelve bucks, to come out two dollars ahead on the deal. I thought that was pretty good. Then when I got out of the Army in March of '46, by this time Press Research had become Congressional Quarterly News Features and had pretty well settled on the direction it has since taken.

RITCHIE: What was-the difference between them? What was Press Research originally?

HOLT: Press Research was established in 1944 to provide research and background, feature kind of material, for newspapers who were supporting

Roosevelt in the '44 campaign. Though it was originally very politically oriented, after the campaign Nelson Poynter, who was a very imaginative fellow, and his wife Henrietta, thought they had the germ of a good thing going and de-politicized it, made it objective, and after a good many false starts decided to concentrate on covering Congress, which they thought was the big neglected story in Washington. And thus *Congressional Quarterly News Features* was born. As Dean Acheson said in another context, I was present at the creation.

RITCHIE: Was it a large staff at that time?

HOLT: No, it was not. Oh, gee, they had maybe eight or ten people in two or three rooms down here on 17th Street between Pennsylvania and H. It was a hectic place, the birth pangs were substantial, and the staff was sort of a revolving door. Nelson and Henrietta were difficult people to work for.

RITCHIE: In what ways?

HOLT: Well, Nelson, I think I described him as very imaginative, he was the kind of guy who had about an idea a minute and wanted it implemented the next minute and had utterly no discrimination between good ideas and bad ideas. However, he would at least listen when somebody who was working for him said,

"Nelson, you know this really isn't a very good idea." But this led to a certain amount of friction. Both of them were very demanding of people, I don't mean in the sense of having high standards like Sevellon Brown, I mean in the sense of intruding in personal lives. There weren't any office hours and they would call you at seven o'clock in the morning to ask, "Have you read page 22 of the *New York Times* yet?" "No, Goddamn it, I hadn't waked up yet!" That kind of thing. And as I said, there was a revolving door. They had a penchant for hiring people and then firing them. Or people left and so on. So in a personal sense it was not a good situation. In a professional sense it was fabulous. It was better than any graduate seminar on the American Congress or on the American political system that you could imagine because you were as close to the middle of it as an outsider could get. You were doing things that had rarely been done in journalism before. It was an enormously valuable and productive learning experience.

RITCHIE: When you answered the ad for that job, they said it was a liberal publication, and that apparently attracted your attention.

HOLT: Yes.

RITCHIE: Could you explain why that attracted you at that time?

HOLT: Well., to go back a little bit, I began to have a political consciousness in the 1930's with the New Deal, FDR, all of that. I was a big fan of FDR and the New Deal and I guess in that sense I was a product of the times and the environment out of which I came. I would guess that most of the economics and government faculty at the University of Texas probably had similar views, you know they weren't all that blatant about expressing them in class but the bias, if you want to call it that, came through pretty clearly and rubbed off.

RITCHIE: I wondered about your family's paper and what its political leanings were.

HOLT: Oh, well, hell it didn't really have any political leanings. My father was moderately active in politics. He was the Democratic county chairman in Coryell County for a while. He and my mother too, for that matter, engaged themselves locally in state Political campaigns. One of my earliest memories is mother

driving around the back roads of Coryell County with me while I handed out anti-Ferguson literature. You know, she would stop in the road and I'd run up to the farm house and leave this piece of campaign stuff. The Fergusons were very controversial figures in Texas politics in those days. I guess we're talking about the early '30's. Jim Ferguson had been governor approximately the time of World War I

and had been impeached by the legislature, and since he was barred from holding office anymore his wife Marian, who was universally known as "Ma" ran and was elected governor a couple of times. Every time a Ferguson ran, my family rose to the barricades.

This has some relevance later on: my father was reasonably close to Tom Connally. Connally, as a matter of fact, represented the congressional district where I lived when he was in the House before he went to the Senate. There were other people running for governor or attorney general, one damn thing or another, who would come through town during a campaign and Dad would take them around and introduce them around the square and bring them home for dinner--that's the meal in the middle of the day--and that kind of thing.

RITCHIE: So, you were originally attracted to the advertisement in that it offered a sense of politics and journalism combined?

HOLT: Well, I guess that matter had something to do with it, subconsciously.

RITCHIE: But once you joined the organization it became a non-partisan, neutral publication.

HOLT: That's right.

RITCHIE: Did that create any frustration for you?

HOLT: None, no. No, I had been well-schooled, well-drilled, both at the University of Texas and at Columbia, that by God there is a distinction between news and editorials and don't you ever forget it. You can do one or the other but you sure as hell can't do both.

RITCHIE: And that was particularly true in the Congressional Quarterly, I would imagine.

HOLT: Oh. yes.

RITCHIE: Could you describe just what the Congressional Quarterly was at that time--what your functions were, and especially who their audience was?

HOLT: The name Congressional Quarterly has always been something of a misnomer. It was selected to begin with because the idea was to put out a quarterly publication which would be the record of Congress for a particular three month period. Then these four quarterlies would be combined into an annual which was and is called the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* at the end of every year. The market for this was, and to a considerable extent still is, newspaper editorial offices and libraries as a research tool. Then Nelson decided that quarterly was really too long a period for this,

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so there was a thing called the *CQ Weekly Report*. This did on a weekly basis what the quarterly did on a quarterly basis. In addition to that, the *CQ Weekly Report* almost always had a fairly extensive feature story which dealt with one issue that was timely. It being a very hectic period, particularly given the Poynter managerial style, everybody on the staff sort of did everything, but for a considerable period my primary function was to produce these weekly features. That was a lot of fun and a very enlightening piece of experience.

RITCHIE: In what ways?

HOLT: Well you just got into everything. You know, doing a thing like that once a week now strikes me as just way, way too Goddamn much work. But my previous journalistic experience had been on afternoon newspapers that had five editions a day and anytime you spent more than thirty minutes writing a story you were either dawdling or you really had something pretty big, so a week relatively seemed like a luxury time. A good deal of research and interviewing went into these things as well.

RITCHIE: Did you focus on the Senate, or the House, or just anything that came along?

HOLT: Through happenstance and coincidence during my days at CQ I spent more time around the Senate than I did around the House. The Senate interested me more than the House, as a political institution. But one of the strong points of CQ was and is the coverage it devotes to pressure groups and lobbyists, which were a whole lot less sophisticated then than they are now, but they haven't changed all that much. So we did a lot of that, and I spent a good deal of time, to my enormous benefit, chasing around town interviewing lobbyists about what they were after and how they worked and so on. I found most of them quite open and candid with this young squirt just out of the Army. Then we followed the development of legislation. I did some work on the Greek-Turkish aid program; I did an awful lot on the Marshall Plan when it was coming along. I followed the

Taft-Hartley Act; I followed the Sugar Act, and that was a revelation about lobbying that was later very valuable. We did a lot of political analysis of congressional districts and voting patterns and that kind of thing.
RITCHIE: That was a very tumultuous period, too. You got there just about the time that the Republicans took control of Congress for the first time in twenty years.

HOLT: That's right.

RITCHIE: The staff was so small back then, you must have had to deal directly with the senators themselves. How did it work in those days?

HOLT: Senators were much more accessible than they are now. Senatorial or congressional staffs were very much smaller. You got to know some staff people up here, but you dealt I would guess mainly with senators themselves.

RITCHIE: There were some real congressional giants in those days, people like Arthur Vandenberg and Robert Taft and others. Were there any in particular that left a strong impression with you?

HOLT: Well, the two you mentioned. I never did really know Vandenberg that well. Taft, I got to know much better. Hell, he was on the Foreign Relations Committee during the last years of his life. But from early on I developed an enormous admiration for him and came to like him personally as well. I disagreed with where he came out on most issues of public policy, but he had that rare quality of intellectual honesty. He was a whole lot more open minded than his public image would lead one to believe.

RITCHIE: Was he a good source for reporters.

HOLT: Yes. In the sense that he would level with you. The art of the leak was then not very well developed and one didn't really think of sources in terms of leaks and that kind of thing.

RITCHIE: Were there certain senators in general that you could go to for information? Were there people who knew what was going on better than others? Or did you just go to whoever happened to be managing the bill or whoever was in the leadership?

HOLT: Well, I pretty well confined myself to who was managing the bill, or who was chairman of the committee or the ranking minority member, or something like that. Also by the nature of the product that CQ put out, you relied more on what a bill said or what a report said, what was in an amendment, what somebody said in a hearing that could be documented if need be. Well, Taft was a

guy like that. The others that impressed were Elbert Thomas of Utah, Connally, George Aiken, Charles Tobey, old Senator [Robert] Wagner from New York, who I guess was pretty close to the end of his time in the Senate. Also, Joseph O'Mahoney of Wyoming, William Langer of North Dakota, and Scott Lucas.

RITCHIE: Did you have any dealings with Styles Bridges in those days, when he was the Appropriations chairman?

HOLT: Yes, but not so much.

RITCHIE: He's not an easy man to figure out. He seemed to have been very powerful but more of an inside operator.

HOLT: I think that's probably right. I got to know Bridges better later on, after I was actually working for the Senate, but I never did know him well. Oh, one of them in those CQ days was Joe McCarthy, who was really *sui generis*. I had been briefly exposed to [Robert] La Follette, right at the beginning of my work for CQ. Naturally CQ was very much interested in the La Follette-Monroney Act, which became the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946. I was personally distressed to see La Follette defeated in '46. But the guy who defeated him, namely McCarthy, came to Washington with the 80th Congress in '47 with the reputation of a young, moderate Republican, part of the new breed, with what was then accepted as a good war record--we later learned differently. But not the stereotype conservative, stick-in-the-mud mid-western Republican. Indeed, McCarthy pretty soon began to make a splash on the Banking Committee with respect to veterans' housing and housing in general. Public housing--or the federal government's involvement in housing in those days--was much more controversial than it is now. McCarthy by and large had a public posture of being reasonably liberal on the subject.

Well, towards the end of the 1947 session of Congress I was at work on a story about freshmen senators and what kind of a splash they made in their first session of Congress. I now don't off-hand recall who some of the others were, but McCarthy was one of them. In the process of doing the research for this thing I ran across some references in the Wisconsin newspapers, the *Madison Capital-Times* I guess, to some rather peculiar ways in which McCarthy had handled his income taxes. So I called him. I guess I said first to somebody on his staff who I was and what I was doing and so on, and very promptly McCarthy came on the phone and said, "Come up and see me, I'd like to talk to you." So I went up to see him and I said, "You know, I've run across this stuff about your income taxes." "Oh," he said, "there's nothing to it. Here, I'll show you." And he dug out this file and gave me his income tax returns, all the while carrying on a non-stop monologue which was laced with irrelevancies but had enough on the subject to

keep throwing you off the trail. I looked at his income tax returns and I was trying to listen to him at the same time and I couldn't make any sense out of either one of them. It was a classic performance.
A similar performance is described in much greater detail in Richard Rovere's book, *Senator Joe McCarthy*, in which indeed McCarthy drags Rovere along to his dentist's Office for an appointment and washes his mouth with Bour-

bon and all that. You know, McCarthy was a very peculiar character. He was not at that time on the Communist kick that he got on later. But you could tell that there was something strange about that guy.

RITCHIE: I find an interesting ambiguity among a lot of the people we've interviewed. There were apparently a lot of likeable traits to McCarthy that people have trouble sorting out now because of later reputation.

HOLT: Well, I unfortunately got to know him much better later on. I suppose in my time on the Hill I must have known in one degree or another hundreds maybe a thousand members of the Senate, and McCarthy is the only one that I ever came to dislike so Goddamn much that I couldn't even bring myself to say hello to him when I met him in the hallway. So as far as I'm concerned he ended up with no likeable traits at all. But in his early years he certainly did have some. He was not an unpleasant guy to have a drink with. He had a much more outgoing personality than he had later. McCarthy later developed a persecution complex and became very withdrawn, but in the early days he was a very outgoing fellow.

RITCHIE: You described the income tax-story, in which McCarthy acted in a clearly very

manipulative way. What sense does a reporter have in terms of politicians trying to push stories on them, trying to shade stories and influence the way the news is written.

HOLT: Well, the good reporters develop a pretty fine sensitivity to this kind of thing. It requires some experience, and I didn't have all that much experience in those days. Even in those days it was pretty clear to me that there was more there than met the eye and I was the object of a con job, or a snow job. But my sensitivity to that kind of approach was not as well developed then as it became later. It wasn't as well developed as the good reporters around this town have it now.

RITCHIE: What was the press gallery like in those days? Did you have a desk there?

HOLT: No, I had a card to the gallery. I was frequently in and out of it. It was a much smaller place than it later became. I haven't been in the thing in years, I don't know what it's like now. But it was a very chummy place, a lot of leather couches and arm chairs around a lot of banter and wise cracks and gossip among the reporters. A pretty relaxed atmosphere except when something really big was happening, like the last night of a session, or the wind-down of an important

debate, or something like that. I used to like the atmosphere in the press gallery.

RITCHIE: Since you were doing a weekly survey, a factual survey, did you find other reporters using your material? How did the rest of the press gallery look on the Congressional Quarterly at that time?

HOLT: In the beginning nobody had ever heard of us. As a matter of fact we had a hell of a time getting admitted to the press gallery.

RITCHIE: That's right, because you didn't file telegraph dispatches to a daily paper, and that was a criteria.

HOLT: That was the problem with respect to the daily press gallery.

RITCHIE: Oh, and you were in the Periodical Press Gallery.

HOLT: The problem with respect to the Periodical Press Gallery was that we didn't have a second class mailing permit! But we kept hammering away, pecking away, chipping away, and eventually this was overcome. But CQ had a considerable struggle in its early days of name recognition and winning acceptance. Just finding

somebody to buy the damn product, it was a pretty hard row. I don't know how much money they lost. The Poynters could afford it because they owned the St. Petersburg Times in Florida, which is a small paper but a very profitable one. It was a long time before CQ made a profit. It was longer before it made a profit than it was before people began to recognize what it was.

RITCHIE: Did you begin to get some recognition from other reporters in the gallery?

HOLT: Well, in the sense that they knew who I was, yes, sure. You were around up there, you sat at the press table at a committee hearing or something like that, usually everybody knows who everybody else is--especially in those days. The press corps was much smaller then than it is now. TV didn't amount to much.

RITCHIE: The CQ was started in part because they said the press didn't cover Congress adequately. And a lot of-time the Congress complains that the president is more thoroughly covered than the Congress is. Is it your feeling, from having worked up there, that the press really wasn't doing an adequate job in covering Congress?

HOLT: Well, I think that's right, but you have to make a couple of distinctions to be

clear what it is we're talking about. CQ was founded on the premise that Congress was not adequately covered, but what that meant was that Congress in its totality as a political institution was not adequately covered. Then and now, with any particular story up here or any particular piece of legislation the press I think does a good job. I think they covered the Marshall Plan very well, the Taft-Hartley Act, that kind of thing. I think now they will cover a tax bill very well for anybody except a tax lawyer. And they do a better job now on Congress as an institution and the politics of Congress than they used to do. But I think in another sense, in the totality of Congress they do a worse job. This I guess is inevitable because the volume of legislation, of non-legislative hearings, of this and that up here is so much greater now than it was then that there is no way a newspaper or a general interest news magazine can cover the whole damn thing. You look what's happened to the size of the *Congressional Record*; you look what's happened to the size of the *CQ Weekly Report*. You know, we used to do something about every Goddamn bill except private bills. You could do this in maybe sixteen pages. Now the *CQ Weekly Report* runs, oh, gee, I don't know, it's as thick as *Time* magazine.

RITCHIE: You were able to follow up on legislation too, from week to-week, whereas the press

has a tendency to focus on events of the moment but not what happens to it down the road.

HOLT: That's right.

RITCHIE: So you stayed with *CQ* from 1946 until 1950?

HOLT: No, till ‘49.

RITCHIE: And you went to the *Reporter* then. What made you decide to make the switch?

HOLT: Well, I mentioned earlier that from a personal point of view CQ was not a satisfactory place to work. And although professionally I was flowering, or growing anyway, learning a hell of a lot, personally I was unhappy, that is I was unhappy with the office environment, I wasn't unhappy with life in general. So I started looking for a job, oh hell, in '48. Not just any job, you know I didn't want to go from one frying pan to another. And in the fullness of time, by which time it was '49, I caught on the *Reporter*, which was then just beginning.

RITCHIE: It was Max Ascoli who was founding that.
HOLT: Yes.

RITCHIE: What was his purpose? I know it became a very impressive journal, but what was the idea behind it when it was started up?

HOLT: Well, if you want a well-reasoned, coherent statement of it you had better ask somebody else.

RITCHIE: How about an impressionistic statement?

HOLT: I was not party to the planning stages of the *Reporter*. I was just still a pretty young kid, I wasn't thirty yet, looking for a job. They were looking for a staff. Max--I guess I was hired with out ever meeting him, but I got to know him later on--he was a very complicated guy, an Italian anti-fascist intellectual refugee from Mussolini. As a matter of fact he had been in jail and had been beaten up. He fancied himself a liberal. I guess in most respects he was, but he did not fit the prevalent American stereotype of a liberal, or a conservative either, as far as that was concerned. As nearly as I can describe it now, the object of the *Reporter* was to provide a well-informed point of view which was not available in other magazines which then appealed to intellectuals or otherwise intelligent people with a serious interest in public affairs. It was going to be what *Harper's* and the *Atlantic* and *Saturday Review* and so on could not do. It took it a number of years to figure out what that was. As you said, it later became a distinguished journal. I guess the last time I saw Max I told him the magazine had gotten much better since I left it! But we were

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sort of floundering around in those days. I was there for a little bit less than a year. I mentioned that *CQ* was a revolving door in its early days, so was the *Reporter*. They began with the idea that they would be staff written, and they would have a Washington bureau, of which I was a part. I think there were five people in it.

RITCHIE: Was Douglass Cater one of them then?

HOLT: No, Douglass was in the New York office.
My assignment on this was Congress. I did a story on farm legislation. I did a profile of Bourke Hickenlooper. I don't know if I can remember the other things I did. We used to go to New York every other week for an editorial conference in which everybody would wring his hands and moan and Max would lecture and pontificate. Out of this we were supposed to get a sense of guidance and direction, which never really came through to me very clearly.

RITCHIE: So you were doing the same type of writing?
HOLT: Same type of writing, yes.

RITCHIE: But not quite at the same pace.

HOLT: No, it was a more relaxed pace at the *Reporter*. In the first place the

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Reporter then was bi-weekly, and in the second place you weren't expected to be in the magazine every issue.

RITCHIE: But after a year you decided to go?

HOLT: Well, Max decided. The magazine was losing more money even than Max's wife could afford, so they made a major decision to switch from being staff written to being contributor written. Which meant that the Washington bureau was wiped out. Max came down here, it was just before Christmas in 1949, and called us over to his suite in what was then the Statler Hotel and broke this news. The bureau chief took us down to the bar in the Statler and we all got drunk on the last expense account!

RITCHIE: So this was Christmas of 1949?

HOLT: '49, yes. So I started looking feverishly for another job and ended up in the Foreign Relations Committee.

[End of Interview #1]