

INTERVIEW with RONALD A. SARASIN

U.S. Representative from Connecticut's 5th district, 1973 thru '78
Washington DC <<>> Tuesday, February 2, 2010

STYLE NOTES: All normal and non-sourced text after the bio is Sarasin speaking. Text in italics was spoken by interviewer **Frank Gregorsky**. Some of Gregorsky's questions are left out because the purpose of this document was to take quotes off an interview tape, and get them confirmed; it only partly works as a transcript.

SARASIN, Ronald Arthur -- born in Fall River, Bristol County, Mass., December 31, 1934; attended grammar school in Beacon Falls, Connecticut and high school in Naugatuck, Connecticut; B.S., University of Connecticut, Storrs, 1960; J.D., University of Connecticut Law School, Storrs, 1963; served in the United States Navy 1952 to '56, attained rank of petty officer, second class; admitted to the Connecticut bar, 1963; served as town counsel, Beacon Falls, Conn., 1963-1972; assistant professor of law at New Haven College, New Haven, Conn., 1963-1966; member of the Connecticut state house of representatives, 1968-1972; assistant minority leader, 1970-1972; delegate, Connecticut State Republican conventions, 1968, 1970, 1972, and 1974; delegate, Republican National Convention, 1976; elected as a Republican to the 93rd and to the two succeeding Congresses (January 3, 1973-January 3, 1979); was not a candidate for reelection to the 96th Congress, but was an unsuccessful candidate for election as Governor of Connecticut in 1978; president, **U.S. Capitol Historical Society**, 2000 to present.

SOURCE -- <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=S000062>

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(1) First Campaign for Federal Office

Richard Nixon has gone down in conventional media history as a cross between the mad bomber (in southeast Asia) and a paranoid. In fact, policy-wise, he was the least conservative GOP President since TR: Created the EPA, indexed Social Security to inflation, signed a major hike in the capital-gains tax, transferred industrial tech to the USSR as part of detente, ended our defense treaty with Taiwan, let the budget deficit expand rather than contract with the business cycle, and called himself a Keynesian. The point here is, assuming you were a northeastern moderate making your first run for federal office in '72, it wasn't hard to have Nixon at the top of the ticket, was it? (The 1976 Almanac says he carried the revised 5th district by 24 points.)

It was fairly easy to run in '72. Nixon was running against George McGovern, who didn't look like he'd have much of a shot at it. It certainly looked like a good year to be a Republican -- although my district was restructured near the beginning of the campaign, which is probably why I won. John Monagan was very popular, nice guy, and had been there for 14 years. He had never had a very serious challenge...

In the first campaign, I bought an old school bus, painted it red, white and blue; and had the back of it ripped off and refashioned to look like the back end of a railroad car -- sort of a whistle-stop [effect]. Big disc on the back of it, but instead of the train company's name it said SARASIN FOR CONGRESS. We ran that all over the district; and even if I wasn't in it, people would think I was, which gave me that much more exposure. And we did use it as an office...

During the first campaign, I said people wouldn't have to come to me because I would "bring this bus back" and "we'll use that as our mobile office." Well, when I won I had to do it -- and did it. And it was very successful. That huge bus would be out there in some community on a Saturday morning; a couple of staffers would take whatever problem the constituents had, while I'd be in a public room nearby holding a town meeting.

(2) Second Campaign and 1974

That first term seemed like forever -- especially during Watergate itself, with the hearings. Every day was "rip and read." In those days, we had teletype machines in the Speaker's lobby -- UPI on one side, and AP on the other -- and you'd just walk back and forth to see what they were saying. One shoe after another kept getting dropped. Every time you'd think "well, maybe it's gonna go away" [laughter], it didn't.

It was not a fun time to be a Republican, trying to run in a Watergate year. As a matter of fact, 13 Republicans [out of the 30] in my freshman class were predicted to lose, and

12 of them did. I was the exception. But I had worked hard. I was home every weekend -- office hours every weekend, town meetings, all that kind of thing.

Connecticut Opponents

John S. Monagan (December 23, 1911 – October 23, 2005) was a Connecticut politician and author. Monagan graduated from Dartmouth College in 1933, where he majored in French literature and was the editor of the Dartmouth *Jack-O-Lantern*. After attending Harvard University law school, he served on the Board of Aldermen in Waterbury, and became Mayor of Waterbury in 1943, serving until 1948. In 1958, he was elected Congressman from a district including Waterbury and served in the House of Representatives from 1959 until 1973, leaving after being defeated for re-election in 1972. After leaving Congress, Monagan practiced as a lawyer in Washington, D.C., and was active in amateur music and in charitable causes. Monagan wrote several books including his memoirs and a biography of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. He also maintained a decades-long correspondence with the British novelist Anthony Powell. He died in October 2005 after a long illness, at the age of 93. He continued to be active into his nineties as a writer and book reviewer; a month before his death, he spoke at a symposium honoring Anthony Powell's centenary at Georgetown University.

SOURCE -- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John S. Monagan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_S._Monagan)

Ella Grasso was born in Windsor Locks, Connecticut, to Italian immigrant parents. Contrary to popular belief, she was not the first elected woman to serve as Governor of a U.S. state; however, Grasso was the first woman who was elected Governor "in her own right," without being the wife or widow of a past Governor...

In 1952, Grasso was elected to the [Connecticut House of Representatives](#) and served until 1957. She became first woman to be elected Floor Leader of the House in 1955. In 1958 she was elected Secretary of the State of Connecticut and was re-elected in 1962 and 1966. She was the first woman to chair the Democratic State Platform Committee and served from 1956 to '68. She served as a member of the Platform Drafting Committee for the 1960 Democratic National Convention. She was the co-chairman for the Resolutions Committee for the Democratic National Conventions of 1964 and 1968. In 1970 she was elected as a Democratic Representative to the 92nd Congress, and won re-election in 1972.

In 1974 Grasso did not run for re-election to Congress, instead running for the Connecticut Governorship, and won. She began her first term in 1975, and was elected to a second term in 1978. Grasso was married to Thomas Grasso in 1942, and together they had two children, Susanne and James. On December 31, 1980, Grasso resigned her office due to her ovarian cancer, and died of it several weeks later on February 5, 1981, at the age of 61.

SOURCE -- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ella Grasso](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ella_Grasso)

(3) Congressional GOP Organizations

Your memo mentioned Chowder & Marching. And there was another Republican Group that was called "SOS."

Society of Statesmen? Or did those initials mean "Save our Souls"?

Nobody really knew what the letters stood for. But it was about as old as Chowder & Marching. And every Wednesday morning we would have a joint breakfast, and bring in a prominent speaker -- and those were some of the best opportunities to listen and learn.

Every year [both organizations] would invite two members of the freshman class, and I was invited into SOS. SOS was, in a way, competing with Chowder & Marching to try and get people they thought would become the good guys in the future.

So obviously you couldn't join both.

No, you couldn't join both...

You'd go to a Member's office, and they would lay out the drinks and the cheese and crackers, or whatever, and you'd talk about what your committees were doing. It was a great learning experience. People like John Anderson and [John Erlenborn](#) -- he was sort of my mentor on Education & Labor -- were part of it.

There was almost nothing you wouldn't hear about. So, when I went back home to do a town meeting, and somebody brought something up that was an issue before Ways & Means, I'd have some idea what was goin' on -- because Barber Conable had discussed it in SOS. A new Member could actually become a little bit of an expert on a lot of things.

We'd have [ex-Members] come back quite often -- [Clark MacGregor](#) was a member and he would show up a lot. A lot of former Members would be there whenever they were in town -- it was their way of maintaining contact with the Congress.

Chowder & Marching would meet on Wednesday afternoons, and we would meet on Tuesday afternoons -- and then do that [joint] Wednesday morning breakfast.

Talk a little bit about the Wednesday Group.

That was the more liberal Republican Members of the House, and another good group. So I enjoyed that too. I wasn't invited into that until my second term -- and the

meetings were almost the same [as SOS]: You'd sit around and talk about what your committees were doing. The format was almost identical: Go around the room, and Members would report...

But I never felt there was a Wednesday Group "agenda" and certainly not an SOS agenda.

Wednesday Group didn't take public positions [or] issue press releases?

No.

If somebody brought a Dear Colleague and pitched it, and wanted to go around the table to get signatures --

I don't recall that ever being done in Wednesday Group or SOS -- although you might learn about a letter that was circulating, and go back and tell your staff that you wanted to get on that...

And when the Republicans actually took over, the responsibilities they had were so great -- committee responsibilities and everything else -- that they didn't have that much time for SOS and C&M. The SOS "evening" meetings -- they were held at 5:00 -- finally just fell out of favor. They stopped meeting in Members' offices, and for a while Newt gave 'em a room that is now part of the Speaker's suite; it was one of the empty conference rooms on that corridor, the Speaker's corridor. And so you could meet there for the Tuesday meeting.

But because you had to wheel in everything -- the food, the drinks -- it became difficult, especially for former Members who didn't have staff to help 'em do that and so forth. It was also difficult to get people to attend the Wednesday morning breakfast, which was really unfortunate. And then when [attendance dropped] it was hard to get good speakers. But [well into the 1990s] we had great speakers: [Hugh Sidey](#), Bob Novak, the Vice-President, Cabinet members -- we met at the Pentagon with Bill Cohen when he was Secretary of Defense. I mean, these were great meetings.

(4) The House GOP Leader Who Became President

I thought Jerry Ford was a wonderful human being -- just warm, and nice, and he could not have been -- you know, we didn't always agree, but...

Having gotten to know Ford as the minority leader, and in under two years he's President -- by your second term, '75-76, what were some of your dealings with the White House?

Well, I didn't have very many -- with the White House. But Ford would come up [to the Hill]. He'd come into the cloakroom -- he was a great friend of Helen Sewell, who ran the Republican cloakroom snackbar, and had succeeded her father in doing that. Between them, they'd been there over 80 years, and Ford was her great friend. He'd come in and have his usual cottage cheese with Worcestershire sauce. You'd see him in the cloakroom -- [except] he's now the President of the United States! That was kind of nice. He'd be friendly with everybody. It didn't happen very often, but a few times. He always remembered my name -- even if someone had just prompted him [laughter].

I thought he was a great President. And it was nice, especially for this kid from a little town in Connecticut, to be able to say: "I'm a friend of the President." Ford was a good guy.

Although his pardon of Nixon, two months before the '74 elections, combined with a staggering economy to wipe out dozens of GOP House seats.

I criticized Ford, publicly, when he issued the pardon. I thought it was the wrong decision -- and later I realized it was absolutely the right decision. He had to get rid of that difficult situation and move on, because Nixon would never get a fair trial anywhere. Ford did exactly the right thing -- and it cost him an election. And publicly, while I was still in office, I said that -- that I was wrong, Ford was right.

But I wasn't very kind to Ford [during the heat of my '74 fight for re-election].

(5) Energy Policy and the Northeast

The only thing I remember being alone on -- almost alone, in New England -- were all of the energy issues during the gas shortages. [Jim Cleveland](#) [of New Hampshire] and I were the only two New England Congressmen who consistently voted for expansion of drilling and for getting the government out of the way, instead of looking for controls and other things Congress or the President might be doing to exacerbate the problem.

My attitude was: If the government would just shut up and leave the industry alone, the market would solve the problem.

Even offshore drilling up in the New England states?

Yeah, I'm for that -- and I always have been. And more nuclear power -- we have this opportunity, let's take advantage of it, and stop being dependent on Middle Eastern oil. Instead, we do a lot of dumb things like Ethanol -- drive up the cost of food [derisive laughter] and not solve the problem.

(6) Legislative Distinctions

After 1976, you had been a U.S. Representative for four years, and before that a General Assemblyman for the same length of time. What was really different between the two legislatures, if anything was really different?

I was certainly prepared for the legislative process -- so, few surprises there.

But the lack of attention to language -- in the bills themselves -- surprised me. Congress didn't really pay attention to the language in the bills. In the state legislature, we'd all be seated, on the Floor -- it was rare that people were not on the Floor. Committee meetings would not be going on at the same time.

You listened to the debate -- in some cases, it's where you learned about the bills. And so you agonized over words because you wanted to be sure the Administration and the departments would execute the statute exactly the way you meant it. You wanted to be sure the words were accurate; if the courts ever looked at the language, they would really understand what you wanted them to. In Connecticut, we agonized over words -- and maybe, as a lawyer, some of us did that a little more than others.

How big of a body was the General Assembly?

We were 150-some people.

So you're saying on a lot of the days there might be a hundred of the seats --

Everybody would be there -- everybody! Only a couple of empty chairs. Committees would meet in the morning, you'd go into session at 11:00, and everyone would be in their seat.

What kind of staff support did you have in Connecticut?

None. Your office was the trunk of your car, and even in my second term, when I became Assistant Minority Leader, four of us had to share a secretary. Now [in Hartford] it's a different game -- everybody has an office, they have help, and everything else [laughter]. And it's still a part-time job.

(7) Atypical Allies Back Home

Serving in the federal House during the '70s, and not having a "safe" seat, how did you build durable links with individuals and groups who rarely gave the time of day to Republicans?

Early on, I had some Labor support -- probably going back to a couple of issues in the state legislature -- although I was fairly conservative there [too]. But I had a lot of "craft union" support -- the operating engineers, the mechanical people, that kind of thing.

The boilermakers, the pipefitters -- guys with those real niche trades.

Yeah -- exactly. And they continued to support me; they were really good.

Well, what kind of things did they want?

Strikers' benefits became a big issue. Bill Ford [D-Michigan] had the bill and it was obvious that his bill wasn't gonna pass; I had offered an amendment to change it, quite a bit -- and the irony was that, because the underlying bill was clearly not gonna pass, the Democrats suddenly started supporting my amendment. Finally, it failed -- but I got credit for trying to craft a compromise that would hopefully pass. It almost did. Some of the unions supported me because of that. And some of the Republicans were not very happy with me -- for attempting to give [the unions] a way out on something that [laughter] would've lost more dramatically.

I also become kind of an expert on mining issues: Hard-rock mining. MSHA ([The Mining Safety and Health Administration](#)) -- kind of like OSHA -- came along during that period. And so there were a number of labor issues that I got involved in; they were topical at the time.

(8) That Era versus Recent Times

It doesn't sound like you were that aggrieved that we were down two-to-one [during two of your three House terms] on a partisan basis.

It was different then. And that's why I loved every minute of serving in Congress -- but I wouldn't want to be there again. Not today. It's no fun. They don't let you in the door! That whole health-care fiasco [during 2009]? It was all done behind closed doors -- with only Democrats sitting there, and the Republicans aren't even allowed in?

I never felt -- I mean, I always knew that I didn't have the votes to get everything I wanted -- but I never felt that somehow I wasn't making a difference; that my voice wasn't heard; that I didn't have some influence on the legislation or get some little adjustment to whatever the Democrats were trying to do. I never felt like I was shut out of the process. When push comes to shove, you know you're probably gonna lose --

but enough of what I offered was accepted to make me feel that, "Okay, it's worth running for reelection."

But today, I don't know why a Republican wants to come back. It just isn't any fun -- and [lately] it's vicious. It wasn't that way before. You'd lose -- but we'd actually win a lot. During the Nixon years, you had a good strong southern conservative group. They weren't called Blue Dogs back then, but -- put them with the Republicans, and a lot of issues could be won.

And of course all those southern Democrats retired, because they'd been around a long time, or lost their seats to Republicans. And then the Republican number [in terms of legislative strength] was just whatever the Republican number was. If you were in the minority, you didn't have anybody else to go to.

But it's different today -- I wouldn't want to be there.

We had more hearings [in the '70s]. I'd come back Sunday night to be here for Monday morning, and they don't do that any more. They rig the schedule so you're not gonna have any votes until late on Monday or late on Tuesday.

No matter what a Member does with his family, though, it's probably wrong. It's just not a good family situation, and probably never has been. There's a high toll with family situations as a Member of Congress -- I don't think it's any better now.

You didn't end up gettin' a divorce.

Oh, I did. Yeah, I did. For a lot of reasons, not just the congressional schedule, but -- the schedule didn't help. And it's hard on kids. Because, if you bring your family here, at least when I was in Congress, we were meeting every day, and meeting late into the day, so you're not home for dinner, not home for Little League and for all the other activities you oughta be home for.

And then, on the weekend -- the process started in '72 or so -- part of my campaign against John Monagan was "where is he? He's never here. And he oughta be here; he oughta be listening to the people..." Well, I won, and so -- I had to be there! [laughter]. And I was home every weekend -- but when you're "home" you're not home. I'd get a schedule on Thursday telling me where I'd be from Friday night on, and I would just live to that schedule.

Any observations about Jerry Ford's successor as House GOP Leader?

I liked John Rhodes; he was a good guy. And he was a member of SOS.

He wasn't as articulate as Bob Michel -- but Jerry Ford wasn't all that articulate either. Still, I thought [Rhodes] did a good job. I think [Bob Michel](#), over the years, obviously did a much better job -- friendlier. But those were the days when the Leaders had a good relationship, which doesn't exist now. I don't think you have John Boehner and Nancy Pelosi as real good friends -- if they are, it's hard to see what good it might be doing. Different ball game.

People aren't listening to each other to reach the accommodations that are necessary to really, really find the "center" of legislation. Instead it's all of what one guy wants [versus the same attitude for his counterpart].

Although in the end Gingrich and Clinton made a whole bunch of compromises -- on capital gains, medical savings accounts, deficit-reduction, Bosnia --

Well, but Clinton was triangulating, and doing that very cleverly. So it was to his advantage to work out some of his problems. Welfare reform and many of the other things he did -- those are great moves forward.

How much of that do we see now? It's "I don't care what you think, I don't want to hear your opinion, don't bother me with that, we know what we're doing and we intend to do it our way." That's not the way it ought to work. Not at all.

(9) The United States Capitol Historical Society

I love what I'm doing here. We were actually created by Congress, but we're not a federal agency, we're a non-profit 501(c)3. We have to raise all our own money; we don't get any federal dollars. We have a budget of about \$3 million.

We were founded by a former Congressman -- actually, a Congressman at that time, named [Fred Schwengel](#), from Iowa. Fred had been around for a while -- out of office in due to the Goldwater defeat -- and then back again, serving until Tom Harkin beat him in 1974. But Fred continued to run the Society for the next 20 years, and they've been here [in the Veterans of Foreign Wars Building] for a long time: We're in space that the Warren Commission occupied after the Kennedy Assassination -- I think we have their furniture [laughter]; it's all beat up, so it has to be pretty old.

At any rate, our mission is to educate the public about the Capitol -- the art, the architecture, and the people who've served there. We have historians and educators on staff. We do publications. We sell some Capitol-related merchandise. We used to have a kiosk in the center of the Capitol, down in the crypt, which we ran for years and years until they opened the Visitor Center and decided that the feds should run the gift shop,

and did; so they threw us out, much to our unhappiness. We no longer have that source of income, which supported almost everything else we did.

Who made that decision?

Senate Rules and House Administration. They decided to operate the gift shops because they wanted to keep the profits. They buy a little of our stuff, wholesale -- which helps, but they don't buy much. Fortunately we have a good number of supporting members - - associations, and corporations, like UPS, Procter & Gamble and General Mills, the Food Marketing Institute, and others -- who keep our programs going and pay the rent.

Our salaries have been frozen for the past three years. Our sister organizations receive much better treatment by their respective branches.

How so?

The White House Historical Association is housed in two federal buildings on Lafayette Square and operates a gift shop and exhibition space in the Commerce Department Building at no cost to them, and the Supreme Court Historical Society operates a gift shop in the Supreme Court Building, again, at no cost to them.

But we're still doing the work we promised to do, and it's exciting -- I enjoy doin' it.

A Concluding Thought

I'm really unhappy that SOS kinda folded up.

Did it really?

Yeah. I'm not aware of anything they're doing. Wednesday Group apparently is still active, and I've been to a couple of their annual meetings.

So C&M won the long competition?

C&M won out. It was the first, and it will probably be the last.

United State Capitol Historical Society --
<http://www.uschs.org/Content/69.htm>