

INTERVIEW with STEVEN D. SYMMS

U.S. Representative and then Senator from Idaho, 1973 through 1992

From Wikipedia.org, Spring 2010, but with corrections by interviewee:

Born April 23, 1938, in Nampa, Idaho
Political party: Republican
Residence: Caldwell, Idaho; and Leesburg, Virginia
Alma mater: University of Idaho
Military service: United States Marine Corps, 1960-63
Profession: Agriculture

Steven Douglas Symms was a four-term Congressman (1973-80) and two-term U.S. Senator (1981-92) from Idaho. He was among the most conservative members of the Republican Party. He is currently a partner at Parry, Romani, DeConcini & Symms, a lobbying firm in Washington, D.C.

Symms attended public schools in Canyon County and graduated from Caldwell High School in 1956. He attended the University of Idaho in Moscow and graduated in 1960, with a B.S. in Agriculture. After graduation, Symms served in the Marines for three years, after which he worked as a fruit grower. From 1969 to '72, he was co-editor of the opinion journal *The Idaho Compass*.

In 1972, Symms ran for Congress with a theme tied to his apple farm. He featured a drawing of a big red apple and the slogan "Take a bite out of big government!" He was elected to the United States Congress, and won re-election three times, serving through 1980, when he ran for the U.S. Senate. He unseated four-term incumbent Democrat Frank Church. Symms was re-elected in 1986, defeating Democratic Governor John V. Evans.

Symms is a cousin of former Oregon Congressman Denny Smith.

He was succeeded in the Senate by the Republican Mayor of Boise, Dirk Kempthorne, who was later a two-term Idaho Governor and from 2005 to 2009 the Secretary of Interior in the Cabinet of President George W. Bush.

After leaving the U.S. Senate, he founded Symms Lehn Associates Inc., a consulting firm. In January 1999, he partnered with John Haddow and formed Symms & Haddow Associates, a lobbying firm. In January 2001, Steve and John joined forces with Romano Romani and former Senator Dennis DeConcini -- of Parry, Romani & DeConcini -- to form Parry, Romani, DeConcini & Symms.

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FRANK GREGORSKY: As 1972 opened, had you held local office of any kind?

STEVE SYMMS: No, I was at the ranch.

FG: Something catapulted you into politics.

SYMMS: President Nixon's imposition of wage and price controls [in August 1971] was one big motivator. And before that I had gone to "FEE" seminars. I was already a conservative, but then Ralph Smeed got me to attend those seminars.

FG: I forgot -- the acronym "FEE" is --

SYMMS: Foundation for Economic Education. See that picture of [Leonard Read](#)? I'm one of his lieutenants. Read set up the FEE in 1946, at Irvington-on-Hudson. A lot of people supported it. Read's idea was that you can't solve these problems with politics, you've got to solve 'em with ideas, and that ideas have consequences. He showed us how to go out and educate the thinking people on the virtues of the marketplace.

I didn't do that much [with all of this] until 1971. My wife was more conservative, and less libertarian. But the FEE kind of rang a bell with me. I didn't go to Irvington-on-Hudson until later, but we started bringing Leonard Read and his team into Idaho. And my wife and I went down to Silverado and Napa, California [for additional Read events]. He knew Ayn Rand very well. Her group published *The Objectivist* newsletter, and I used to read that -- I think Kathy and Jim Mertz subscribed to it for me as a present.

Barry Goldwater Jr. [then a California Congressman] and I sponsored a FEE seminar in the summer of 1973 -- out on Route 50 at the Arlie House; it was very well-attended and very helpful for young Republican staffers. One of Leonard Read's great lines was "out-humanitarian the humanitarians" -- by explaining to 'em how capitalism works. What people see is the offer [or result] of some program -- like an AMTRAK train coming through town, funded by the government. What they can't see is where would the money be if the government hadn't taxed it away to fund the train.

FG: Right.

SYMMS: Once you're comfortable explaining that, Read would tell us, you don't have to vote for all these programs. And a lot of [prominent people on our side] never were able to figure that out. Some who got big press coverage as "conservatives" were really big-government conservatives: Bill Bennett and Jack Kemp, for example -- there was never a government program they were against.

FG: [George W.] Bush and [Karl] Rove -- as a duo, were they big-government conservatives?

SYMMS: I think they were.

FG: So Tom DeLay, too.

SYMMS: Tom DeLay definitely was. I mean, we never cut spending when those guys were in charge. By contrast, Newt Gingrich had things goin' pretty well. We balanced the budget [by 1998]. If he and Clinton hadn't ended up in all their little sideshows, they would've had Social Security fixed, I believe.

Newt to me is one of the smartest of all the people from that era. Larry MacDonald was very skeptical of Newt when Newt came to the House. Because of Larry's friendship with me, I was a little skeptical too. But I watched his Conservative Opportunity Society and started becoming a believer. Not long after I left the House, I realized that Newt was a real thinker.

(1) First Campaign and First Term

FG [text comes from the set-up e-mail]: Richard Nixon has gone down in conventional media history as a cross between mad bomber (in Southeast Asia) and paranoid (at home). People in our segment of the party, though, had different beefs during his 5 1/2 years in office. Policy-wise, he was the least conservative GOP President since TR: Created the EPA, signed a major hike in the capital-gains tax, transferred industrial gear 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. He made a big point of putting southerners and strict constructionists on the Court, and Warren Burger turned out well enough. But another Nixon pick -- Lewis Powell -- wrote the "abortion for all" decision.

SYMMS: When I first ran, during our '72 primary, they asked me who I was supporting for President. I said: John Ashbrook. "As long as he's running, put me down as an Ashbrook Republican." And I didn't even know him! And they said: "But will you support Nixon [in the fall]?" I said: "Well, if he wins the primary, I guess I will [laughter] -- I'm running on the Republican ticket and I will support the reelection of President Nixon."

I didn't want to tell 'em I was probably going to vote Libertarian in November.

FG: John Hospers?

SYMMS: Yeah, [John Hospers](#)! I'd read his book. Hospers was a Libertarian like I am -- he believed in a strong foreign and defense policy. In World War Two, he had flown B-17s over Europe.

FG: And he got one electoral vote -- one of the Nixon electors, I think the fellow was from Nebraska, defected from the Nixon delegation. [Actually, he was from Virginia -- FG]

SYMMS: I didn't even remember that -- and, for the record, I voted by secret ballot.

FG: So now it's January 1973, and you are sworn in by Speaker Carl Albert, Democrat from Oklahoma -- where do you go to look for allies?

SYMMS: I had Phil Crane, and Ben Blackburn from Georgia. [Ed Derwinski](#) was a great pillar of wisdom for me; his office was just down the hall. Plus, I was already philosophically pretty grounded. Also, Senator [Jim McClure](#) was a great help to when it came to keeping things in perspective. And I had a really brilliant guy as my A.A. -- Bob Smith, who had also helped me in the campaign.

As for how I got adjusted? They give you a little book, when you go in the House, that's got everybody's picture in it, their name, and what district they're from. It's not even pocket size -- just a small little square book. I took that with me and went to every single Member. We voted on the Floor then, if you remember -- no voting machine. So these guys all come to the Floor. I just picked each one of 'em out and introduced myself or [otherwise] met 'em all.

I made it a point to know every Member of the House. Within three or four months, I was on a first-name basis with every single Member. They knew who I was, and I knew who they were, and I could talk with 'em. That really helped me.

Campaigning is what I was better at -- for me, the campaigning is the fun part about politics.

FG: Making connections directly.

SYMMS: And that's the way the House used to work. They ought to take that voting machine out today -- throw it in the Potomac River. Then the Members would be on the Floor, and they would be lobbying each other on their issues, and working with each other, without the staffs. What's wrong with Congress today is that everybody has too big a staff, and you get nothing but ideologues on both sides that are in their twenties, and they don't have enough perspective to see what you have to do.

FG: Say more about people to carry out conservative projects with [in those early years].

SYMMS: Phil Crane was instrumental in the formation of [what became the] Republican Study Committee. Ed Feulner was his administrative assistant. What they set up was the Republican Steering committee -- Ed Derwinski and myself and a bunch of guys, we all pooled staff dollars to hire people and get it off the ground. By that point [1974] John Rhodes was Leader, and he insisted that we not call it the Republican Steering committee --

FG: Which sounded like a Leadership entity!

SYMMS: Yep. "You guys can't use that name." So we had to compromise and call it Study Committee. I was still a firebrand in those days -- I didn't know what compromise was all about. But I said: "Okay, if that's what we have to do, we have to do it."

And Phil Crane, at that point in time, was the best stump speaker in the Republican House group.

FG: Once you were colleagues with [John Ashbrook](#), did you do much with him? —

SYMMS: Oh yeah; his office was just down the hall. Ashbrook and Derwinski were in those two corner offices on the fourth floor of the Longworth, looking out to the Capitol. Then you'd come around that corner [and] down the hall -- Dave Treen had an office there, Phil Crane, myself, and on down to the end of the hall were Ron Dellums and Charlie Wilson. And those were really fun days. You could go all the way [ideologically] from Ron Dellums to John Ashbrook. And Dellums -- you ever been around him?

FC: No, but Newt used to speak very well of him. Called him a great guy.

SYMMS: He is a great guy. And he had a staff of just really attractive people -- nice, and they worked with the other staffs. Ron himself was just a nice guy all the way around -- hard-core liberal as he was. It was fun; it was a fun time.

Sometimes, if Congress had to stay [in session] late that night, we'd have a fourth-floor party. The people who worked on the fourth floor would put the party together. Members would be friends with each other, and you got to know who their staff people were. It's just not that way now. See, they'd be afraid to do that. A party on the fourth floor of a federal office building today? People would see that as absolute blasphemy.

FG: But -- who would think that? The ideologues in each camp?

SYMMS: Maybe, but I really mean the general public -- because the 24/7 news -- Fox News and CNN -- would be over there taking pictures of Charlie Wilson with his arm around two girls and drinking a beer. You see what I mean? Charlie was an incredible character. He was [one of the Democratic members] of my Class. Funny as could be -- "the liberal from Lufkin." That's what he called himself.

FG: What about some of the GOPers from that fairly large Class of '72?

SYMMS: Claire Burgener, Thad Cochran, [Jim Martin](#), Carlos Moorhead, Trent Lott and Bill Cohen -- they all become good friends. [Jim Johnson](#) [of Colorado] was a complete libertarian on foreign policy -- he didn't want the U.S. to do anything with other countries other than trade. And [John Conlan](#) [of Arizona] was elected president of the Class.

FG: Good -- I never knew that.

SYMMS: Yeah. And he ran a campaign to get it.

FG: Any others [from the '72 freshmen] deserve a mention?

SYMMS: Ben Gilman and [Stan Parris](#) were both good friends. Bill Ketchum [of California] was a World War Two and Korean War veteran -- Army -- and he used to give me a hard time about the Marines -- that they "always had their press corps with 'em." Bill Ketchum was actually with Ernie Pyle when he was killed. He fought on Guam, the Philippines, and Okinawa -- and Pyle was killed on Iwo [Shima](#), a little island right off of Okinawa.

FG: Among the senior House Republicans, besides Ed Derwinski, who is making an impression on you?

SYMMS: H.R. Gross was still in the House. And I camped beside him for the first two years -- I learned the House Rules from him. When he left, because he thought I'd be somebody who would carry on the fight, he gave me this huge file of all these amendments he had offered. One of 'em was to not spend any money on the Eternal Flame.

[Mutual laughter]

And another one was, if they had to build a Kennedy Center, he would vote for it, but only if they would allow to have wrestling down there one night a week [laughter]. He was great. He said: "Why, these cultural people, they want to tax the poor people to pay for the arts and humanities so they can go enjoy the Opera."

They used to smoke on the House Floor; you'd just stand behind the railing. And they were trying to ban advertising for little cigars. He got up on the Floor and patted his chest -- he smoked those Chesterfields -- and he patted his pack there [by the shirt pocket] and said: "I just hope someday, when I'm laying on a bed at the Veterans Hospital, because I picked up this bad habit as a young doughboy in France, that somebody will have the generosity to at least bring a cigarette and put it to my lips so I can enjoy one last drag before I die." Everybody in the House started cheering! Democrats and Republicans clapped when he said that -- they cheered, because H.R. was just magnificent.

FG: Was he also acerbic in his style?

SYMMS: Oh yes, very acerbic. He'd get up and talk about "the fleshpots of the world, from which my friend Wayne Hays has just returned." When he left, everybody chipped in money and gave him two round-trip first-class tickets to Paris -- because he'd never taken a foreign trip while he was in office. He wouldn't travel -- senior Republican on the Foreign Affairs Committee, but he wouldn't go. (After he retired, he did go -- back to France, where he fought in World War One.)

Soon after Chuck Grassley got elected to H.R.'s seat, I went out to Iowa for a banquet. Ronald Reagan was the speaker, and we were honoring H.R. Gross for his [26 years of] service in the Congress. He and Reagan were buddies.

FG: I didn't know that.

SYMMS: They were both at WHO Radio in Des Moines. Reagan did the sports reporting.

One time I asked H.R.: "Who do you think is the most capable of all these people we serve with?" He said: "You'd have to say Wilbur Mills. When he brings a bill to the Floor, he's got everything greased. The skids are greased, Republicans are on board, Democrats are on board, no amendment is ever going to pass -- and he runs 'em right through."

(2) Ideological and Sometimes Incremental

FG: Let's talk about your approach to national politics. Philosophically very rigorous. On the other hand, you could get along and be friends with -- it sounds like -- anybody.

SYMMS: When I got on the committees back here, and discovered that the largest employer in Idaho -- in the first congressional district -- was the U.S. Forest Service, and the second largest was the Bureau of Land Management, I started realizing that I can't be totally blind to the fact that, you know, we're not going to change this situation overnight. I did get involved with the Sagebrush Rebellion to try to transfer that land back to the state.

From page 215 of the 1976 *Almanac of American Politics*:

The 1st congressional district [is] traditionally the more Democratic of Idaho's two seats... With a large labor vote in Lewiston and Coeur d'Alene, and the University of Idaho in Moscow, the panhandle often produces Democratic majorities. But in 1st-district politics these days, the panhandle is often outvoted by

Boise and nearby Canyon County, both heavily conservative. These conservative votes were more than enough to produce 1972 and 1974 victories for Republican Steven Symms, a fruit rancher and businessman who was only 34 when he won his first term. His performance was impressive. In 1972, he beat the Senate Majority Leader in the primary and [won by 12 points] in the general. In the Democratic year of 1974, he won with a convincing 58% of the vote; at the same time, his former aide Bob Smith was making a creditable showing against Frank Church. This is all the more remarkable in that Symms is that rarest of Congressmen these days, a free-market ideologue; he likes to think of himself as a libertarian, and he doesn't hesitate to cast lone votes against legislation his principles oppose.

The state's 2nd district is more of a geographic unit. Most of its people live within a dozen or so miles of the Snake River, in small cities or farmhouses near the irrigation ditches that bring water to the potato fields... [E]xcept for Pocatello (pop. 40,000), it is normally Republican. But even more significant, it is the home of Idaho's right-wing subculture. The John Birch Society is strong in the sparsely populated farm counties and little mountain-locked towns, isolated from any center of urbanity. It is easy to see how a few enthusiastic, articulate right-wingers can come to dominate a town's school board and, by assiduous proselytizing, change a small county's voting patterns. That is what appears to have been happening the past 10 or 15 years in southern Idaho; the results are all there to see in the election returns. They show up, for example, in the strong third-party finish of George Wallace in 1968, when in some Snake River counties he almost equaled Hubert Humphrey's totals -- or in the fact that [American Independent Party nominee and GOP Congressman] John Schmitz actually outran McGovern in four counties here in 1972.

But, during that first House race, I was on a bus trip goin' up through the district, and my uncle called me to say: "Steve, you're losing 10,000 votes a day; you gotta get down here and straighten out this statement that you want to sell all this public land." I told him: "Well, Doyle, I didn't really say sell it all." So my Uncle Doyle says: "Well that's the way it's being reported. And all your supporters out there who are ranchers and so forth -- they don't want it sold off; they've got grazing leases and timber permits -- you know, because they're working with these government agencies."

I had to fly back to Boise and sit down with the Secretary of State -- Pete Cenarrusa, who held that office longer than anyone else in Idaho history. He drew me a little blueprint for a press release. He told me to go out and talk about a first step: "If we could transfer this land to the states, we could still manage it here, and it would still be available for ranchers" and so on. The land to be sold off would be any land that butts up against the city; the city needs more room for development, people want to build houses, and [the feds] could start selling off parcels --

FG: Um-hmm.

SYMMS: So he said, "That's the position to take now." He also said: "You can't go any further than that. They all think the Rockefellers will buy it all." I said: "But why would they want it?" He said: "You and I know they wouldn't, but that's the way it's painted." The Rockefellers would come out and buy all the land. But the Rockefellers didn't -- or at least the Harrimans didn't want it. The Harrimans gave that Harriman Ranch to the state of Idaho, up there on the Snake River.

FG: A really good story about representing your district versus being ideologically pure.

SYMMS: Well, what do you do? I mean you can't just ignore -- unless you just don't care if you get elected. It's easy for Bill Archer and Ron Paul take a "pure" position; it's harder for somebody whose state is two-thirds owned by the federal government.

FG: [Laughter] And that's a great sentence -- perfect.

SYMMS: Now, I did vote with Bill Archer -- you remember when Nixon wanted to put the COLAS in for Social Security?

FG: Yeah! The week before the '72 election, he signed a 25% increase in the basic payment. Not sure whether the COLAs began with that bill or not.

SYMMS: Well, they asked me what I thought about automatic cost-of-living increases. Bob Smith, one of my staff, advised saying that "it wasn't the senior citizens' fault that we're having inflation, so if [COLAS are] an equity move, I could go along with it." Six months later, they forced a vote on it on the House floor; and after Bill Archer had explained it, and I had listened to the debate, I voted with him. So I voted the opposite of what I had said.

FG: You voted to stop a COLA?

SYMMS: Yeah, to not have it. This was a big vote in the House. Not very many people voted that way. I was one of 'em. I also voted against the Endangered Species Act.

FG: Um-hmm. That's good.

SYMMS: A lot of that stuff I opposed, on philosophical grounds. But Endangered Species was not a hard vote, because the ranchers out there -- they hated them; they still do.

FG: What about your relations in the House with the major environmental groups?

SYMMS: Slim to none. They'd put up with me. I was cordial to 'em, but I didn't support their position. I was with Don Young on [opposing] the Alaska Lands Bill. He and I put up a valiant fight. We got 145 votes against it. You go look at that [day's] *Record*. Were you over there then?

FG: Yeah.

SYMMS: I was Young's #1 guy on the House floor. John Seiberling [D-OH] was the main guy for it. We put up a good fight, but -- we didn't have the votes. Jimmy Carter [and the Democrats] pushed it through at the end of 1980, in the lame-duck session.

FG: With an "aye" vote from a freshman named Newt Gingrich [laughter].

(3) Other Battles; Crane and Bauman; Frank Church

FG: What about the push for same-day voter registration? Do you remember when Dick Dingman at the RSC worked with Bob Dornan and others to impersonate Democratic Members of Congress and get phony driver's licenses?

SYMMS: Yeh. Beldon Bell, Dick Dingman and those guys [arranged it]. I played the role of Frank Thompson from New Jersey. And he said: "Symms, you son of a bitch" -- at this point he was laughing -- "how could you do that to me?" I said: "Frank, it was just to make a point, it wasn't anything personal..."

FG: How did you physically do it?

SYMMS: They produced ID cards with my picture and the name said "Frank Thompson." You could take that card in and register to vote.

FG: So you went down to the House gallery and had a mug shot made, or -- ?

SYMMS: No no no. They took 'em -- I mean, the House Republican Study Committee took the photos. We were showing how easy it would be to counterfeit a card.

Another thing I did was to take a couple of pistols up to the Press Gallery, right before a planned vote on Saturday Night Specials. Opened up a briefcase, took out these two pistols, and said: "I'd like y'all to come around and see this." I held 'em up. "Now, which one of these do you think is a Saturday Night Special?" One was a Buntline 22 -- long-barreled pistol, like something Tom Mix would have, you know? The other one was a nice little smooth Smith & Wesson semi-automatic 380 pistol that you could stick right here and nobody could see it.

And I challenged those media guys to say which one is the Saturday Night Special, by the definition of this bill that [the House managers] were gonna pass tomorrow.

FG: Sure. And there's no answer to that question?

SYMMS: Well, they all said: "It's this little one." *No, it's this other one.* "Because it didn't have the proper engineering, if you dropped it -- conceivably -- and it landed right on the hammer, it might discharge a round."

And that was the point: "This is why it's impossible to [make sense of this bill]. Some poor lady, maybe she can't afford this one -- which cost \$400 -- while this other one cost \$90 [and would serve] to defend herself in her house. And you're calling it a Saturday Night Special? And the House isn't going to pass a law that says she can't have that pistol? But this other one -- the bad guy can have that anyway..."

FG: Who were you making this demonstration to?

SYMMS: The reporters in the Press Gallery. Jim McClure used to tell the story that I took [the pistols] to the House Floor and did that -- I never took 'em to the House Floor. But the amendment was voted down, and that [demonstration] was given a lot of credit, because it exposed the phoniness of the whole bill. Jim liked his version better always told it that I was on the Floor [with those pistols].

FG: So the reporters did write something up, and [the majority party] lost the vote?

SYMMS: Oh yeah. The House people heard about it. So they took the bill down, or maybe they didn't even vote on it. McClure was the one that told me [using the two pistols in a show and tell] defeated that amendment. He was a big pro-gun guy too.

FG: In 1979 Phil Crane begins running against Ronald Reagan for the 1980 nomination, creating an awkward situation for conservatives. Did you try to talk Crane out of it?

SYMMS: Not enough; I should've talked to him more. But he was determined to do it. And I had always told Phil Crane -- and Jack Kemp, too -- that they ought to run for President. Having supported Reagan in '76, I didn't want to get involved in '80 [even though he was now the frontrunner], because of Phil being in the race.

FG: I see.

SYMMS: But Paul Laxalt got on me. He said, "Steve, you gotta do this -- I'm not worried about Phil [as some kind of threat to Reagan], I'm worried about you. You're trying to run for the Senate and you need to be listed as part of the Reagan group." So that's what they did, despite my reluctance -- not that I wasn't for Reagan, but I wanted not to hurt Phil's feelings.

And Arlene Crane was furious. She came down to my office and raised a ruckus one time [about a staffing matter in Phil's office]. For that and other reasons, I went over to Phil and said: "You're not going to like what I'm about to say but, if you want to continue this presidential campaign, the only way you'll be able to survive is to go file for divorce today."

FG: Wow. That was a gutsy --

SYMMS: And of course he's totally opposed to divorce.

I also sat her down and said, "Arlene, you must be the preacher's wife, pure as the driven snow. Instead you went over and chewed out Senator Hatch the other day, and it's embarrassing. You don't have any right to tell Senator Hatch that he can't support Ronald Reagan." She ranted and raved. I decided *this woman is off her rocker*, and told Phil. So Phil -- bless his heart -- goes and tells Arlene! It took almost 10 years before she'd hardly speak to me again. Not 10, but -- she was pretty ticked with me for a long time.

FG: Well, you did the right thing from the point of view of your friendship with Phil.

SYMMS: Phil had been very helpful to me. He and Ed Feulner helped get the office set up [in '73]. They got Howard Segermark to help me set up the office and he helped find a good, experienced office manager: Sue Cornick. They were there during my first term, until the Idaho people could get snapped in. Then Sue went with Henson Moore and stayed with him 'til he left. A really capable woman.

FG: I need to ask you about two other Congressmen who, in very different ways, led the House Republicans during the dark days of (especially) the middle 1970s. What are some words you would use to describe -- first, Bob Bauman?

SYMMS: A true classic conservative on the Floor. He knew the rules and kept everyone honest -- offering a lot of amendments, and objecting when objections were needed. Bob was a really great Congressman. And I offered him a job in my Senate office when he was defeated -- but he went on to other endeavors.

FG: And John Anderson?

SYMMS: Very capable. And he found out he could get good press by opposing Republicans.

FG: Now -- what kind of a guy was Frank Church?

SYMMS: He was a "clean" guy -- one of the earliest officeholders to disclose his financial dealings and so forth.

FG: On TV is the only time I ever saw him, but he always struck me as "prissy."

SYMMS: Well, kind of pompous -- and he grew more pompous later in his Senate years. He wore the toga all the time.

SteveSymms.com has the videos of our 1980 debates, and the best one is the last one. The first one was run by the League of Women Voters, where they had us stuffed into tight, confined rules. Well, he's a good debater, in fact he was national debate champion in 1940 when he was in high school. And then he served in World War Two.

Church was a very capable person. I had a lot of respect for him. People said: "Well, how did you guys get along [in the same] delegation?" I said, "We got along great -- until I started running for the Senate -- that kind of ruined the rapport between the two offices -- "

FG: But you're saying he was qualified to be a U.S. Senator.

SYMMS: Oh, absolutely. He was very qualified to be a Senator. Frank just got too liberal for the state, and I rode in with Ronald Reagan. A lot of people probably to this day think he was a better Senator than I was. I would argue with that. I was part of the Reagan Revolution -- Frank would have fought him all the way. And we got more roads out built in Idaho than ever before. I was Chairman of the Highway Committee --

FG: You brought back the 65-mile-an-hour limit in western states.

SYMMS: Yes. And more than that, I brought back tons of money to build roads that needed to be built.

I used to catch hell from guys [in the east]. Strom Thurmond jammed his finger in my chest: "All this money's going to Idaho, and we're not gettin' enough in South Caro-LAHHNN-ah." So I sent him the facts. They received a lot of money early on, because the Interstate was built through South Carolina early. In Idaho we were still finishing the Interstate.

So I used to tell the skeptics: "You give us back our land, and I'll go dollar for dollar [on highway appropriations] with you. But as long as the federal government owns two-thirds of our state, and we have to build all these roads for people to drive through Idaho from one end of the country to the other -- then we want our money, and we're paying for it with our fuel taxes."

(4) Tax Pledges and Ruptured Trust

FG: Let's talk about the party schism over the Andrews Air Force Base budget negotiations from June to September of 1990. Do you think President Bush's big mistake was going into them at all, or instead was the blunder making the sweeping "read my lips" pledge during 1988?

SYMMS: Party schism -- huge, and that Andrews thing cost Bush his reelection. No question about it.

FG: But he scored the famous 91% approval rating three months after signing that bill.

SYMMS: I know.

FG: So -- couldn't he still have put it back together?

SYMMS: He might have, but I always believed [pause] -- see, after the '88 campaign, there was a lot of internal jealousy within Republican ranks. Bush made the no-tax pledge, and Bob Dole, Pete Domenici and some of those guys thought it was irresponsible.

FG: Right.

SYMMS: Because why promise people something you probably can't deliver on? And the Senators who felt this way were never dyed-in-the-wool supply-siders. I was a strong tax-cutter, because I saw it as a way to make government smaller; and I would rather have a smaller budget, even if we had to borrow money. As long as spending was lower, that was more important than having higher taxes [to achieve] balance with a bigger budget.

FG: Right. Therefore, during '88, you didn't have a problem with [candidate] Bush making an absolutist pledge on taxes.

SYMMS: No! had I tried to get Bob Dole to take the same pledge -- unsuccessfully. So I had no problem with Bush doing that, because I thought he was on the right track! In fact, it led to the greatest 30-second TV spot I ever saw -- that blue background and him saying READ MY LIPS: NO NEW TAXES.

FG: But your subtler institutional point is that rivals in the Senate -- the rivalry [from the '88 primary battle] sustained itself, and they wanted to make President Bush eat those words.

SYMMS: Yeah -- they wanted to. And I will always believe that those guys in the Leadership of the Senate led him to slaughter.

FG: [In the Leadership] of both parties?

SYMMS: Both parties. [Democratic Leader] George Mitchell was shrewd. People can say what they want about him, but Mitchell is very smart and very shrewd. He had Dole and Domenici [and other] senior Republicans workin' with him, and they all put this together, and they got Bush on board [for negotiations that would result in tax increases].

FG: Once that train left the station [in June of 1990] and the talks were underway, how could things have been managed differently, as in better?

SYMMS: I told [White House chief of staff] [John Sununu](#): "John, what the President needs to do -- if he has really made up his mind to support this -- is to have a press conference and announce that he's going along with a tax increase only because he thinks this budget crisis is sooo bad -- "

FG: Um-hmm.

SYMMS: "And that he will not seek reelection because of [changing his stance from '88]."

FG: Wow! I can't imagine Bush Sr. displaying that kind of intellectual honesty.

SYMMS: Or he could have said: "I'm not ruling out running for a second term -- but I'm willing to sacrifice running for reelection because I know I made the pledge the other way."

FG: And then see what the reaction was inside the party! Interesting.

SYMMS: Right. And maybe -- I'm talking to Sununu at this point -- enough Republicans would have insisted he run anyway, in which case he could still run, and get over it.

FG: But at least he would have, sort of, asked permission --

SYMMS: Yes. Try to obtain permission. Otherwise, this would come back to haunt him. Not only that, but they didn't realize how tough Bill Clinton would be [during 1992].

Say what we want about Bill Clinton -- and I thought he was terrible when he first got elected -- but when I look back at it, if Reagan would've had his way, and gotten the 22nd Amendment repealed, Clinton would still be President; Newt maybe would still be Speaker; and this country would be waaayyy better off than we are now.

FG: [Laughter] That's a great extrapolation!

SYMMS: [Laughter] You can't expect somebody to stay Speaker that long, I guess. But Newt likes to say that Denny Hastert was better to be the Speaker [after '98] -- well, I don't agree with that. Because Denny just rolled over for the Bush people.

(5) Two Middle East Wars, Two GOP Presidents

FG: You were out of office by this time, but -- what did you think in 2003 about Iraq?

SYMMS: I was skeptical, because I had supported going into Iraq in 1991. I was skeptical about [a much wider effort 12 years later], because I was afraid -- I knew we could take it militarily, but then what are we going to do with it once we get it? But I didn't oppose it, and in any case I didn't have a vote.

FG: Say more about the 1990-91 situation of Kuwait and Iraq.

SYMMS: I had supported President Bush Senior in the first Iraq War, and I wanted us to keep fighting -- for about two more days. If we had engaged the Republican Guard for just a couple more days, nothing would've been left of it. We'd engage a division of the Iraqis [up to that point] and they'd either surrender or they'd be dead.

FG: Two more days -- but not march on to Baghdad?

SYMMS: You wouldn't need to go to Baghdad. Just get rid of enough of the Republican Guards so that Saddam would've had to flee.

FG: That's an interesting angle.

SYMMS: And I had an argument with [NSC chief] Colin [Powell] about that. We were up in that secret room in the Capitol. He explained it all to me: "Steve, you don't need to worry, we've accomplished this already. In two weeks, he'll be gone." He had more experience than I did, so I told him I'd not [push my scenario in public].

FG: And what we did with the Kurds was reprehensible.

SYMMS: It was terrible. Stopping when we did allowed him to go back up there and kill all the Kurds. But Colin thought [pause] -- he honestly believed that Saddam would be overthrown.

You know, our record on helping people that are in tough shape is bad. We don't seem to know how to shift gears with our foreign policy. After we had gotten Saddam out of Kuwait, we could've forced all those Gulf states to have a peace treaty in Tel Aviv. That part I did say: "Let's all go to Tel Aviv and have a peace treaty. If Anwar Sadat can do it, then all the rest of you can do it. We've bailed you all out in this war, so you sign a peace treaty and allow Israel to exist."

We had five hundred thousand people over there -- the biggest force for peace in the Middle East we'd ever have. "We ought to solve this issue right now, when we can write the rules."

FG: Did you tell that to Powell too?

SYMMS: Yeah! And his guys all laughed at me -- you know, "Crazy Symms." But I had been

getting briefed by General Gordon Sumner. He'd been showing me how to do this. But anyway -- it's all history.

FG: Can I get some thoughts on Reagan's place in history versus Bush 43's?

SYMMS: Personally, I always liked George Washington as our best President -- but I think Reagan's right up there with him. Ronald Reagan was a great President. When he took office, I was so young that I didn't appreciate how much of an impact he was having. I thought we were compromising too much.

Steve Hanke and I talk about this a lot -- he writes in *Forbes* magazine and is the currency-board guru. He was in the White House when Reagan took office, as a member of the Council of Economic Advisors. He stayed about a year or two; when TEFRA [the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act, August 1982] came along, he couldn't stomach it, so he left. He and I had also been involved in the Sagebrush Rebellion. We have talked about it since -- that Reagan was making a lot more headway than we gave him credit for.

In 1981 and '82, during the Reagan administration, [Hanke] was a Senior Economist on the Council of Economic Advisors. In 1995 and '96, he served as an advisor to [Domingo Cavallo](#), the Minister of Economy of [Argentina](#). He has also held formal economic-advisory positions with [Uruguay](#) and four countries in eastern Europe, especially [Bulgaria](#) where the [Lev](#) is pegged successfully to the Euro through a [currency board](#) that he created. In 1997, he began writing his "Point Of View" columns for *Forbes* magazine.

SOURCE -- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_Hanke (as of June 19, 2010)

FG: And now George Bush Jr.

SYMKS: First off, as I noted, he was a big spender -- a big-government conservative. I mean, that's a given -- but so was Abraham Lincoln. So that doesn't necessarily mean that he'll have a "bad" place in history. On Iraq -- if we succeed, eventually; if this thing works according to his original vision -- he will [be viewed] as a really good President.

FG: You mean if we have a democratic Arab state?

SYMMS: Yes, and what a revolutionary development -- secular constitution, a pro-capitalist society, and not religious bigots running things.

EG: They are still going to be hostile to Israel, though.

SYMMS: They might. But Bush will have put a big spike right in their side. It will change people's perspective of him. He did stay with this issue, he was very persistent --

FG: Unlike LBJ in his final two years, who just crumbled.

SYMMS: Bush did not crumble. He was tough. He never flinched. He had a hard time. It took him a long while to get the counterinsurgency working properly.

See, when they have a war like this, they should always put the Marine Corps in charge and not the Army -- because the Marines are trained for counterinsurgency situations. They know you've got to get along with the local people, or you can't win.

FG: Much like the Philippines under Teddy Roosevelt. Resistance in the Philippines persisted for 10 years after [we won those islands from Spain]. We had to defeat Islamic extremists, in the Philippines during TR's Administration, and the Marines were the leaders there.

SYMMS: Yeah. Yeah -- and that has always been true. Gen. Petraeus had been educated in counterinsurgency [and] how to fight it. He took advantage of the Marines who were there [in Iraq], and it's working. But boy it's hard -- it's so hard to go into a country, change the culture, and expect that they won't still be fighting back and forth in 10 years.

FG: Isn't the prognosis worse in Afghanistan, though, because it's so bloody primitive?

SYMMS: Ohh God yes. I've never understood why the Democrats all want to go to Afghanistan and fight.

FG: Right -- well, 70% don't. Obama is against his own party on this issue.

SYMMS: It's unbelievable that we think we can do this. It's so expensive to try to have big million-dollar pieces of equipment moving up and down those back-country roads. Some smart guys with a few C4 charges can blow 'em off the road and down the hillside -- it's just outrageous. They're isn't anything in Afghanistan -- if you did win, what do you have? It's a poor country. Mostly what they grow is poppies.

In Iraq, they at least have oil, and great agriculture, with a very smart people. The problem there is a generation of people who have been stamped down by Saddam. It will take a while for them to be able to think in terms of entrepreneurship again.

**END of VERSION 1.1 of SYMMS BOOK QUOTES,
Incorporating his mark-up of 6/15/2010**

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