

“The Last Bit of Skill”

Participant: Eli Jay Segal

Interview Date: February 8–10, 2006

Project: William J. Clinton Presidential History Project

Eli Jay Segal was chief of staff for William J. Clinton’s 1992 campaign and then led the administration’s AmeriCorps initiative. Senator Robert Byrd was reluctant to support it, and Segal recalls negotiating to get him on board. This interview took place at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston where Segal died 10 days later.

Eli Jay Segal: And I went to see Jay Rockefeller, a fellow Senator from West Virginia. We didn't always get along but we did a little vote swapping. I walked into Rockefeller's room, in which I'd never been, and said, "Jay, we need Bob Byrd's vote." He said, "He's very hard to get." I said, "But I'm told you can do it," my usual line. Then we started chitchatting about things. I looked around his room and I could see that baseball was a very important part of his life. I said, "Jay, I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to let you off the hook easy. You ask me any baseball trivia question you want, whatever. If I get it right, you've got to ask him. If I get it wrong, you're off the hook."

This is where my memory fades a little because this is 12 years ago. I think his first question was, "Who was the organist at Ebbets Field?" I said, "Everyone knows that was Gladys Gooding." He had a chuckle about it and then he said, "Everyone knows that in 1950, the Giants effectively won the pennant by getting Eddie Stankey and Al Dark from the Braves, but no one knows whom the Braves got in return. If you can tell me who the Braves got from the Giants, you win." Who could remember a piece of trivia like this? This is a trade that had happened probably—let's see, this was 1993 and that event happened in 1948 or '49. Without hesitating a second, I said, "Everyone knows it was Willard Marshall and Sid Gordon." [laughter]

It blew him away. It created a friendship, although I don't think he remembers that that's where our friendship comes from as well as I do. I was right and he delivered Bobby Byrd. Now whether that was a direct one-on-one I'll never know, but it was Rockefeller doing what he said he was going to do, and my using the last bit of skill I had. I knew baseball and politics pretty well.

End of excerpt.

Interview with Eli Jay Segal, February 8–10, 2006, William J. Clinton Presidential History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia. URL: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/eli-jay-segal-oral-history>