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Making the Switch from Banking to Commerce

Michael R. Lemov recounts the experience of moving to a new committee.

Interview recorded February 22, 2012

At the end of about a year, I was still hungering for consumer protection because that was my first love. That made me better than just a regular trial lawyer, which was what I was trained to be, or a commercial lawyer. When I was working on consumer protection, I felt I was working for the public interest. Maybe that's not always true. A lot of people might argue some of the things we did were over-regulation. I'd argue with them about that, but that's one point of view. Anyway, there I come walking down the hallway of this building—the Rayburn Office Building—in about 1970, the very early part of '70, I saw John Moss coming along. And I stopped and said hi to him, and he said hi. And I said, "Say, Mr. Moss, you were supposed to call me when you got some dough from Harley Staggers." And he said, "Well, I did get a little money, but Patman is paying you a lot more than I could pay you on the House Commerce Committee." He's a full committee chairman, and they have a bigger empire than subcommittee chairmen. Subcommittee chairmen had a very small budget and a very small staff in those initial days. Moss changed it, but that's the way it was then. So I said, "Well, Mr. Moss, what made you think that I wouldn't take a salary cut to come to work for you?" And he said, "Would you be interested?" I said, "Absolutely." And so, he offered me the job. And then I went to Shacklette, Baron Shacklette, Mr. Patman's AA, to tell him that I was going to move across the hall to the Commerce committee. Shacklette said, "Don't do it. You cannot do this." I was stunned. "Why? Why can't I move to another committee? Don't you guys all work together?" Shacklette said, "Mr. Patman does not like to lose staff. He's very protective and strong about keeping his staff." And it also is a sign of power, or a loss of power, when a full committee chairman begins to lose his staff. There's a sense that he may be retiring or aging. So Shacklette said, "You can't do this, Mike. What will happen—the last guy that tried to leave Patman had to move to Hawaii. That's the only place he could get a job." He said, "Moss will back down, Patman will fire you, and you'll have no job at all." And I really—I had a wife and two little children at home—not so little anymore, but they were little then. And I was worried. But I said, "Well, I have to do this. I really want to do this." So he said, "Okay, let's go tell Mr. Patman." I walked into Patman's office with Shacklette, Shacklette said, "Mr. Patman, Mr. Lemov is going to go work for Congressman Moss on consumer protection, and so we wanted to come in and tell you that he's made this decision." Patman didn't look at me. He looked at Shacklette and said "Take Mr. Lemov's keys from him now. Take him down to his office and clean it out now." And that's pretty much what happened, although I think Shacklette gave me a few days to get out. Shacklette was a great guy, and I was very friendly with the banking committee staff. Staff relations were wonderful; I don't really remember harsh words in all my, almost a decade on the staff—various staffs up here. So I moved to the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, now known as Energy and Commerce.