

Linda Melconian

Assistant Counsel and Legislative Assistant, Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill, Jr., of Massachusetts

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

Learning from Ways and Means Chairman Wilbur Mills of Arkansas

Linda Melconian recalls observing Chairman Wilbur Mills at work counting votes on the House Floor.
Interview recorded June 7, 2018

He was so powerful. I mean he'd have dinners with Presidents, Democrats, Republicans. He knew the tax code backwards and forwards. And two or three weeks, two weeks before he was ever going to bring a tax bill to the floor, you'd see him. You wouldn't see him the rest of the time. He'd be busy in Ways and Means. But he'd come out to the floor, and he'd start renewing acquaintances. It was fascinating to watch him work. I mean, he was a pro, at his best. And he'd renew acquaintances—ask them about their family, children, various different things. He knew a lot about the Members, and he'd ask them stuff and stuff. And he'd, you know, casually comment that he's got a bill coming out, want them to take a look at it. "Take a look at it. See what you think. Let me know if you've got any problems with it." And he did this for a period of time, and it was schmoozing the Members, building the relationships, consolidating those relationships, renewing those relationships. "I'm here." And then he'd start—then by the week before he was ready to bring it out—so, so at first, it was the casual kind of relationship. "Hi, how's everything going?" The next time—and then it would gradually build to okay, eyeball-to-eyeball, "I need your vote on this one. Are you with me?" And he, I remember he was doing this, and I was watching it. So I was standing in the back of the House with him, and he came back. And I said, "How's it going, Mr. Chairman?" And he said, "I think it's going pretty well. We're in good shape." He said, "I think we're in good shape. You tell, you tell Tip we're in pretty good shape." But he said, "Don't tell anybody else that." I said, "Okay." And he said, you know he said, "When you count votes, you always want to have 10 in your pocket that no one knows about. You never know what can happen the last minute. You've got to keep those extra 10." And I thought, "That's pretty shrewd. That's sharp."