

Alumni Forum

PROFESSOR IN POLITICS

A former OU professor, now an aide to U.S. Senator Fred Harris, talks about his work in Washington and discusses the differences in moving from a campus to the Capitol

When Fred R. Harris, '52ba, '54Law, was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1964, he selected another University alumnus, Dr. William R. Carmack, to serve as his administrative assistant. Dr. Carmack at the time was director of OU's Human Relations Center and associate professor of speech. A native of Lawton, the 35-year-old professor holds a BA degree cum laude from Abilene Christian College, an MA from Florida State University and a PhD in mass communications and speech from OU. On a recent visit to the campus Dr. Carmack discussed his new position as a member of Sen. Harris' staff in a taped interview.

Sooner: What differences and similarities do you note in being a teacher and a politician?

Carmack: I have found more similarities than differences, interestingly enough. One, politics is not restricted to national politics. You can use the term, if you want, in a boy scout troop—wherever there is maneuvering for responsibility and decision-making positions. This is also true in a university. All you have to do is to be on a campus, as I have, when an administration

changes to get a close-up look at extremely sophisticated politics in action. University life is highly political in two dimensions. One, with reference to the particular university itself—there's a hell of a lot of politics going on at any school where people are alive, where there's still upward mobility. I suppose you might find some tiny little school somewhere at which all seven faculty members are nearing retirement, but in any dynamic major state university that's adding new departments and fomenting and turning over and changing and where there's opportunity for upward mobility, there is highly sophisticated political activity. And sometimes even stratified, like elections to faculty senates.

Then, secondly, in any active profession there's an enormous amount of political activity. If you're going to read papers at conventions, be appointed to national boards in your profession, then there is politics. So I don't see any sharp distinction between political activity in the academic field and political activity in the national field. It's the same sort of thing. One is just so much grander in scope and scale than the other.

Sooner: Have you been able to use your academic experience in your new position?

Carmack: My particular interest is in speech. I used to teach courses in discussion and the history of rhetorical theory and later in human relations when I moved to the OCCE and the Human Relations Center. I would say that both were directly related to what I am doing now. The Human Relations Center, for example, helped me to become sensitive to the attitudes and problems of the minorities. We were interested in race relations and problems of the Negro and the Indian, the migrant worker, the labor-management problems. We were interested in professional relationships within the community that might cause tension like school problems and police problems, and every one of these problems is a subject of national concern and often legislative concern. I literally have made direct applications from my job at OU to this one. Fred has a long history of interest in human rights, and it was in this connection that we first became friends. So naturally, he's going to attract some of this business. And if he didn't he'd go

looking for it. His wife, LaDonna, was on the executive committee of the Human Relations Center and Fred was on the advisory board, so they both were contributors to it. And a lot of his interests center around that field.

My experience was helpful in another way: A senator is an institution. He's a man, yes, but he's also an institution. In other words, if the senator is out of the country, the senate business goes right on. His absence diminishes the activity, but it doesn't stop the function of his office. So one of our chief problems is to keep the communication lines as open as possible between the senator and the people. And if you view it as a communications problem, then obviously training in speech or public relations or journalism or any of the communications skills would be highly germane.

Every once in awhile I get a letter from a student asking what one should study to be an administrative assistant. Usually, I guess, law is a typical background. Political science is obvious, but the communications skills are equally relevant and ought to be more common on the Hill. Academic life, if it's vigorous, can indeed prepare you for this sort of job and there's scarcely any academic discipline that doesn't have some relationship. I know one man up there who a parasitologist; I suppose his senator has little opportunity to develop specific material about parasites, but the fellow's background has surely contributed something if nothing but discipline and the ability to do research.

Sooner: How different is Washington from academe?

Carmack: When it was announced that I was to be Harris' aide, Carter Bradley, ('40journ), Sen. Monroney's AA, wrote me a letter that allayed the misgivings I had about leaving the academic life for Washington. He said something like "I know you regret having to leave the stimulation of academic associates, but I think you'll be pleasantly surprised when you get up here to find that the staff members are also highly dedicated, extremely knowledgeable professionals." And that's true. It's the Big League. There are no dumb bunnies up there. Most of the senior aides have established personal careers behind them. I miss the bull sessions with the faculty and students and the exchange of ideas that's possible on a college campus, but not all that much. Many of the senior staff members are former faculty members;

in fact, many of the senators were once teachers and professors.

Sooner: Would you describe the duties of the major staff members in Sen. Harris' office, including your own?

Carmack: All Senate offices have at least three positions in common, and then they vary widely depending on the personal and legislative interests of the senator. At least all senate offices have a legislative assistant, a press secretary and an administrative assistant. Often there are special assistants in areas like conservation or aeronautics and space. The legislative assistant obviously is supposed to be concerned chiefly with legislation. The press secretary's duties are likewise obvious. He's the public relations man for the senator and concerns himself with the press and campaigning.

The administrative assistant, which is my position, is by far the most nebulous of the three and the most difficult to describe. One obvious job he has is office manager. Another duty he has is substitute senator. In general practice, and we don't hold to this rigidly, the first person one would likely reach if he failed to reach the senator on a matter of business would be the administrative assistant. There are exceptions. For example, we have a legislative assistant who has a specialty in public works and agriculture. If you came in and said you were a farmer concerned with an agricultural problem and the senator was not available, then you would see the legislative assistant in our office. But typically, if you walked in as stranger and had a matter to discuss with Sen. Harris and he was not in, you would see me. That holds true for phone calls also. I'll return any phone calls he can't. Let me say parenthetically and accurately that he's easier to talk to than I am. Fred keeps an absolutely open door and we do not prescreen any calls. So when I talk about my role as substitute senator, I'm talking about instances when Fred is out of the office on the floor, in committee or out of town. And then I serve in his stead. Whenever he has two invitations—we often have two groups with a breakfast the same day or some such conflicting functions—that are of interest, except for the instances where the subject matter would dictate otherwise, then I would attend one of them.

Dr. William R. Carmack, before becoming Sen. Harris' administrative assistant, was director of the Human Relations Center.

This is standard and common practice in Washington, and everyone understands it.

An amusing example of this stand-in duty took place in Durant. To begin with, when I took the job with Fred, I cancelled all my speeches—there were something like 23 that I had scheduled as part of my work at the Center for Human Relations—except one. I talked with Fred about it, and he decided it would be proper for me to give a speech at the annual southeast division meeting of the OEA in Durant. So I went down after I'd been in Washington a couple of months and made my speech, which was all right. It turned out that the senator had agreed to deliver a commencement address at the college there, and right at the last minute, he was unable to go. We had an extremely tight session, and as the history books will say, there's never been a session like it—and I hope there never will be. We had unusually long hours and not infrequent Saturday alerts. Anyhow, just about the time for Fred to leave for

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Durant, the majority leader sent a wire to all senators requiring their presence on the floor. Well, the last thing Fred wanted to do was to miss votes, especially on major bills, so he had to send me, very reluctantly, along with a copy of the telegram to show the president of the college.

And so I showed up in Durant again to speak to essentially the same group I had addressed only a couple of weeks before, this time with a speech for Fred. This is a difficult kind of speech to make. I hate to start with an apology, and yet you're talking to someone else's crowd. They came to hear him, and there you are. Well, the least you can do is apologize. I never did know whether they believed the explanation about the telegram. They had to believe I was reading the thing. So I said I was terribly sorry that the senator was detained, and he hated it worse than they did, but that he talked to me about what he would have said and sent me down to say it.

Fred became eager to make amends to the Durant people, and so he accepted another speech pretty soon. And to make a long story short, he once again got right down to the wire and another crucial session came up. The majority leader wouldn't release him, and so once again I made a trip to Durant to deliver a speech. This happened four times, and I ended up making five speeches in Durant within the first few months. One of them was for Carl Albert who got into the same box. He and Fred were scheduled to make speeches there the same weekend, so when he found out I was going to deliver my usual substitute speech for Fred, he called on me to substitute for him. I spoke to the same group twice in one day, once for Fred and once for Mr. Albert. I became known among the delegation as the official Durant substitute. I never speak anywhere but in Durant, and I always speak in Durant. We do as little of that

as we have to because when people invite the senator, they are not only interested in what he has to say, they're primarily interested in him personally, and Fred makes all these engagements he can.

Sooner: Do you ever serve as a speechwriter?

Carmack: As far as working with the senator on copy, speeches, newsletters and material of that sort, I do that only if it is germane to an area that I am interested in. I'm not what you would call The Speechwriter. Fred doesn't use one. He does most of his own composition still. I don't know how long he can, but he still does. I work with the text of anything in the area of education and human rights, the areas that I have worked with professionally. I do a lot of basic research and feed things to him. What he really likes is material—he doesn't like manuscripts as much as he likes material if we've got time to go that route. So I get my share of that. And it's one of the most enjoyable things I have an opportunity to do, because it's most immediately analogous to what I used to do.

Sooner: What about mail?

Carmack: The biggest single block of time I spend, is with mail. You've probably heard stories about our mail. We get a deluge daily, and particularly at first we received an enormous amount. At the beginning we received about 3,000 letters a week which was as many as Senator Kennedy received from New York. This has fallen off to between 300 and 400 answerable items a day. This means most of the 17-person staff is preoccupied most of the time with fighting the mail. Unfortunately, we've been as far as a month behind, but now we've caught up to the point where we're never more than three days behind. Our office uses the dictaphone which is rare among senate staffs, but I'm a believer in the system. Most of the day I'm using the dictaphone for letters between phone

calls and appointments.

One explanation is the fresh meat theory; every request that had been going begging for 38 years reappeared. One gentleman wrote that the government owned him money for a carload of potatoes that had been lost, derailed or something. This happened before World War I. He had been writing to every representative and every senator since then without avail. He wrote us three or four letters right after Fred got there. We found out from the Department of Agriculture—they knew all about him—why he wasn't going to get any money, wrote and told him and we haven't heard from him since. So there's that kind of letter. The guy who says, "Aha, a new one." Another reason for so much mail is Fred carried on—and this, too, is my theory—a very, very personal campaign. Our mail that comes into the office is really "Dear Fred" mail, more than "Dear Senator Harris." People think they know him, and some of them do, people who have shaken hands with him out in the hustings. And that kind of a highly personal, direct campaign extended as it was over such a long period of time has generated a tremendous amount of mail.

Another reason is we're taking it very seriously, and people can sense this. I've been up there now over a year and I checked with the office yesterday by telephone and asked my secretary how many letters we had backlogged. There were eight. We're that close to caught up. And we have not failed to answer a single letter. It doesn't matter how wild or critical or abusive the letter is, it receives an answer. We lavish a lot of time on mail, because we think it's important.

Sooner: How do you spend an average day in the office?

Carmack: On a typical day I would arrive at the office to find a number of phone calls to return, and I would also begin attacking the mail.

We generally come into the office about eight in the morning, and one thing we have to take into consideration is the time differential between Washington and Oklahoma. When we're on daylight savings time, there's a two-hour difference. Now a person won't get up in Oklahoma at 6 a.m. and call, but it's very likely he will call in the evening, around 4:30. That's 6:30 p.m. Washington time, but he expects someone to be in the office then. We need to be there.

We're not sensitive to this. The average individual knows that by gosh, he called at 4:30 and no one was there. We open the office at 8:30 and we have no quitting time. The women members of the staff are free to go at 5 but most seldom do. And there is always someone in at 7 and often until 8 p.m. We keep the office open about 12 hours a day, and there is always a good number of people in the office on Saturdays.

Sooner: What would you say has been the highlight of Sen. Harris' inaugural year in the Senate?

Carmack: His committee appointments are worth noting. The Public Works Committee is a very important one, but it may be that in the long run the Government Operations Committee may be better recognized because of its power—it's the only committee that has oversight on the totality of the federal government. It is the appropriations watchdog of the Senate. And this committee has the famous McClellan investigating subcommittee to which Harris was appointed. This was a real plum, a very enviable assignment.

The most important thing in my judgment that's happened to Sen. Harris this session is his designation as chairman of the new subcommittee on government research. It hasn't been widely publicized, and I haven't found anybody yet who fully appreciates the meaning of the position. It will prove, however, to be highly significant and of national importance. Sixteen percent of the federal budget is devoted to research and development. There is not a single subcommittee in the Senate which makes that expenditure its business. There are subcommittees concerned with separate areas like space or agriculture, but nobody has cut across broadly and tried to draw together in a meaningful way what it is the government is doing in research and development, and what it's not doing, which is also important. I'll throw out a guess that 95 percent of the research dollar, and we're talking about \$16 billion, is in the natural or physical sciences. I doubt if a fraction of one percent is in the humanities and arts, and yet, we have this new Arts Foundation. And of the 95 percent, and this also is an estimate, probably 90 percent goes to the physical sciences. Maybe we want this and maybe we don't, but it ought not to be an accident.

Or take the research that we do. We

know for a fact that 20 schools get 67 percent of the research dollars—MIT, Caltech, Michigan—and this is self-perpetuating. Two things happen. One, your top men in the physical and natural sciences and engineering are constantly getting sucked away by the "have" schools, and beyond that, when they get there, they're not teaching. They're associated with a major research institution. Chances are they're teaching one high level graduate seminar if they're teaching at all. What we're doing, dramatically, is depleting our teaching resources. Maybe we want to do this and maybe we don't, but at least we ought to know what we're doing.

Somebody ought to take the time to do a depth analysis of the processes by which the government contracts and carries on its research and this subcommittee will do this. We don't have any government-wide policy on the matter of awarding grants and contracts. Some departments like to give grants; some prefer to give contracts. Some require matching funds; some don't. If you develop a patent or copyright while on a government research contract, if you're on a Health, Education and Welfare project, it's yours; if you happen to be working on something for the Department of Defense, it's theirs. Surely there ought to be some kind of policy so that a man doing research for the federal government would have a general idea what he's doing. So far it's at the discretion of the secretaries in the various departments. Maybe it's best that way, but it ought to be because the Congress wants it that way.

There's a law now that requires an agency to report to the Congress annually on its research activity. I daresay some have never reported, and it's safe to say that none have reported annually or if they have, it's been in the most summary fashion—one page to the effect that we do a hell of lot of research around here. And there's the classification problem. Are we really using each other's information or are several different departments buying at great public expense highly classified material—classified from each other? Or you could get even simpler than that. You could ask if the record keeping systems are even compatible. One department is computerized, one department isn't. Even more basic, do two departments know what each other knows? It's incredible that

we've allowed 16 percent of the gross federal budget to be spent whatever way these departments have felt is proper, without any real coordination, without any real oversight on the part of the Senate. And that's what Harris has got and it's a tiger. We're not going to sensationalize or muckrake, but I think as we get an expert grasp of this thing, it will be of great national interest and will emerge as by far the most significant thing that happened to Fred in his freshman year.

I've been deeply involved in this up until now, but when we get going, I expect we'll have to have a committee staff, and I'll probably have to let go of it just as it becomes interesting, which is the lot of administrative assistants, and return to the mail or plan a parade in Altus. The AA has to be a generalist, not an expert in any one thing.

Sooner: How do you find the job of serving the people of Oklahoma—how difficult is it?

Carmack: Oklahoma is an easy state to represent and this has contributed to Fred's rapid success in the Senate. There are a number of great senators, Richard Russell of Georgia for instance, who have never achieved national greatness because the state they represent is such they never could. They get so hung up on the race question and enmeshed in parochial issues that they never have a chance to appear as great as they are. There are probably very few minds that have served this nation to equal Richard Russell's, but as long as he represents Georgia, he can never really reflect the total national interest. But Oklahoma is not that parochial, and our senators don't have to be preoccupied with such provincialism.

Sooner: What are your personal feelings about serving in the center of power of this nation?

Carmack: I'm not blasé at all. I never drive by the Capitol at night without stopping the car. I still get a kick out of walking across the Capitol rather than taking the connecting subway. I'm a tourist and I think I always will be. I'm very impressed when I see Sen. Dirksen walking down the hall. If I hear there is to be an important speech on the floor, I'll slip away to the gallery and listen to it. It's very challenging and very thrilling to observe. It's been an exciting year and should I return to the classroom, this experience would surely enrich my teaching. END