Mel Steely: 00:00:27 Okay. I'm Mel Steely with the Georgia Political Heritage Project at the University of West Georgia. Today, February 11, 2002, we're interviewing Congressman Johnny Isakson at his office in Cobb County. Congressman, thanks so much for taking time to help us out with our project.

Johnny Isakson: 00:00:49 It's a pleasure.

Mel Steely: 00:00:49 I appreciate it very much. Let's start off with you talking a little bit about your early life. When and where were you born?

Johnny Isakson: 00:00:58 Well, my father used to brag about the fact that I was born in right field of Atlanta Fulton County Stadium, because when I was born in 1944, old Piedmont Hospital was on Georgia Avenue right where old Atlanta Stadium was built in the early 1960s. I was born in the city of Atlanta. We lived in a small house behind a house, or like a garage apartment, which I do not remember. Moved to Buckhead and lived in apartments there that my grandfather, who was a Swedish immigrant stone mason, built. And then moved to Brookhaven where I really, from the age five to age fifteen was where I really grew up.

Mel Steely: 00:01:43 Who were your parents? Tell us a little bit about your immediate family tree; parents, grandparents.

Johnny Isakson: 00:01:48 Ed and Julie Isakson, my parents, both of whom I lost in the 1990s. They were great parents. Mom was from South Georgia. Her dad, who I'm named after, John Hardy Baker, was a tobacco warehouseman. He lost everything in the depression, become a share cropper and later finally purchased 200 acres of land and farmed it until he died in 1957. My grandmother, his wife, was a South Georgia gal. My mom went to Georgia Southwestern University. She was the only one of my parents who had any college education. She went there for two years and came to Atlanta where she met my father, who at the time in the late 1930s was driving a Bambi bread truck, had a bread route. When World War II broke out, my dad was rejected because he had a grade seven heart murmur, so he drove troop buses during World War II, moving troops around in the southeast for ultimate deployment really in most cases. My mom, just a wonderful lady. She was a stay-at-home mom. She really raised us. My dad went on to start out in real estate in the 1940s and
Johnny Isakson: 00:03:34 My dad's parents both immigrated from Sweden. They immigrated from Sweden in 1915. My father was born in 1916. My grandfather on my father's side became a naturalized United States citizen in 1926. In fact, I have his naturalization certificate framed at home. I'm very proud of that. He was a stone mason who came to George West, Texas to do a Post Office on a government contract as a stonemason in 1915, and a year later came to Atlanta and was a stonemason on many of the buildings at Oglethorpe University, which, you know is all stone granite type of facility.

Mel Steely: 00:04:16 Beautiful place.

Johnny Isakson: 00:04:17 He never really spoke English. I can never remember Andrew, my grandfather on my father's side, speaking much English as long as I knew him. His wife, my grandmother Josephine, spoke good English, but he never really... I don't know whether he did it for business negotiating skills where he could pretend like he didn't really understand or not, but he pretty much spoke the native tongue.

Mel Steely: 00:04:48 Did your dad speak Swedish growing up?

Johnny Isakson: 00:04:50 Just a little bit. He was born a year after they came to the United States.

Mel Steely: 00:04:55 First generation American.

Johnny Isakson: 00:04:56 First generation American. So I'm second generation.

Mel Steely: 00:05:00 Gee, quite a story. And then your dad goes from that to becoming kind of a real estate mogul. A picture of great success I would think.

Johnny Isakson: 00:05:10 Dad was a great guy. He was a great people person and a very charitable person. He grew up in very humble circumstances. When he started out in real estate with John J. Thompson in the '40s and then went to Hassan Daud in the '50s. I can remember I had a job paying me, I believe, fifty cents a week to keep their sign room and Coke machine filled and the sign room clean.
up in their office at Hassan Daud. Then, in 1960, Howard Chatham asked him to come manage a small company at the time, which was Northside Reality, which they had really laid the foundation and built into one of the state’s, really the country’s leading brokerage companies.

Mel Steely: 00:05:54 I was thinking your father had actually started it.

Johnny Isakson: 00:05:56 No, a lot of people-

Mel Steely: 00:05:58 [crosstalk 00:05:58] was going, but then he developed it.

Johnny Isakson: 00:06:00 It had been started for two years. It was kind of a fledgling company. There were eight sales people. Dad went with them, the Chatham family owned it, and they owned it until 1990. But he built it from really an eight sales person company to... I became president in 1977, and in the seventeen years dad built it to be a company of about 500 agents and about fifteen offices. Last year the sales of the company were over $2 billion.

Mel Steely: 00:06:35 Quite a success story.

Johnny Isakson: 00:06:36 It really is.

Mel Steely: 00:06:36 Yeah, geez. Would you say you grew up in Buckhead? Or did y’all move to Cobb County? When did you make the move in Cobb County?

Johnny Isakson: 00:06:49 I made the move into Cobb County in 1968. My wife and I married in 1968. 1967, when we met, but when I first started working after I came back from the service, I started working in Cobb County in Smyrna. My wife and I married, lived in an apartment on 285 for the first year, but I was trying to build my business in Cobb County. I knew the best place to build a business would be to live in the same community you were working. So we moved to Cobb County in 1972 and lived there ever since. We've been there thirty years.

Mel Steely: 00:07:31 But you grew up in Buckhead? [crosstalk 00:07:33]

Johnny Isakson: 00:07:34 Yeah, I grew up in lots of different places, but the ten year stint on East Brookhaven Drive, which now is considered sort of... Brookhaven is considered a part of Buckhead. I was in and around Buckhead all my elementary school and high school years.
Mel Steely: 00:07:48 What was that like? Now that was in the late '40s and '50s, mostly early '60s?

Johnny Isakson: 00:07:54 Well, it was from 1950 to 1962. Mel Steely, I'll tell you two interesting stories to give you a perspective. When I was in the boy scouts I was a member of Peachtree Road United Methodist Church, which is on Peachtree Road. I was a member of troop 59. When we would go to Bird Adam's Boy Scout Camp for the summers Bird Adam's Boy Scout Camp was where Cumberland Mall is today. I mean, that was an out of town trip in the 1950s.

Johnny Isakson: 00:08:26 Second thing, when I started high school I went to North Fulton High School. Rode the school business in the morning and the evening. In 1957 and '58 the Idly property had been sold. In fact, my father was a participant in that, and the Noble family bought it and built the first major mall in the southeast known as Lenox Square.

Mel Steely: 00:08:51 That's Ben's daddy.

Johnny Isakson: 00:08:52 That's right. Back during the '57 and '58 I'd go every morning past Peachtree and Lenox, which was out of town. It was nothing like it is today. And they had this sign that said only 364 more days until Lenox Square opens, so I rode by that most all those 364 days and watched that mall be built, the initial mall, which by the way was not enclosed. The original Lenox was open air.

Mel Steely: 00:09:26 I didn't remember that.

Johnny Isakson: 00:09:27 That's right.

Mel Steely: 00:09:27 And it really was on the outskirts of Atlanta?

Johnny Isakson: 00:09:27 Oh, very much so. In fact, in the seventh grade, when I was at R.L. Hope, or 6th grade at R.L. Hope, I was the school safety patrol officer on the intersection of Peachtree and Piedmont. If you can picture this, you had an eleven-year-old sixth grader directing traffic in morning drive time at Peachtree and Piedmont. Today you wouldn't get out in the middle of that intersection if you were in armor.

Mel Steely: 00:09:50 I wouldn't do it.

Johnny Isakson: 00:09:54 But that area probably in perspective I can't really think of an analogy except it might have been like Marietta is to Atlanta, or was to Atlanta some fifteen years ago.
Mel Steely: 00:10:10  Mm-hmm (affirmative) I remember my mother talking to me about going down to the old Depot and catching a train and going to Marietta. And you off to the woods and-

Johnny Isakson: 00:10:21  Used to have a trolley that went from downtown Atlanta to Marietta.

Mel Steely: 00:10:25  That's right. They sure did. It's incredible.

Johnny Isakson: 00:10:28  Amazing.

Mel Steely: 00:10:29  That's the way I grew up in Cedartown. We used to come through Marietta; go to Rockmart, Dallas, Marietta and come in from the north there and go by that old graveyard. That's the highway leading up to Rockmart, I suppose. Times have changed.

Johnny Isakson: 00:10:44  Mass transit really had a larger reach in those years than it might today.

Mel Steely: 00:10:51  It did. Proportionally probably more riders, too.

Johnny Isakson: 00:10:55  I think proportionally that was true.

Mel Steely: 00:10:58  Were you a pretty good student in school?

Johnny Isakson: 00:11:01  I was a pretty good student. I'll be very candid with you. I did well in high school. I probably had a C+ average at the University of Georgia when I graduated University of Georgia. Finished everything on time, was probably not as good a student as I should have been, but finished everything on time and learned a lot. In fact, in a lot of the speeches that I do today I still use some of my teachers from high school as examples in some of the problems we deal with today in American education, and American life. I learned a lot from my teachers.

Mel Steely: 00:11:38  When did you graduate from high school?

Johnny Isakson: 00:11:41  '62, from Dykes High School.

Mel Steely: 00:11:43  Dykes High School. Okay. You went straight into college.

Johnny Isakson: 00:11:48  Went to University of Georgia, graduated from there in '66.

Mel Steely: 00:11:52  You majored in...
Johnny Isakson: 00:11:53  I majored in Business Administration with a minor in Real Estate.

Mel Steely: 00:11:57  Mm-hmm (affirmative) You were going through that then right at the very time when Vietnam was starting and when the civil rights movement is starting to gear up. Dr. King's leading marches at that point, talking about... Well, you have integrated at that point. University of Georgia has become integrated, just barely, when you get there. That's a tremendous period for a young man to be involved in. Tell me about it.

Johnny Isakson: 00:12:26  It's ironic, in Brown versus Board of Education was in 1954. In 1960, no, in 1959 the Atlanta public schools integrated, and I was in the Atlanta public schools when they integrated. You have to remember I think there were eleven black students who were bused to all white schools. Not every school was integrated. Northside High School which was near Dykes and North Fulton where I went had two of the first black students. The University of Georgia, Charlayne Hunter-Gault and... Oh, I can't remember his name.

Mel Steely: 00:13:15  I know he became a doctor and then had a road named after him. I can't remember it.

Johnny Isakson: 00:13:18  I'm sorry, it's slipping me. But the gentleman, the first black gentleman that went to University of Georgia went in '61 and I came in '62, so I was in the Atlanta public school when the first black students integrated. One year before I went to University of Georgia. I tell this a lot. In fact, not too long ago in a meeting, I was using this analogy. Most of the fundamental societal changes emerge out of education, public education. When you look back on the twentieth century, certainly the civil rights movement and the integration of public schools probably is one of the singular most important societal events that occurred.

Johnny Isakson: 00:14:07  Children actually were the platform on which society was changed. Their housing laws came later. Equal opportunity employment laws came later. But the actual concept in the South of minority black children and white children going to and then being integrated was done in public education, which I think sends a signal of how important education is, but how important children are. They probably are the most open minded. I remember clearly that we were all a little bit surprised at how serious our parents were taking this event in the 1950s. And Atlanta did an amazingly good job. Atlanta's, I think it's nickname a city too busy to hate came after it demonstrated through that period and through the tragic loss of Dr. King and the fact that we had little or no violence while the rest of the
country was literally on fire really showed a great temperament on the part of the people of Atlanta.

Mel Steely: 00:15:19 And great leadership.

Johnny Isakson: 00:15:20 Absolutely. [crosstalk 00:15:21]

Mel Steely: 00:15:21 In both black and white communities I think.

Johnny Isakson: 00:15:23 No question about it. No question about it.

Mel Steely: 00:15:26 An exceptional period. When you look around at Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Carolina, and Arkansas-

Johnny Isakson: 00:15:34 And Detroit, Boston, Los Angeles.

Mel Steely: 00:15:36 Exactly. It is amazing what we went through. How did Vietnam strike you during that period? You'd just gotten into a college when Vietnam was starting to heat up, '62 and three was your first year. Fall of '62.

Johnny Isakson: 00:15:56 President Kennedy had sent advisors in and at the time that President Kennedy was assassinated, which was '63-

Mel Steely: 00:16:05 Jim had just been killed a few months earlier.

Johnny Isakson: 00:16:08 A few months, not long. But Vietnam was sort of a distant thing at that period. Then in '65 and '66 Lyndon Johnson was the President. Vietnam started heating up. And right about the time we graduated was when the draft went into full mode. All of us who were seniors began trying... It wasn't a matter of whether or not you were going to the military. I want to make this point, Mel Steely. I do not remember a soul at the university that I ever encountered who did not assume that they would go in the service. I don't remember anybody talking about going to Canada. I don't remember anybody talking about going to England. I don't remember anybody talking about going to England.

Johnny Isakson: 00:16:54 Instead we were applying for everything known to man to go in on our terms, so to speak, rather than be drafted. And I say that in both the positive contents as well as the selfish content, so to speak. A lot of people went to OCS. I applied to Naval OCS. I applied to Army Guard, the Air Guard. I had about four different applications that went in my junior years when I started that process. Really all of us were... I was rejected for Naval OCS. The number of people trying to get in OCS became so high that the threshold for passing that initial exam, it'd be the first day I
didn’t make the cut. I did make the cut in the Air Guard, and all
of us left. In fact, about five guys that I knew at Georgia left with
me. We graduated in June. We were off to basic training in
December of that same year. A lot of guys off to OCS and then a
lot of guys got drafted, a lot of them went to Vietnam. I lost
some very close friends in Vietnam. It was-

Mel Steely: 00:18:06 Did Lindsay Thomas graduate with you?
Johnny Isakson: 00:18:09 I believe that Lindsay Thomas was a year ahead of me.
Mel Steely: 00:18:15 I interviewed him. He had a very poignant thing because a
number of his very good friends did go and died. And he talked
about he had done exactly what you and everybody else... Was
he an SAE? You were SAE-

Johnny Isakson: 00:18:27 I was an SAE, yes.
Mel Steely: 00:18:29 You and-
Johnny Isakson: 00:18:30 I don't think Lindsey was an SAE.
Mel Steely: 00:18:31 No.
Johnny Isakson: 00:18:32 In fact, I'm sure he wasn't.
Mel Steely: 00:18:33 Because I remember it was you and Skin Edge and Pierre
Howard.
Johnny Isakson: 00:18:37 Pierre Howard and I were... In fact I'll tell you an interesting side
note. There was a time in the General Assembly when I was
there that seven of us from the same fraternity within two years
of the same age were in the Georgia Legislature. Pierre Howard,
Paul Trulot, Bobby Lawson, Alex Crumley, myself. It was quite
an interesting group.
Mel Steely: 00:19:03 It brought out a whole new thing. It was interesting to me to
watch SAEs take care of each other.
Johnny Isakson: 00:19:07 Oh, yeah.
Mel Steely: 00:19:08 Because I remember sitting there doing rapprochement when
Pierre was covering for Skin and he said, "Now don't let
anything happen to Skin." And I remember Wayne Garner got
very upset about it.
Johnny Isakson: 00:19:21 It's something too, the bonds of a fraternity.
Mel Steely: 00:19:24 There really was.

Johnny Isakson: 00:19:24 Yes, absolutely.

Mel Steely: 00:19:25 I had seen it with Kappa Alphas, but I had not watched it with SAE people. But it was just as, or more stronger, than the KA one had been.

Johnny Isakson: 00:19:36 Every bit.

Mel Steely: 00:19:36 It was fascinating to watch. You got through. You went into the Air Guard. Got your degree in business. Did you actually go in an overseas duty or anything, or just active duty here?

Johnny Isakson: 00:19:50 Yeah, I was active duty here and then I flew military airlift command missions. At that time on the east coast, MAC military airlift command, we flew the Dover, Delaware to Goose Bay Labrador to Frankfurt, Rhine-Main in Frankfurt, to Ramstein which was the huge NATO base, still is by the way, in Germany to the Azores in Portugal, back to McGuire Air Force Base. That was the MAC 124 route. I was in a 124 unit, was a command and control specialist, and flew that route a number of times. Most of those times, by the way during Reserve Duty. And that was about a nine day trip. Those big old 124s, they weren't pressurized. They couldn't fly any higher than 12,000 feet, they were four propeller engines. The weight they could carry was not significant, but the volume it would carry, the cubic space within the plane, it could carry a Huey helicopter which is, of course, critical in the Vietnam era. With only the blade disassembled they could carry the whole helicopter otherwise.

Johnny Isakson: 00:21:02 We did quite a bit of ferrying to U.S. Forces in Europe where there was a lot of staging there, force out these stages just as it was at Hickam and in Hawaii on the other side of the world.

Mel Steely: 00:21:18 Do you have any strong feelings about Vietnam?

Johnny Isakson: 00:21:22 You know, the period of 1962 to 1966 was within a year of the period of '67 to '73. But they were ages in difference. And '62 to '66, first thing I remember in college was the Cuban missile crisis. There were obviously no cell phones back then. We didn't even have calculators back then of the sense that you have them today that came out of the space program later. When the Cuban missile crisis hit I remember standing in line in Reed Hall, which is the freshman dorm where all of the freshmen stayed, Reed and Payne, standing in line to call home along with everybody else in the dorm to volunteer if the Russians
attacked. We were calling our parents to tell them we were going to do that. And of course Kennedy didn't back down and Khrushchev finally did and it never came to blows. That was my freshman year.

Johnny Isakson: 00:22:24 Then my sophomore year the President of the United States was assassinated in November, I was in history class in LeConte Hall at the University of Georgia when a student was running... I can remember this day, hearing the voice of a student running down the hall saying, "The president's been shot. The president's been shot." And our professor went outside, evidently confirmed it, came in and dismissed the class. We all went for four days sat in this case the fraternity house in the TV room watching the whole world turn upside down. Watching Lee Harvey Oswald get shot. Watch the president die. Watch the funeral.

Johnny Isakson: 00:23:03 The civil rights movement was aflame. Johnson came in to office, may have inherited the worst confluence of issues coming together than any man ever inherited, social and-

Mel Steely: 00:23:18 Lincoln I think worse.

Johnny Isakson: 00:23:20 Probably only Lincoln. But his was a combination of societal as well as international, which is an unusual convergence of issues. There was a great sense of patriotism in what I told you about our junior year, everybody trying to figure out where they were going to serve, and what branch of the service they were going to get into. Vietnam still although escalating was not what it ultimately ended up being in like '68 to '72, which were the four most tragic years of that war. But there's a high degree of patriotism. I had a burr haircut. You didn't see any sideburns. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that. When I was at University of Georgia you had to have girls in from a date 11:30 on week nights and 12:30 on weekends. They couldn't wear Bermuda shorts. I mean, it was reflective of the age in which I grew up where it was conservative, respectful, patriotic.

Johnny Isakson: 00:24:25 I remember coming home from... I went to basic as I told you in December of '66, came home in February of '67, less than a year from graduating from college. Went back up to the fraternity as I had a three day leave. That's by the way when I met my wife. I got to Athens and my fraternity brother said, "Hey, my date's roommate doesn't have a date. Do you want to go out tonight?" This was like 7:00 for an 8:00 date. I said, "No, I remember what it was like when you get last minute dates. He said, "No, no. She's really a great gal." I finally agreed and a year and two months later married her, a year and four months later.
Johnny Isakson: 00:25:07 The whole world had changed. I mean, all of a sudden there was long hair. I remember the Red and Black had a story about marijuana and I didn't even know what marijuana was when I was at University of Georgia. Here eight months later it was an issue. That whole era that really I will guess lasted probably ten years to the late '70s of the Haight-Ashbury, people going to Canada, people going to Europe to avoid the war. The whole peace symbol. All those things erupted, Kent State. All of that just happened right after I left. It was almost like two different worlds. The University of Georgia that I went to and left in mid '66 and the University which I came back to eight months later. It was unbelievable.

Johnny Isakson: 00:26:04 I remember Butch.

Mel Steely: 00:25:57 My first cousin, Harold Steely, Butch they called him, was at Georgia the same time you were and played on the football team.

Mel Steely: 00:26:05 And his story is much like yours. He found it incomprehensible to look at all the developing long hairs and the marijuana and the marches. That was just getting cranked up at that point.

Johnny Isakson: 00:26:18 You just wondered what did I miss? Because it just changed like that.

Mel Steely: 00:26:22 Mm-hmm (affirmative) It was incredible. You stayed in the Air Force then did your two years active duty and reserve duty, and then went in inactive reserves, or-

Johnny Isakson: 00:26:37 Actually, reserves until 1972.

Mel Steely: 00:26:39 Oh okay. Until '72. At what point did you decide that you decide you were actually going to go to work with your dad?

Johnny Isakson: 00:26:49 That's an interesting story.

Mel Steely: 00:26:51 Or did you immediately? You went on your own first there didn't you when you came back?

Johnny Isakson: 00:26:55 No, let me tell you that story. I came home in 1968 and I said you know if I don't go ahead and try real estate my dad's never going to let me forget it. Every Thanksgiving he was going to say, "Well, I you had been in real estate you'd be doing better." So I really had this idea I wanted to do something else, but I
didn't know what something else was either. I wasn't one of these people that say one day, at that point in my life, one day I'm going to be such and such. So I went in to real estate and starting selling houses in Smyrna, Georgia. I was on my way to being an absolute failure. I think a lot of it had to do with not knowing what I wanted to do and figuring I wasn't going to be doing this for very long so I wasn't that motivated.

Johnny Isakson: 00:27:47 Then I met Diane and fell in love and you know necessity is the mother of invention. So I decided, well, you know you better make some money, so I started really paying attention to my dad and what advice he was giving me. And all of the sudden I started doing pretty good. Shortly before we were married, we opened a little office and dad said, "Tell you what, why don't you recruit this staff? Why don't you see if you can build this office?" And I did and had reasonably good success and came to like it more and more. Next thing I knew it was ten years later and dad came in one day and said, "I'm going to slow down." He and Mr. Chatham, Chatham who owned the company, said, "We think you've done a pretty good job at it. We think you could run it."

Johnny Isakson: 00:28:44 Well, that was the last thing in the world I had ever thought about doing. And dad, of course, built it into a good sized operation. But I took it on and did that for twenty-two years, ran the company and we grew it, and I was so lucky. I had so many wonderful people that came to work for us. All my friends were in the business. It was a great family-type business. We took care of one another and took a lot of pride in what we did. I'd be just as happy today doing what I was doing for those, I guess, thirty-two years, if it hadn't been for being elected to Congress in '99. Which obviously was both a voluntary and a conscious decision, but was very happy doing what I did.

Johnny Isakson: 00:29:31 My dad taught me a lot. He was a great example. His people skills were the best of anybody's I've ever seen.

Mel Steely: 00:29:41 You really enjoyed the business.

Johnny Isakson: 00:29:43 I did. It's tough business. I mean, any time you're running a big business that's end of the year you're happy, and then January 1, you have no income and no business until you go out and sell something. That's... I think it probably was great preparation for me for the political side, which I always had an interest in politics. I think the sales experience and the people experience probably helped me along the way in my political career.
Mel Steely: 00:30:09  You anticipated my next question. When and why did you get interested in politics? Did it start at Georgia when you were doing campus politics, or what?

Johnny Isakson: 00:30:20  Started on a black and white Philco television, which is what we had in the '50s, watching the national conventions on television when Stevenson and Eisenhower had their great races and Sam Rayburn was speaker of the house. Sam Rayburn looked an awful lot like my grandfather John Hardy Baker. I remember watching them, and I remember my parents being confused as to why this kid was watching this national convention speeches. I was involved in student government in high school. In college I was an officer in the fraternity and some other campus organizations. The first time...

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Johnny Isakson: 00:31:00  ... some other campus organizations. The first time I remember either admitting to myself, or finding out that serving in office might be something I would want to do one day, took place with a guy named Steve Brown, who was a motivational sales trainer. Came to Atlanta. Taught a five week course, two nights a week, to improve your selling skills, and stuff like that.

Johnny Isakson: 00:31:33  Anyway, one of those nights, we went in, he said, "All right I want everybody to pull out their business card, and write on the back of their card, where they want to be in 10 years," which was at that time 1978. Ten years would have been 1978. I wrote down United States Senator.

Johnny Isakson: 00:31:54  Nobody else, I mean there were thirty of us in the class. He didn't ask anybody to say what they wanted to be publicly. He collected all the cards. Then after he collected the cards, I remember him saying, he said, "Well you've all written down what you want to be, and where you want to be ten years from now." He said, "Now you've got ten years to get there, and that's what this course is all about." Then he went on. He was using it as an example of being prepared, so to speak.

Johnny Isakson: 00:32:23  Ironically, ten years later I wasn't a United States Senator, but I was in the Georgia legislature. Ironically, I don't know how many years ... I guess thirty years later, I was in the United States Congress.

Johnny Isakson: 00:32:37  But I always had an interest in public service, which is the way I've always looked at it. Politics is the means to a good end. Sometimes it's not a pretty means, and sometimes not a good
means, but it is the process by which the end result hopefully, is good public service. At least from my standpoint that's the way I look at it.

Mel Steely: 00:32:59 Not perfect, but better than the other options.

Johnny Isakson: 00:33:01 It certainly has lasted longer than anybody else's invention since the beginning of man.

Mel Steely: 00:33:06 Yeah. Let's be specific on your first race in ‘76. You ran as a Republican.

Johnny Isakson: 00:33:17 Actually the first race was ‘74.

Mel Steely: 00:33:19 Oh! I didn't realize that. You lost your first one.

Johnny Isakson: 00:33:22 I lost my first one, which was the best thing. If more politicians lost their first races, we'd have a better class of politicians. I guess what I should do is rephrase that. If most people who lost and never ran again, ran a second time, we'd have a better class of politicians.

Johnny Isakson: 00:33:41 I ran for county commission in Cobb County. 1974, you may recall what was going on in ‘74. Nixon resigned, I think, two days before the primary, in August. I ran because I had a four year old and a two year old. The Atlanta Constitution, Journal Constitution on Sunday had done a full page article on what is ... how expensive college was getting, and what it was going to cost to send a kid to college in the late 80s and early 90s, which is when my kids would have gone, and did go. I forget what the numbers were, but they were huge. Twenty thousand dollars, or something, which it ended up being a lot more than that. But at the time, that was what it sounded like.

Mel Steely: 00:34:23 Well, that was big at the time.

Johnny Isakson: 00:34:25 It was big at the time. At the same time the national debt had gotten to a trillion dollars. I was in a business that was highly interest-rate sensitive. Interest rates were going through the roof. In fact, Georgia was bumping its usury limit, which meant there wasn't going to be any credit. I said to myself, "This is crazy." I decided I was going to get involved.

Johnny Isakson: 00:34:53 I had never professed a party, so to speak. My dad was a big Democrat. Never ran for office, but he was a Herman Talmadge Democrat. I used to clean up at Herman Talmadge fish fries, hand helped my father. He always volunteered for Talmadge. I
was a big fan of Ivan Allen's. Of course in Georgia, there weren’t any Republicans, so all the politicians you really knew were Democrats. But because of the interest rates, because of the debt, because of looking at what I was going to have to do to raise my kids and educate them, I said, "You know, I think I’m a Republican." Sometimes ignorance is truly bliss. I qualified for the county commission as a Republican in a county that had three elected Republicans, and seven elected Democrats. Not really realizing how big a mountain it was to climb. The conscious decision to run as a Republican was not a political decision. It was a decision where I really decided why I was what I was. And I've thought a lot about that.

Johnny Isakson: 00:36:06 I have determined that it was those national conventions that I watched in the ‘50s. The Stevenses and the Stevensons and the Eisenhowers and the Rayburns. The expression and the pride of political party affiliation in the ‘50s and up until Vietnam was totally different than it is today. My experiences were, you were what you were because you believed that was right. Either political correctness or political ease was not the reason you did things.

Johnny Isakson: 00:36:38 So I'm not giving myself any credit for being a pioneer, but I'm just saying, I've wondered why in the world I made that decision that time. I lost that race, and figured, well that's always be a great experience. Actually came pretty close to winning. Close enough.

Johnny Isakson: 00:37:27 About a year later, Carl Harrison, who was then on the board of education, and one of those three elected Republicans in the county, came and said, "You know you really ought to run again." I said, "No." I said, "Listen, I learned a lot. One, I know you're a Republican, and I am too, but it's hard to win out here, and I got two little kids, and I had two thousand dollars of my own money in that race," which was a lot of money back then. I think, I guess he convinced me.

Johnny Isakson: 00:37:27 Anyway, however it happened, I ran in 1976 and was the only Republican in the state to defeat a Democratic incumbent, the year Jimmy Carter was elected President of the United States.

Mel Steely: 00:37:39 I remember well.

Johnny Isakson: 00:37:41 I ran against the tide.

Mel Steely: 00:37:43 At the next convention, you were held up as the shining example. It could be done.
Johnny Isakson: 00:37:49 I could be done. I was the only example. I don't know how shining I was, but I was the only one.

Mel Steely: 00:37:53 Yeah. Newt lost that year. His second time. It was a rough year.

Johnny Isakson: 00:37:58 It was rough.

Mel Steely: 00:37:58 It really was. How did you win? What do you remember about that campaign?

Johnny Isakson: 00:38:09 One, I'll tell you. I know why I ... both how and why. One the selling skills, the discipline of my business helped me a lot. You never meet a stranger, and you're always trying to ... In sales, you always move to the level of the person you're with, which is where a lot of people in politics just get all messed up. They're either way above, or way below the head of whoever they're interacting with at the time.

Johnny Isakson: 00:38:36 Then again, the associates I had in the business. The people. They were so supportive of me. Because when you run for office, you really are asking a lot of people to sacrifice other than yourself.

Johnny Isakson: 00:38:46 I guess today I'm referred often to at times as a moderate, which I have no problem. I'm not a labeling type person, myself, but I had a lot of friends who were Democrats, and I had a few friends who were Republicans. A few only because there were a very few who would admit to being one.

Johnny Isakson: 00:39:08 Ran on an agenda that ... I'll tell you an interesting, my opponent who I defeated, about two weeks before the race, ran a half page ad in the paper that said, "Don't send a boy to do a man's job." That kind of hurt. I was thirty years old. Probably looked like I was twelve. Back then I looked younger than I really am. I won that race by pointing out over and over again how he voted on one vote. He abstained in a committee on a vote on an issue that ended up being of critical importance. I said, "I may be young, but if you send me, I will exercise the vote for you that you asked me to cast. I'll never sit on my hands." That was pretty much it. You combine that with a lot of good friends, and a lot of help, and we won by about 55-45 margin. It was pretty sizable victory.

Mel Steely: 00:40:09 Remarkable. In that year, especially.

Johnny Isakson: 00:40:12 Yeah. Nixon of course was still on everybody's mind. Gerald Ford had done a great job of an impossible mission. That race by
the way for President was a lot closer than a lot of people remember. President Carter just swept Georgia.

Mel Steely: 00:40:26 Yes, he did.

Johnny Isakson: 00:40:28 It was a difficult year.

Mel Steely: 00:40:31 I remember him coming home and making that pitch about send Democrats to help me.

Johnny Isakson: 00:40:39 That's right.

Mel Steely: 00:40:40 Elect Democrats.

Johnny Isakson: 00:40:41 And they did a pretty good job of it.

Mel Steely: 00:40:42 They did. Boy did they ever. Like you pointed out. You're the only guy that-

Johnny Isakson: 00:40:46 In the legislature-

Mel Steely: 00:40:47 In the legislature.

Johnny Isakson: 00:40:48 The only one in the legislature that did.

Mel Steely: 00:40:49 Yeah. Well, we'd already lost all of our elected state wide officers. The boys that switched over earlier in the '60s, they were all gone, and our Congressmen were gone at that point. They'd tried various things and Fletcher and Blackburn, they weren't there anymore. You were the only ray of hope.

Mel Steely: 00:41:09 But right at that very moment, Mack Mattingly was chair, came up to become chair of the Party. He put together what came to be called the long range planning committee. Mattingly, Gingrich, Linder, John Linder, Paul Coverdell, Bob Irvin, John Amos. That was pretty much the core. Had a lot of other people that kind of went in and out, offering advice. Mike Egan was one. There were a number of people that were doing then. One of the first objectives of that particular group, between the time you lost a race and won a race, was to try to refocus the party away from the country club image. Well, not just an image. It really was a country club party. The most important thing was to get elected third vice chairman from the western district, or something. Anyway, to focus on recruiting good candidates, and then giving them money and support to help them win. I believe they called it Operation Breakthrough.
Mel Steely: 00:42:12 Do you remember much about that? Did these guys help you any, or did you do it all on your own? I've heard both sides. Where, oh yeah, I never would have been elected hadn't been for them. And others said, "What. I don't remember them doing anything for me." What was your memory of the Party, in that '76 race?

Johnny Isakson: 00:42:31 To no discredit to anyone, there were a handful of people ... Bob Shaw, Paul Coverdell, Mike Egan then was minority leader of the House at that time. And Mack Mattingly. They were all involved, but I remember going to those conventions. We'd have those conventions in the downtown Atlanta Marriott, which had a ballroom that was partitionable into four meeting rooms. And our whole state convention fit in one of those four meeting rooms. Maybe 250 people. Now they have four, five, six thousand people at those things I guess.

Johnny Isakson: 00:43:13 In '74 and '76, there was moral support, and there was encouragement. The Operation Breakthrough, I know precisely when Operation Breakthrough ... It was 1983, I mean it was 1982.

Mel Steely: 00:43:28 When it began to pay off?

Johnny Isakson: 00:43:29 That was when officially our Operation Breakthrough took place. The reason I remember that date was I was running for reelection, Herb Jones was running for Congress and I determined that I was going to run for minority leader to replace Herb. So I spent a lot of that summer traveling the state in an effort to help elect some more Republicans to the legislature. If I remember correctly, and I may be off a few on this number, but I think, when Herb left we had twenty-one Republicans in the House, out of 180. When I was elected in '76, there were nineteen. So it had grown by two over the six years.

Johnny Isakson: 00:44:20 Bob Irvin, who was about to leave the House at that time. In fact, he had left the House.

Mel Steely: 00:44:25 Yeah, he left after the '74 ... He served in '75, 6 and then was gone.

Johnny Isakson: 00:44:30 That's right.

Mel Steely: 00:44:31 He wasn't there in '77.

Johnny Isakson: 00:44:32 He left, but he helped with that effort. John Linder, Paul Coverdell-
Mel Steely: 00:44:37 What was the guy's name that was the dentist?

Johnny Isakson: 00:44:41 Oh, John Savage. He later switched Parties. They all helped with Operation Breakthrough, and promoted it, and from time to time, I would make a trip and make speeches for them. That year was the year that we elected I believe four new Republicans and went to twenty-five. The reason I remember twenty-five is I ran for minority leader, and won thirteen votes to twelve votes. I've always remembered that. Thirteen and twelve is twenty-five and everybody voted in that election.

Mel Steely: 00:45:14 Who ran against you? Phillips?

Johnny Isakson: 00:45:15 No. John Linder.

Mel Steely: 00:45:16 Linder. Oh.

Johnny Isakson: 00:45:18 I won that, and then was reelected three other times. So I served as minority leader in the House for eight years.

Mel Steely: 00:45:23 Herb had replaced Egan-

Johnny Isakson: 00:45:25 Herb replaced-

Mel Steely: 00:45:25 ... and Egan went to Washington.

Johnny Isakson: 00:45:26 Egan went to Washington with the Carter administration.

Mel Steely: 00:45:28 Right. And then Herb took it for four years, and then ran himself and lost.

Johnny Isakson: 00:45:32 He actually took it for six years.

Mel Steely: 00:45:33 Six years. Okay.

Johnny Isakson: 00:45:35 He was minority leader from '76 to '82. I was from '82 to '90. And Egan was the four years preceding Herb.

Mel Steely: 00:45:45 Yeah. When you got to the legislature, after having been elected, George Busbee was the Governor. Tom Murphy was the Speaker. Zell Miller was Lieutenant Governor. All of them had been there a little while. None of them had been long tenure, but all of them had been around a while, and knew what they were doing.
Mel Steely: 00:46:08 What do you remember about those three gentlemen, and what do you remember about your first months as a legislator? Was it what you expected it to be?

Johnny Isakson: 00:46:19 I think I was pretty much in awe of the opportunity, and soon became pretty much in awe of the responsibility. Got a good piece of advice from Carl Harrison. He said, "The only way to learn is with mouth shut, and your ears open." So I followed that advice, and had a good mentor. Carl was my mentor. He'd left the Board of Education, been elected to the House. So we sat next to each other.

Johnny Isakson: 00:46:46 Again, going back to growing up in sales and realizing how important people are, I made and effort to get to know everybody. Realized pretty quick when you're outnumbered nine to one, which we were, that if your only friends were Republicans, you'd lose every vote, nine to one. So I made as many friends on the other side as I could.

Johnny Isakson: 00:47:07 Back then, we were such a small minority that we weren't bludgeoned to death, so to speak. But Speaker Murphy, who grew up in the old school, and believed that if you were on the ins, you were on the ins, if you were on the outs, you were on the outs. I have the greatest of regard for Speaker Murphy. I always remember Newt Gingrich talking about how much he learned from Murphy and gained from him. As painful as that victory was, the experience is a great teacher. With Tom Murphy, you're getting a PhD in politics. And as tough and ferocious as he could be, it's fortunate for all of us that his heart was big, because Georgia never suffered because of that ferocity, so to speak. Republicans did, but the state as a whole certainly didn't.

Johnny Isakson: 00:48:00 The speaker and I, the years I was minority leader, I mean, he respected my job, and I certainly respected his, and had to take him on. I always tried ... I figured the best way to be successful to any degree, would be to pick your fights. Don't try and fight every one, or you just get obliterated. We picked them and we never won one outright, but we won a number of them by the Democrats coming right in behind and taking a bill I'd authored, or somebody else had authored, reintroducing it with another title and another number, but the same bill.

Johnny Isakson: 00:48:41 When they had the big Capitol renovations scandal ... When Kerry Bond went to federal prison, and the contractors and everything else ... I made it a habit that most people in the legislature didn't read the law. Certainly didn't read the laws that were being amended of the contemporary bills they're
Johnny Isakson: 00:49:07 I learned how the legislature ... I think it's called the Legislative Services Committee was established, which was the committed for the renovation. When it was established, it was a committee of designated appointees, all who were Democrats. All who were in a tight group. It's oversight was stated as a generality, not specifically. It's liability was nonexistent. So I wrote a very comprehensive bill amending that law. Didn't talk to a soul. Had it drawn up in legislative counsel, where they do honor your secrecy.

Johnny Isakson: 00:49:39 I remember introducing it, the first or second day of the first session we went after that scandal. Of course the newspapers got a hold of it, and the next thing I knew, I was on every TV station and ... Amending this thing nobody had ever heard of before. Well as it turned out, it was the whole key to where everything broke down because the accountability that was supposed to be there hadn't existed because it never carried out its function. I just rewrote it, and wrote the appointees, or the designees to that commission in such a way as it wouldn't be totally under the control of any one person, the Governor or the Speaker, or Lieutenant Governor.

Johnny Isakson: 00:50:22 Democrats just went crazy. They said, all right, we don't need to do this. Everything's fine. Two weeks later, they introduced a bill that did not change a comma or a paragraph. Passed it out at the subcommittee the next day. Passed it out of the committee the next day, and on the third day, which is as fast as you can deal with a bill. It has to be read three times. It was on the floor of the House.

Johnny Isakson: 00:50:42 To this day, that's one of my fondest memories. I mean, even the media picked up on the fact as to what they'd done, but we really made a positive, constructive change. We changed something that was broken. We made the legislature more accountable, and the operation of the Capitol more accountable. To this day, there's never been a scandal since. That's been twenty years ago.

Mel Steely: 00:51:08 Yeah. What do you remember about working with the Senate and a House ... Well, you've been both House and Senate.

Johnny Isakson: 00:51:15 Yeah. I've been both of them.
Mel Steely: 00:51:18 When you're in one, working with the other, was there as much tension and resentment, and so forth there, as everybody says?

Johnny Isakson: 00:51:25 I didn't find it in my days. Of course my days in the House were fourteen years, from '76 to '90. You know, senators just have an attitude, whether they're state senators, or United States senators. The title is perceived to be a little more important. The numbers are less. In the case of the United States Senate, they have no rules. In the case of the Georgia Senate, they write them as they go along, so to speak. So there's a little bit of a different air in the Senate, than there is in the House.

Johnny Isakson: 00:51:59 But interestingly enough, All the battles, so to speak, and the fights, were between Tom Murphy and Zell Miller. They weren't between Republicans and Democrats. They weren't between the House and the Senate. They were between two men. I mean periodically, Zell would always be the one that was promoting the more liberal aspects of the Democratic agenda, and Murphy was always on the conservative side. That's where they'd have their fights, whether it was over teacher's salary increases. I mean, Miller would always be for bigger ones than Murphy would. Whatever the case might be. They had some classic battles. We were all, all the rest of us, Democrats and Republicans alike, were pawns in that big battle. We'd either ... Speaker would get House members to pocket the Lieutenant Governor's centerpiece of legislation in the year, and the Lieutenant Governor would get a Senate to deep six the Speaker's centerpiece legislation. They'd fight, then about three days before the session was over, they'd go somewhere, and kiss and make up. Next thing you know, Bills would fly through, and the deadlock would be broken. Nobody ever knew what the real deal was, but there was a deal somewhere.

Mel Steely: 00:53:12 I remember watching it with these teacher salaries. The system seemed to be the Governor would come out and say, "Okay. We're going to have a 3% increase." And the Speaker would say, "Oh, this ain't enough. We got to have three and a half." Then Zell would say, "Oh that ain't nearly enough."

Johnny Isakson: 00:53:28 " ... got to have four."

Mel Steely: 00:53:28 " ... we got to have four."

Johnny Isakson: 00:53:30 That's right.

Mel Steely: 00:53:30 And everybody knew this ahead of time that was in that group. They knew what it was going to be. People writing the bills, they
knew what it was going to be. The public didn't. It all was great drama and great theater.

Johnny Isakson: 00:53:41 Theater. That's exactly what it was. Lot of acting.

Mel Steely: 00:53:44 I know. Every once in a while, you get real emotion and people really cared. But it wasn't all that often. Most of it was theater, I'm afraid. The only few times I've seen Speaker get upset, he'd get terribly upset about Tom Perdue. If you mentioned Tom to him, that brings on great emotion. I've seen him take his Stetson and throw it on the ground and stomp it, which is unusual for Mr. Murphy. I saw him do that once.

Johnny Isakson: 00:54:12 That's true. He's a pretty cool character.

Mel Steely: 00:54:13 Yeah. He was trying to get Joe Frank to fire. Joe Frank wouldn't do it, so. He was very frustrated. Most of the time it is theater, and it is pretty much agreed to ahead of time. When you were working on bills, didn't you find that to be true? That you knew what pretty much was going to happen.

Johnny Isakson: 00:54:30 You pretty much could figure ... You know the House, but constitutional requirement had to introduce the budget. The Senate couldn't. House didn't, until the governor introduced his budget. The governor would introduce his, and then the House would carve out some differences. Senate would carve out some. But you pretty much could figure out, after about half the session, where it was going to end up.

Mel Steely: 00:54:51 What do you remember about Busbee during that period?

Johnny Isakson: 00:54:54 Busbee was ... George is and was as a governor, is today, a great guy. He, of course, had the great misfortune of being elected and having to cut teacher pay five percent, I think in his first budget, which is the biggest turnover the Georgia Legislature ever had in the election after that. I came in the election after that. He did that in '74, and I came in '76. I was a part of that turnover, although that was not the big issue in my race.

Johnny Isakson: 00:55:29 Of the Governors I served under, his big focus was economic development. He did a great job with that. He had a sensitivity being from Albany, of getting technical education spread around the state. Job training. Did affect the Fall Feather Festival, to this day is still in Albany. That's the state chamber's big promotion to business and industry. Governor Busbee had a lot to do with that.
Johnny Isakson: 00:56:00 He was workhorse, so to speak. Good, solid guy. Did a great job. Came in, in very tough times, because of the budget cuts that had to take place, so the rest of it was downhill after you have to fight something like that.

Mel Steely: 00:56:21 I remember that very well. That bill, we only had one person in the whole House that voted to honor the contracts of teachers.

Johnny Isakson: 00:56:31 Something like that.

Mel Steely: 00:56:33 It was a guy from Carrollton. I remember it because I stood there and watched, and I was very close to Tom Glanton. I don't know whether you remember-

Johnny Isakson: 00:56:39 Oh yeah. I knew Tom. I was on the industry committee with him.

Mel Steely: 00:56:41 Yeah. Tom and I were very close friends. I was an aid, so to speak, to him at that time. I could not get him to vote against it. I was trying to get the university professors ... He just said, "Mel Steely, I just can't do it. The governor. The speaker. Everybody wants it done. We haven't got the money. We got to do it."

Johnny Isakson: 00:56:58 That was the session before ... First year of the session before I was elected. And it was a five percent across the board cut on teacher ... took away a five percent raise, is what it did. And it was a lot of money, and I remember as a businessman what '74 and '75 were like.

Mel Steely: 00:57:16 It was terrible.

Johnny Isakson: 00:57:17 We were getting clobbered, but that's the one thing about being the big enchilada, which of course public school teachers really are. They're a huge number, and huge force. But when you are the biggest piece of the budget and somebody's got to cut, you're the biggest target of the budget too. That's what happened in time.

Mel Steely: 00:57:35 Well, they did. They cut Ralph Partman. You didn't know Ralph. He's the only one that voted with us, and he got defeated. But he was real dumb. He went out and told teachers he didn't appreciate them coming up there, trying to tell him how to run his business. And his wife was leading them. She was a teacher.

Johnny Isakson: 00:57:52 I'm surprised he didn't lose more than his job.
Yeah. But he's the only one that voted for that. We sued, and won, and had to be paid, because we actually had a signed contract. Public school teachers didn't. So they were not paid. But the next year, they got the increase. We got nothing. So it kind of evened out.

Kind of averaged out.

Yeah. It sure did. Who were the other members of the legislature, that you remember from those early days, that made an impact on you?

Well, a lot of people did. First of all, from Cobb County, my mentor is Carl Harrison, the Republican, but you couldn't be in the legislature and be from Cobb County and not be affected by Joe Mack Wilson and Al Burruss.

Joe Mack was the consummate wool hat politician. Al was a very bright, very smart, and very ambitious Democrat who took on Tom Murphy. In fact, he ran against Tom Murphy in '76.

Your first year there, he took him on. Yeah.

Didn't beat him, and then ... In fact, Glen was one of Tom's, I mean Al's biggest supporters. And they went into kind of political exile for a couple years, but Murphy finally brought him-

Glanton quit. He couldn't-

Glanton couldn't, but Al stuck it out, and became majority leader.

That's right.

He carried Murphy's water. I learned so much from Al and Joe Mack. Joe Frank Harris was chairman appropriations. Gerald T Horton, Gerald Talmadge Horton, who was a liberal Atlanta Democrat, was the chairman of the industry committee. He may be the brightest guy I ever served with. Just keen mind. He later went on, worked for ... left the legislature. Went to the city. The new school in New York. Taught there. Went to Southern Company. Just did lots of things. Very bright guy. Wonderful guy. Learned a lot from him. G.D. Adams, who was a boat dealer from South Atlanta, ran the state planning community affairs committee. I learned just an awful lot from him. And a lot from the South Georgia guys. I love South Georgia, because I used to
work on my grandfather’s farm down in Fitzgerald in the summer months. Got to know a lot of those guys. So I learned a lot from really all of them.

Johnny Isakson: 01:00:22 I’ll be honest with you, Mel Steely, anytime somebody asks me a question like that, my whole approach to life has always been, it’s all about making and keeping friends. That’s what I always try to do. So I learned a lot from a lot of people, and benefited from every one of them.

Mel Steely: 01:00:39 Did you find that becoming leader changed things for you very much, in the House?

Johnny Isakson: 01:00:46 Well, you have a bullseye on your back. But you know, when you run a business, you have a bullseye on your back. So I’d already been running a business. So I was used to having the place where the buck stopped-

Mel Steely: 01:01:03 You were the president of Northside at that point, yeah.

Johnny Isakson: 01:01:06 By then, yeah. So I understood that responsibility, and I approached how I was minority leader, much like I approach my business, figuring that I was outnumbered and in business, sometimes I was outclassed. But A, with effort, and B, with persuasion, there’s a lot that you can do, so I just took it upon myself to take a sales approach, rather than an adversarial approach. I would take the Democrats on and the speaker on, on issues, but I took them on with an alternative point of view, trying to sell that point of view, rather than taking them on, and making it personal. So I don’t think I endeared any enemies. I think I gained some friends because of that. So my sales training probably has served me very, very well from that standpoint.

Mel Steely: 01:01:57 Mm-hmm (affirmative). I developed during the 80s what some call the Egan-Isakson Approach, which was described as working with the Democratic leadership to be able to get something done. The other approach, the so-called Gingrich-Linder Approach, was more of an in your face design to provoke confrontation. On the feeling that if we don’t confront and fight, we will never be a majority kind of thing. Do you think that's a fair analysis of what was going on?

Johnny Isakson: 01:02:30 I’d say that's absolutely fair.
Mel Steely: 01:02:33
What's your memory of all that. How did it work? Did it work or was it simply divisive among Republicans? Would it have been better had one side gone to the other side? Or what? Just talk to me about that for a minute.

Johnny Isakson: 01:02:44
Actually, I want to answer that in two ways. One in the historical sense of what was happening then. Second in the perspective sense of what I've been able to absorb and learn from all that.

Johnny Isakson: 01:03:02
We had some difficult times. I'm flattered to be thrown the same analogy with Mike Egan, I have a high regard for Mike, but I think we had a similar propensity from a standpoint of your job is to go down there and do something for your constituents and hopefully make a positive change, and the only way you can do that is to change the laws, and the only way to do that is to pass in the legislature and if you're outnumbered nine to one you can't beat them all in the head and expect to pay us anything, so we were certainly non-confrontational but nobody ever accuses, and I'm glad they didn't because there was never any reason to. We weren't go along to get along types, we just said, "Look, we're going to take the issue to the Hill and try and win it and we're going to try and win some friends on the other side." And we're fairly successful.

Johnny Isakson: 01:03:54
The other side and Newt certainly was and John Linder are more confrontational. Their confrontational nature would sometimes make it impossible for those of us that were trying to put together a coalition be successful because we all got cast with the same label, which was fair as Republican. There were tense times, I don't mind telling you. I mean we're just two different types of approaches. Now in perspective, both sides of that did the party a great service. And I'll give you a good example.

Johnny Isakson: 01:04:38
In 1985, Sam Caldwell was still Commissioner of Labor in Georgia and I was Minority Leader and Sam Caldwell got in all kinds of trouble a boat burned up, and they claimed insurance and there were ... I can't remember all the things, but it was clear that Sam Caldwell had done some bad stuff. And this is kind of a first for your getting ready to tell you a piece of history that I don't think is in writing anywhere in Georgia.

Johnny Isakson: 01:05:11
Okay.

Johnny Isakson: 01:05:11
That six months between my graduation from University of Georgia and my going to basic training I worked for Sam Caldwell when he ran and defeated Ben T. Huett for Commissioner of Labor in Georgia is the first political experience I had working for a candidate. You obviously think very highly of
somebody when you do that. And here I was the Minority Leader of Georgia and the guy I had worked for ... 1966, nineteen years earlier, was embarrassing himself, apparently had violated any number of laws and was a huge scandal and it was just ripe for the confrontational side to say, "See how these sorry Democrats are." And I was the minority leader, but the sorry Democrat was the guy who gave me my first job.

Johnny Isakson: 01:06:03 I went home and everybody was clamoring, "Johnny, you got to do something. You're our leader." Well, I went home and I picked up the Georgia Constitution and a miracle happened. I read in the Constitution ... I read the impeachment part, and then I read ... And we were out of session. Weren't in session so you couldn't have an impeachment trial until you were in session. And I think it was the summer so it was going to be six months before we came back in session. So I read in there I said, "You know, this other part of the Constitution says only the governor can call a special session. And he can only call it for one purpose, except, that three-quarters of the general assembly in petition to the governor can convene a special session."

Johnny Isakson: 01:06:55 And a light bulb went off and I said, "You know, I'm not comfortable with this confrontational stuff but they're right we have got to take this on." I hate like the Devil that it's Sam Caldwell, because he gave me my first job two decades ago. But I sat down at home on my typewriter then because we still didn't have PCs at home like everybody does now, and I typed out a resolution to convene the Georgia Legislature for the purpose of an impeachment of Sam Caldwell. The next day I went down to the Capitol, the reason I want to point out to whoever ever watches this that I typed it myself. It had five typographical errors and two or three spelling errors in it and it's somewhere in some historical document somewhere.

Johnny Isakson: 01:07:40 But I didn't want anybody to know and I didn't want any of my colleagues and I was going to take this hit myself but I went down and had a press conference and asked all the members of our caucus who wanted to come, to come and about almost all of them did. And I said, "It's become apparent to me as minority leader that in the interest of Commissioner Caldwell and the health and vitality of the integrity of Georgia that this must be dealt with expeditiously, the governor has said he will not call a special session. The Constitution of Georgia says that three-quarters of the general assembly and petition signed can call a special session. We the Republican minority, all twenty-five of us, have signed this petition. I'm now making it available to any Democrat who wants to sign it until we get to three-quarters."
Johnny Isakson: 01:08:24 Well, two days later Sam Caldwell resigned, two or ... Short period of time later. I didn't see this firsthand, but I'm told that the Democrats did a head count and found out that ninety percent of the Democrats were going to sign that petition, if they could get their hands on it, because they were catching heat. And that was my first confrontational event as minority leader taking on the other party, and kind of putting a little of my blend on it by using the issue of special session rather than the personality. Allowed us to be successful and I think over time I gained more respect for the ways in which confrontation could be used positively and I think I won some people over on my style as well. Nobody is always right.

Mel Steely: 01:09:16 If I remember correctly you handled the follow-up press questions on about pointing out that it was unfair to Mr. Caldwell to have these things hanging over his head and they needed to be cleared-

Johnny Isakson: 01:09:27 That's right.

Mel Steely: 01:09:27 And there was never a, "Hey, this dirty crook deserves to be kicked out." None of that. And you learn that from Al Burruss? Or your daddy.

Johnny Isakson: 01:09:36 No, I learned that from my dad, and I learned that from ... Selling is causing people to act in a predetermined fashion. If you call somebody a crook or a thug or anything else they're not going to react in any predetermined fashion you've got in mind. But I tell you this another one I hate to throw all this sales analogy in but-

Mel Steely: 01:09:58 That's fine.

Johnny Isakson: 01:09:59 If you want to ever get anybody's attention and win them over you either tell them a secret, ask a favor, or make a confession. And in that memory of yours about what ... And you're right that's exactly what I did say. I said, "Let me tell you, we need to do Mr. Caldwell a favor. He doesn't need to have to continue to go through this." And people say, "You know, that's right." And next thing you know we were pointing out he's going to have to go through it sooner than six months from now so he thought it through and Sam stepped down.

Mel Steely: 01:10:32 And was never bitter at you.

Johnny Isakson: 01:10:34 No.
Mel Steely: 01:10:34 As far as I remember, personally may have been. I don't know.

Johnny Isakson: 01:10:37 No, in fact I've seen Sam on ... I haven't seen him on too many occasions since that day but did see him, and we never had a cross word that I can recall.

Mel Steely: 01:10:49 I remember Al Burruss adopted that philosophy when he ran against Bic Murphy. Tom Glanton adopted just the opposite philosophy. He called Murphy an old throwback and a caveman and a bunch of stuff. And I can remember going into the speaker's office when Glanton was ... I was in meeting with him and Glanton called in and wanted to come in and he said, "Tell him wait just a minute." And Murphy cleaned off the corner of his desk, and he had that speech Glanton gave under the glass, underlined in red, and I looked over to see what it was. I thought, “Holy cow.”

Johnny Isakson: 01:11:24 That's right.

Mel Steely: 01:11:25 And so while Glanton is sitting there asking a favor, Murphy is reading-

Johnny Isakson: 01:11:30 Reading the speech again.

Mel Steely: 01:11:31 What he said about him and, of course, it was no. And it was strong enough no that Glanton quit, he didn't come back, he didn't run again. I know he tried to run for the Senate later against the governor and lost.

Johnny Isakson: 01:11:42 That's right.

Mel Steely: 01:11:43 But Burruss was in the woodshed for one or two terms. And then as you say came on back and had not made an enemy of Murphy.

Johnny Isakson: 01:11:53 That's right.

Mel Steely: 01:11:54 I know.

Johnny Isakson: 01:11:55 Murphy made him work his way back, but he-

Mel Steely: 01:11:56 He did.

Johnny Isakson: 01:11:57 Gave him the openings.
Mel Steely: 01:11:58 He sure did. He sure did. He explained ... I asked him about that, I asked the speaker when we interviewed him about him, which was some good tapes by the way.

Johnny Isakson: 01:12:06 I bet they are.

Mel Steely: 01:12:06 On him. And he said, "Well, I had to." He said, "If you’re speaker, you can’t just forget it."

Johnny Isakson: 01:12:13 That’s right.

Mel Steely: 01:12:13 But there’s a process that’s involved here. You have those who support you. He said, "I like Burruss. He and I became very close after that when he had his back trouble and all and he was going through that cancer and what all. He said, "He would come in and lay on my floor and I’d be working answer the phone and Al be laying there right on the floor in front of that big couch."

Johnny Isakson: 01:12:31 That’s right. I remember that.

Mel Steely: 01:12:34 He said, "We were close there." And he said, "I thought the world of him but you can’t just let it go." He said.

Johnny Isakson: 01:12:39 That’s right.

Mel Steely: 01:12:40 And so that was his approach on it. You, all together, ran nine elections for House and Senate seats. One for a County Commission seat, and by this time too, for Congress ... a lot of politics.

Johnny Isakson: 01:12:58 And one for governor.

Mel Steely: 01:12:59 And one for governor ... Well, I was going to get to that one in a bit. I was just doing the legislative “all that stuff” here. Which of those election campaigns stands out in your mind, aside from the governor, we’ll look at it separately.

Johnny Isakson: 01:13:13 Of the legislative camp-

Mel Steely: 01:13:14 The legislative ones, uh huh, let’s don’t look at Congress. I really want to do but that’s separate later on.

Johnny Isakson: 01:13:20 Oh, in the-

Mel Steely: 01:13:20 In the House and Senate seats.
Johnny Isakson: 01:13:22 I’m going to be real candid with you – I was very fortunate. I won my first race for the legislature and beat a Democratic incumbent. The Democrats ran a guy against me for my second term, and I won that one two to one and I never had an opponent, in either the primary or the general election for the rest of my years in the House and the State Senate. And I was fortunate. I think winning that race in ’76 got me some respect because the political odds were so against it. And then when winning two to one in a real election when the county was still heavily Democratic.

Johnny Isakson: 01:14:02 And then when I became Republican Leader, fortunately, people treated me pretty well and I tried to treat them pretty well. Felt like I was fairly effective so they didn't run it against me and then I ran for the Senate it was two years after I had lost a pretty close race for governor and folks realized I could raise money and realized that I hadn't tarnished my reputation so they gave me a pass on those two raises.

Johnny Isakson: 01:14:33 Now I've had some terrific contestant primaries in generals. But in the legislative races for the House or Georgia Senate ... My toughest race was my first, the one I wasn't supposed to win, and then they came after me the second time and when I won two to one they never ... Democrats never went after me again.

Mel Steely: 01:14:53 What was your toughest primary race?

Johnny Isakson: 01:14:58 Are we counting the congressional races?

Mel Steely: 01:15:00 No.

Johnny Isakson: 01:15:01 Okay, my first one. When I ran for the County Commission, I had three opponents in that primary. When I ran and was elected to the legislature in ’76, I did not have a primary opponent. By that time we had woken up and realized if we had a halfway decent candidate as a party, we didn't bloody each other up in the primary ... There weren't enough of us to go around, and I benefited from that in ’76, when nobody wanted to run as a Republican anyway. And so my toughest primaries have been in elections that we have not yet discussed.

Mel Steely: 01:15:38 Yeah, there's a debate going on right now – we're hearing it a lot – over in the new 11th District, where Speaker Murphy does not want Betty Darden to run. He wants to let Kahn run and not be bloodied in any way, keep his money, and then come out very strong in October November or September and October. The opposite view is that they desperately need somebody to
run, so they can get some publicity and some interest in that race, and get people to turn out for it. Forgetting who the people are in that particular race as a philosophical thing and a matter of practical politics, what do you think is the best way to do that? To have opponents or not have opponents?

Johnny Isakson: 01:16:25 I would have told you years ago when we were a weak party, in the minority, that we shouldn't have when in fact I was wrong. I'll be very candid with you, the races in my experience in the governor's race and the United States Senate and House races, the primaries that were hotly contested have helped me. I think they help candidates for the long run ... I haven't ever quantified it, but there's an economic value to the earned media that comes from a primary that's contested that you have to buy and create as a candidate that's uncontested.

Johnny Isakson: 01:17:11 Now there certainly are exceptions to that, and I would use the Cobb County experience when I was first running as ... It didn't help us to eat up all our resources in one contested primary, when we had a myriad of races where we weren't even running a Republican. But once you've gotten to any degree of status that's competitive, albeit still the odds are against you, a contested primary can be detrimental. I mean, you can destroy each other to the point that it's not salvageable, but by and large a contested primary is a benefit because it gets you visibility, gets you earned media. You also hone your skills and that's the benefit that I gained in '90 and '96 that helped me so much in a contested primary.

Johnny Isakson: 01:18:08 It's kind of like spring training is to Major League Baseball's World Series. You hate to have to go through it but you do get your skills sharpened so when the big game comes you're-

Mel Steely: 01:18:22 You're ready.

Johnny Isakson: 01:18:23 You got your act together.

Mel Steely: 01:18:24 Yeah, so if you had to do over again you'd want opposition?

Johnny Isakson: 01:18:32 Oh, listen when-

Mel Steely: 01:18:33 Although you did pretty well at the time and if you're the only guy running-

Johnny Isakson: 01:18:36 The only guy running you're-

Mel Steely: 01:18:37 It doesn't do it-
Johnny Isakson: 01:18:38 You're your own opponent, which sometimes can be your toughest opponent. That's the other thing when you don't have a competitor in a primary but you're going to have one in a general you can say something stupid easier in the primary that you can't correct when you don't have an opponent. Whereas, if it's in a contested race you can bury it down the line so ... Competition keeps you from being complacent, and it's pretty good. Now, I will tell you all of us who have run, and been elected and served, want to diminish opponents at all costs. But I mean, I'm trying to answer your question in hindsight: There is no question that it helped me in some areas, some times where I really didn't help ... And in the analogy of this year's Eleventh, I would suspect it would probably be beneficial to the Democrats that that be contested versus not contested.

Mel Steely: 01:19:36 Because Republicans will have a contested one. [crosstalk 01:19:39]

Johnny Isakson: 01:19:38 They already have three. Yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:19:40 Yeah, and maybe more and I don't know whether Buddy's going to get in or not. One day he seems to want to and the next day he doesn't want to. Since we're on tape, I won't ask you any questions about that one.

Johnny Isakson: 01:19:53 I don't know. I don't know.

Mel Steely: 01:20:00 If you had to look back which service did you prefer the most? The House or the Senate?

Johnny Isakson: 01:20:12 I don't think I-

Mel Steely: 01:20:13 Or can you compare them?

Johnny Isakson: 01:20:15 Well, interesting legislating is legislating. I enjoyed both. I enjoy the legislative process. The Senate – its benefits were that there were less of you, particularly in Georgia where you have such a large house with 180 and only 56 in the Senate. But if you back away in terms of the job, I enjoyed it both of them. Don't know. I'm glad I did what I did, I don't have a regret in the world.

Mel Steely: 01:20:59 The break in your General Assembly service came in 1990. You ran for Governor against Zell Miller. It's the end of Joe Frank Harris's term. No incumbent. What went into your decision to make that run?

Johnny Isakson: 01:21:15 Go back to the legislature?
Mel Steely: 01:21:16 No, to go for governor.

Johnny Isakson: 01:21:18 Oh, for governor.

Mel Steely: 01:21:19 For governor.

Johnny Isakson: 01:21:23 I'd been in the House 14 years. We'd gone from being 19 of us to 35 of us, so I felt like I'd at least contributed something to the growth of the party, along with a lot of other people. I was 45, 44, 45 actually I was 44 when I started running in '89, and I just said, you know, I could stay in this House and maybe as Republican leader eight more years, but I'd really like a bigger challenge. I really would like to help crack this one-party dominance. I think it's a fair statement that I had enough respect among the inside baseball crowd, the municipal association, and the lobbies and the Bill Shipps of the world, where I felt like I could build a viable candidacy. Which we really hadn't had in Georgia since Bo Callaway.

Johnny Isakson: 01:22:28 I mean, I think, Hal Suit against Carter was a pretty good race but we really hadn't had a valuable race. And I felt like there were enough issues that I could take them on toe-to-toe and knew enough about the operation where they couldn't waltz around it and gloss over it so I just said, "Look, you only go around once." Governors tend to serve eight years in Georgia. Once they get elected they get re-elected. Eight years from now I'll be fifty, whatever it is, 52. There was nobody else around, except possibly George Israel down in Macon, at the time who had been mentioned as candidate, so I said ... In May of '89 at sixteen to seventeen months before the race.

Johnny Isakson: 01:23:20 Announced I was going to do it. I got in a helicopter and for four days my wife and I flew around to twelve different cities making announcement stops and flew back in on that Thursday night to the galleria, and we had 1500 people show up with hundred dollar checks for my announcement speech, and raised $152,000, which was a whole lot of Republican money in 1989. And immediately said, "Boy, this is great. We're going to skate through this primary with no opposition."

Mel Steely: 01:23:53 Didn't work that way.

Johnny Isakson: 01:23:53 No, I had three opponents within a week, and then course Andy Young and Roy Barnes and-

Mel Steely: 01:24:00 Came in against Zell.
Johnny Isakson: 01:24:01 Bubba McDonald and – I forgot who all the Democrats had, five or six, I guess.

Mel Steely: 01:24:07 They did.

Johnny Isakson: 01:24:07 It was a great race. We made a good showing in a very difficult Republican year. We raised some issues. Particularly, the issue of privatization which became a reality within two years after that. I think my position on the use of lottery funds influenced positively that end result of that, and I made one of the best friends I've ever had in my opponent, Zell Miller. I gained a tremendous respect for him. I feel like he did for me ... We had the most expensive, hottest contested governor's race in history certainly most expensive.

Johnny Isakson: 01:24:52 The only one that would have been closer had been ... Thank you, had been Callaway and-

Mel Steely: 01:24:58 Arnall and Maddox.

Johnny Isakson: 01:25:00 Maddox. But I'd always had respect for him, got to know him real well. You get to know each other ... When you're running for eighteen months traveling around the state in a little airplanes and debating one another, and I've always respected the way he handled the race. I think he did me, and we became good friends so that's not to say that I wouldn't have rather won and us to also become good friends. But if you can between you spend twelve million dollars and run for eighteen months and battle tooth and nail and end up with mutual respect and be friends fifteen years later, it's not all bad.

Mel Steely: 01:25:46 I think you benefited from his race a decade earlier against Talmadge.

Johnny Isakson: 01:25:51 Oh yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:25:51 Which was a very bitter race.

Johnny Isakson: 01:25:53 Yes.

Mel Steely: 01:25:53 And I think Zell learned a lot. I'm not going to do it that way again.

Johnny Isakson: 01:25:58 You do cross those bridges more than once in your life.

Mel Steely: 01:26:00 Yes. And so this second time around you were lucky enough to be the recipient of the good Zell, as Talmadge would tell you,
not the bad Zell. Zig zag, I think it's when they got him back on that one. Yeah, but you're right ... Like you I have tremendous respect for Zell, I think probably he and Talmadge were probably the two greatest governors in the past century, twentieth century.

Johnny Isakson: 01:26:25 I think you're right.

Mel Steely: 01:26:26 For this state. Why do you think you lost that race? You did a lot of things there that Zell did pick up on and did indeed use, and admitted today called him a Republican because of his support of the president and this sort of thing and I've watched him handle things ... I remember it was Shipp, Bill Shipp, one of your old friends that asked him point blank how he could come out against money from lobbyist, and all this other ... How he could look for that kind of reform, and he took more money than anybody ever did in Georgia.

Johnny Isakson: 01:27:05 Right.

Mel Steely: 01:27:06 His reaction was, "Yeah, but because I took it I know how to deal with it."

Johnny Isakson: 01:27:10 That's right.

Mel Steely: 01:27:11 "I can deal with it or somebody else can't." And Shipp was just amazed. But Zell feels that way, doesn't he?

Johnny Isakson: 01:27:19 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:27:19 I mean he turned around and appointed you chairman of the Georgia School District-


Mel Steely: 01:27:23 Board of Education. That kind of thing's not done very often. I cannot imagine Tom Murphy doing such a thing.

Johnny Isakson: 01:27:31 No, I'd think it's safe to say that wouldn't happen.


Johnny Isakson: 01:27:36 Pierre would've done it, he had that type of disposition. But the answer to your question about why do I think I lost in '90, I've always said that candidates lose races and their supporters win them. And so I have never blamed a loss in a race on polls, on lack of money, on anything else. I've always ... Just like when I
played sports, I always could figure out how I could've won the game if I'd have done something differently. And the truth of the matter is I probably wasn't as tough as I should have been on certain issues but the main thing was I didn't ... My platform was too many things out there, it wasn't a clear focus. There wasn't a contract with America, there wasn't a lobby, I mean a lottery, which, of course, was Zell's issue.

Johnny Isakson: 01:28:37 The thing that came closest was the privatization message, but I had too many messages. That, in the end, plus I mean you've run against a guy that'd been lieutenant governor for four terms, and as good on his feet as anybody else. I didn't do a good job of focusing on one or two or three key things because Zell had boot camps and the lottery and that was it. I mean, he'd answer other questions, but it all ended up with [inaudible 01:29:12] and me I was all over the place.

Johnny Isakson: 01:29:16 But that's a bad thing in that race, and in the context of things, I was much better statewide candidate in '96, and a much better congressional candidate in '99 because of it. I've never gone into another race without a message, I can guarantee you that.

Mel Steely: 01:29:36 How did you and Pierre get along when you went back?

Johnny Isakson: 01:29:39 Great. Pierre Howard's, there's never been a finer person. There've been other fine people, but never a finer person in Georgia politics than Pierre Howard. We went to college together. My mother-in-law and his mother were neighbors and known each other fifty to sixty years. Have the greatest respect for Pierre, and we got along great, and he did little things along the way for me, which I've always appreciated very much.

Mel Steely: 01:30:13 Was Culver ... Was he there when you were there?

Johnny Isakson: 01:30:16 Oh yes, oh Lord, yes. Yeah, fact I helped Culver with some real estate that he would ... I had a little side business. I didn't get paid anything for it, but I'd be the real estate counselor on the floor of the Senate and the House when things would slow down a little bit. But Culver was an event, he was not a person.

Johnny Isakson: 01:30:38 He is one in a million, and yeah, I was there when Culver was there.

Mel Steely: 01:30:43 He stands out in my mind as possibly the most colorful Senator that among a lot of them, a lot of colorful ... I can't imagine anybody more colorful.
Johnny Isakson: 01:30:54 No, the Legislature never saw the likes of anything like Culver Kidd.

Mel Steely: 01:30:58 That's true.

Johnny Isakson: 01:30:58 Probably, he is the most unique Senator to ever serve in the Georgia Senate, and Denmark Groover the most unique member of the House.

Mel Steely: 01:31:08 I had a great interview with Denmark talking about his Marine days and all of that stuff. Fascinating.

Johnny Isakson: 01:31:11 I love Denmark Groover.

Mel Steely: 01:31:14 I agree with you.

Johnny Isakson: 01:31:15 I miss him to this day. I am so sorry that we lost him but he was a ... Now, he was very unique for far different reasons than Culver was very unique.

Mel Steely: 01:31:25 Yes. Great personality.

Johnny Isakson: 01:31:27 Never a more cunning, skilled debater than-

Mel Steely: 01:31:32 Both of them.

Johnny Isakson: 01:31:33 Both of them. Than those two.

Mel Steely: 01:31:35 Were you there when Culver came dressed in his purple-

Johnny Isakson: 01:31:37 I was there when he came in his Crown Royal suit.


Johnny Isakson: 01:31:43 Culver always had a bottle of Crown Royal in his file cabinet in his Senate office and I say a bottle, I think, I doubt if it ever got that low.

Mel Steely: 01:31:52 A case.

Johnny Isakson: 01:31:53 And I forgot what the issue was, but he showed up in the Georgia Senate one morning ... This is when I was in the House and he had taken a, I mean it must have been fifty Crown Royal labels and had them sewed together-

Mel Steely: 01:32:09 It was bags [crosstalk 01:32:10]
Johnny Isakson: 01:32:10 With this purple needlepoint looking stuff, and had it as a jacket and wore it on the floor of the Senate, I mean he was ... I forgot what the issue.

Mel Steely: 01:32:20 He'd been accused of drinking and coming back to the Senate drunk. Somebody had, on the floor made that accusation.

Johnny Isakson: 01:32:27 Oh yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:32:27 And he denied it vigorously and then showed up to deny it wearing the Crown Royal jacket.

Johnny Isakson: 01:32:32 That's exactly right.

Mel Steely: 01:32:35 I've never seen anything-

Johnny Isakson: 01:32:37 He's a piece of work.

Mel Steely: 01:32:39 Yes, he was. We got to go back, wait a minute, I guess maybe Marvin Griffin, or something-

Johnny Isakson: 01:32:44 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:32:45 He and Cheney together probably would have been his equal.

Johnny Isakson: 01:32:47 That's right. But nobody was his equal in terms of mischief. He was like the little kid that just always was getting in trouble. He just happened to be fifty and sixty years old when he was doing it but Culver was a piece of work.

Mel Steely: 01:32:59 Yes, he was. Did you ever go down and see his office there in Milledgeville-

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:33:04]

Mel Steely: 01:33:00 Was. Did you ever go down and see his office there in Milledgeville?

Johnny Isakson: 01:33:04 You know, no. I don't- the small- the loan company?

Mel Steely: 01:33:07 Yeah. The little- it has a little hole in the wall.

Johnny Isakson: 01:33:09 No, I didn't see it.

Mel Steely: 01:33:09 You go in there, and it was a little bitty office about this size, the outer office, people sit and wait. And then, they would usher them into a room that was about the size of the rest of your
office, and he was sitting on a high platform. The desk was on a
platform. So, anyone that came in and had to sit down and look
up at him.

Johnny Isakson: 01:33:25 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:33:26 You know.

Johnny Isakson: 01:33:27 Probably some psychology.

Mel Steely: 01:33:28 Oh, I'm sure it was. It was absolutely fascinating to sit there in
the corner and just watch what was going on here, and people
bringing him stuff in, cases of liquor and food. And who's that
from? That's from your friends out at the [inaudible 01:33:44].
Today you would go to jail.

Johnny Isakson: 01:33:45 Oh, absolutely.

Mel Steely: 01:33:46 For that kind of thing. But they pulled off stuff back then. It just
was unbelievable.

Johnny Isakson: 01:33:49 Well, as a footnote, his granddaughter was my first
transportation staff assistant after I was elected to Congress.
Little Tilly Fowler, and of course his daughter Tilly Fowler, I
served with her in Congress from Jacksonville.

Mel Steely: 01:34:02 Yeah. She ran for Florida and won.

Johnny Isakson: 01:34:04 That's right.

Mel Steely: 01:34:05 And got money from her daddy. Called me up and wanted me
to send her money.

Johnny Isakson: 01:34:08 That's the- oh, sure. We're not shy in politics about calling and
asking.

Mel Steely: 01:34:12 No, no, no, no, no, no. Well, tell me about '96.

Johnny Isakson: 01:34:18 I'll never forget that year. That's the toughest race I've ever
been in my life. That's the toughest race I've ever been in,
toughest situation I've ever been in, in terms of running for the
nomination of the Senate.

Johnny Isakson: 01:34:36 When Sam Nunn announced that he would not seek re-election,
I had already – my wife and I had talked it through, and I talked
with my business partners and I had said, look. This is the last
chance I'll ever have to do something I'd really like to do, serve
the people in that type of capacity. And so, I announced. And a few days after I announced that I would qualify when that came up, Guy Millner, who had run for governor two years before and had encouraged me to run for the Senate, called me and said he changed his mind, took back everything he said, and he was going to run for the Senate.

Johnny Isakson: 01:35:15 Well, I remember I was at home and that was a Sunday night, and I said, well sweetheart, you ain't going to believe what just happened, what I just heard on the phone. I told her and said, what do you think? I said, doesn't change my mind, but it sure does change my fundraising challenges, because Guy had already spent probably seven, eight, nine, ten million dollars in that first governor's race.

Mel Steely: 01:35:35 Yeah.

Johnny Isakson: 01:35:36 Had the capability. And we ran, and there ended up being five of us in the primary. And I made it in a runoff with him, which surprised a few people, because it was like 40. He had 41, I had 35. We held him probably lower than people thought. And then, we had the most difficult runoff, probably exacerbated by the fact that the summer Olympic Games were going on in Atlanta for all but two of the days of the runoff.

Mel Steely: 01:36:04 Yeah.

Johnny Isakson: 01:36:05 So, you're competing with the biggest media event since the Civil War in Georgia. And we almost won. I mean, it was a real close runoff, but he won and went on to be the nominee. And I ended up with a debt, which I'd always- I'd had some debts in my political years, but when you get in debt and these statewide races, you're talking about some-

Mel Steely: 01:36:35 Serious money.

Johnny Isakson: 01:36:35 Some serious money. But I've never regretted a minute of it. And when, it was over, I ran the race I wanted to run. I'd profited from the things I didn't do in '90. I had run against some pretty big odds and a lot of money. And I'd taken all the issues of the day, particularly the ones in our party, on head on. And so, I was very proud of- sorry we lost, but very proud of the effort we'd made and figured this was a great way to go out. I had been able to serve people for seventeen years and had run statewide twice. And, although I lost, I never embarrassed myself or my family. And I plunged myself into my business. First time since I could remember, I was getting home at a
decent hour and wasn't making speeches on Friday and Saturday night, wasn't having to call and beg for money, although I did have to pay off a loan personally, of pretty good size. And just was happy as I could be.

Johnny Isakson: 01:37:38 And then, all of a sudden Zell Miller called me on a Friday morning and said, at the end of that year, about six months later said, “I just fired the Board of Education.” And I want to appoint you, and I want you to come down and run it. And I was sitting there thinking, this is a trick. And I stalled, and I finally said, I'm going to have to think about it. And I thought about it over that weekend, and decided I wasn't going to do it. And I called him on Monday morning, I promised him I would at the mansion. And I said, governor, I really appreciate it, but, and he interrupted me. He said, you need to come down here and talk to me.

Johnny Isakson: 01:38:17 And so, I drove down to the mansion and we sat in that little library up front, right as you go in the front door.

Mel Steely: 01:38:24 Right.

Johnny Isakson: 01:38:25 And he said, what are your concerns? Or something like that. And I said, well, there are eleven members on that board and two of them hadn't resigned. Nine of them did resign at your request, but I'm only one person. You got to have a majority to make fundamental changes. He said, you tell me who to appoint. And I thought I said, I'm hearing something. And to this day, we sat down there, we went around each congressional district. And I said, well, E.G. Meybohm in Augusta is a good friend of mine. He's in real estate. He was a big supporter of mine against you, governor. But he's a good man. Fine. And then, we got to the - I forget which congressional district number was at the time, one over around Athens. And the governor said fine to everything I said. So, I said, well, how about Hugh Logan, who was a former Democratic representative. He said, you know, I did have a suggestion. He said, would you mind- Mike Thurman's sister does private tutoring and is big in helping minority children, what about- I said, hey, that's fine with me.
And at 3:30 that afternoon, he called a press conference, and we announced the new State Board of Education. So, all of a sudden, six months after I thought I had done my swan song and it was really the first time I hadn't been involved in politics deeply since 1974, next thing I knew, I was on the state board of education and running it. And nine of the eleven people were my Republican supporters in my other races. And the guy who beat me for governor-

Mel Steely: Had appointed you.

Johnny Isakson: Put me in that position, so.

Mel Steely: And supported you.

Johnny Isakson: And supported and backed me up.

Mel Steely: And supported you.

Johnny Isakson: And we had a great time and got a lot of stuff done. And then, the next thing I knew one day Newt decides to resign. And here's the guy that thought three years ago he was finished and next thing you know he's running for Congress. So, it just goes to show you.

Mel Steely: Yeah.

Mel Steely: I've often thought if you had beaten Millner, you probably would have been a senator today. I think that race turned on- I know everything's- you don't know.

Johnny Isakson: You never know.

Mel Steely: But, in watching that race, it got to be as much personality as anything else. And people liked Max. They didn't like him and people liked you. I don't know that the message that he had and you had would have been that different, maybe.

Johnny Isakson: We didn't have too much different except for a few issues.

Mel Steely: Yeah. And I just think on the personality thing would have been different. Difference in being a big millionaire and a little millionaire, I suppose.

Johnny Isakson: Well, life has-
Mel Steely: 01:41:29 One of his friends was like that. And he said, yeah, Newt. I’m a millionaire, but I’m a little millionaire. There’s a big-

Johnny Isakson: 01:41:33 There is a big difference in that, believe me. I know that.

Mel Steely: 01:41:36 It would have been an interesting, interesting race.

Mel Steely: 01:41:41 Now, we’ve only got a few minutes left here. Oh, you’ve been around for so long, well over what? You started in the ’70s? So, roughly thirty-

Johnny Isakson: 01:41:52 Well over a quarter of a century, let’s just leave it at that.

Mel Steely: 01:41:56 Not to imply anything. You’ve seen a lot of changes in Georgia politics and in the General Assembly. What are the main things you’ve seen change for the good? And then, follow that up with things that haven’t changed that should have, if you don’t mind.

Johnny Isakson: 01:42:12 Well, the best change that has taken place is that what we few Republicans used to always say would happen if we ever got a viable two-party system has happened. There is no complacency in politics in Georgia anymore, because Republicans have demonstrated that they can win at almost any level, and have. Then their ideas are taken more seriously, and oftentimes embraced. And, in many cases, you look today, you see the difference in Democrats and Republicans not being over the issue but on the margins. Because the issue ends up rising to a point of like reforming education. They’re both for it. It’s how you do it and this, that, and the other.

Johnny Isakson: 01:43:04 And that’s good, because I will tell you, when I first went, the dominance of the Democratic Party was so great that the human nature of complacency would- that’s why the capital renovation scandal took place then. I mean, there was no need for them to be accountable. I don’t fault the speaker or anybody else. They were the victims of human nature when you have that big a dominance. So, there is no question that that has been the best positive thing that has happened.

Johnny Isakson: 01:43:39 The thing that I find the least positive, to use a sales term, or negative, to use an academic term, has been the deterioration of political campaigns. This is not- I’m not talking about negative politics. I’m talking- and both sides- but it’s inexcusable to me for adults to expect people to elect folks to office who are acting like third-grade bullies and both sides. I thought, I mean there’s enough to go around. Sometimes our guys, sometimes their guys, but I firmly believe it’s the most negative thing that's
happened. And I think it's one of the things that keeps some people from getting in public life that ought to get into it.

Mel Steely: 01:44:40 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Johnny Isakson: 01:44:41 But I just- and the only way that it changes is for the candidates themselves to change it, because of the nature of our system and the great constitutional protections we have in terms of the First Amendment, and the nature of the elective process are that campaigns were either going to degenerate or rise, depending on what the players do. And there has been a decline in the levels to which the players would stoop. And I think that's unfortunate for the process.

Johnny Isakson: 01:45:19 But I have to tell you that for the most positive thing, which outweighs everything is, that a viable two party system has made Georgia a better state than it would have been without a viable two party system.

Mel Steely: 01:45:31 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mel Steely: 01:45:32 Are there any structural changes you would make, like not having two budgets and things of that nature? You think we should go to one budget?

Johnny Isakson: 01:45:42 You mean the supplemental?

Mel Steely: 01:45:43 Supplemental.

Johnny Isakson: 01:45:43 Let me tell you, I made some of my best speeches, if I may self-indulge for a second, as minority leader of the House and on the Senate floor in terms of how we didn't need a supplemental budget. But I acknowledged in those speeches that I couldn't run my business- in no year that I ever ran my business could I have run it all twelve months based on the budget I did in advance of those twelve months. Budgets are the very best effort you make as a business person to project revenues and manage expenses to make a profit. Budgets in government should be your very best estimate as to what your revenues might be so that you spend those revenues and set the priorities.

Johnny Isakson: 01:46:27 But no year- there are September 11ths, there are recessions. I mean, things happen. And to say that you should never have a supplemental budget, you're being disingenuous. Because, if you know anything, you know budgets have to be amended. The position I argued was that we should have a budget
amendment process to amend the budget. When the legislature comes in, the budget is six months old. You're halfway through the fiscal year. If you've had an anomaly, you know it. If the economy is moving up or down, you know it. If you have an amended process where you amend the budget one amendment at a time, then you can fix the anomalies or you can react to the circumstances.

Johnny Isakson: 01:47:12 But the supplemental where you aggregate the whole budget again, and I mean, it just creates the opportunity for things that would never stand on their own merit. They end up passing because you've only got one vote.

Mel Steely: 01:47:25 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Johnny Isakson: 01:47:26 And I believe to this day, I'm going to tell you something now, I'm working right now on the same proposal in Congress of the United States. This incident in California where we find out two months after Congress adjourns that last year we voted for a fifty thousand dollar appropriation to consult on removing tattoos in California is embarrassing.

Mel Steely: 01:47:45 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Johnny Isakson: 01:47:46 And just as some of the supplemental appropriations in Georgia from time to time were embarrassing. And I personally think that we ought to have a provision where any budget appropriations which are one time in nature and region or area specific ought to have a period just like the rulemaking procedures do now where it's ninety days before it's enacted. And, when Congress comes back in, if one of these things pops up, you can amend it out.

Mel Steely: 01:48:17 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Johnny Isakson: 01:48:18 Because things like that really shouldn't- it just makes us all look bad. And, in the scheme of things, nobody does it unless they hope nobody ever finds out it's going to be in there. And we ought to stop that. Same thing is wrong with the supplemental process. If every amendment had to stand on its own light and had to carry its own majority vote, you'd have a lot cleaner process of better fiscal process and your house would be in better order.

Mel Steely: 01:48:43 People are going to tell you that it's just going to take too much time. It's not feasible to do it that way.

Mel Steely: 01:48:50 I bet you have.

Johnny Isakson: 01:48:51 They said privatization wouldn't work too. But Governor Miller privatized the first state project, allowed me as a member of the Senate to amend the State Parks Authority. And the very first privatized project in Georgia is Brasstown Valley, which is the golf course and lodge in his hometown, which he wanted as he went out of office, which is also the most profitable and returns the most money to the state of Georgia of any piece of infrastructure and recreation it has.

Mel Steely: 01:49:18 That's one time I've seen Zell get mad at me.

Johnny Isakson: 01:49:20 What?

Mel Steely: 01:49:22 When he was still lieutenant governor and he first brought that up years ago, and he asked me about what the college folks were thinking about it. I said, they all love you except for this pork barrel thing you're doing with this golf course. He got so upset. He literally grabbed me by the lapels and shoved me up against his door.

Johnny Isakson: 01:49:38 Oh yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:49:38 Said, what do you mean? Said, I'm a poor man. My county is a poor county. And he said, these people begrudge my people up there that one little old piece? And he said, it'll return more money. He went through this whole thing. He said, all I've done for them and they're going to get on me about that.

Johnny Isakson: 01:49:57 Yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:49:57 I said, well, they're not getting on you. You just asked me what they thought.

Johnny Isakson: 01:50:01 Right.

Mel Steely: 01:50:02 Well, you don't-

Johnny Isakson: 01:50:02 Don't kill the messenger.

Mel Steely: 01:50:04 Yeah. You go back and tell them. I mean, he was real hot about it. But he did back off at that point, but he came back later. And he was right. I've been up there and you have to, and it's a nice place.
Johnny Isakson: 01:50:13 And you look at the numbers, I mean Stormont Trice won that bid. It was privatized. They built it. They operated it. It's a cash flow machine to the state.

Mel Steely: 01:50:22 Absolutely.

Johnny Isakson: 01:50:22 And, as his Evergreen at Stone Mountain now.

Mel Steely: 01:50:26 Yep.

Johnny Isakson: 01:50:26 The same thing has happened on it. Not all of government can be run like a business, but when government gets into businesses, by golly, business can run it better than the government can.

Mel Steely: 01:50:37 I hear you.

Mel Steely: 01:50:41 Which brings us to the one that call King Roy now, your old friend, close friends. I understand you all talk at least weekly.

Johnny Isakson: 01:50:51 Well, I think somebody has been- if he said that, he is giving me far more credit than I deserve. But we talk frequently, but it's not weekly.

Mel Steely: 01:51:00 Well, it was at one time.

Johnny Isakson: 01:51:01 Oh, well listen, it was daily.

Mel Steely: 01:51:03 Up until you went to Congress.

Johnny Isakson: 01:51:05 Oh, absolutely.

Mel Steely: 01:51:06 And even then, still, according to the governor, he seeks your advice privately, not to be discussed on a fairly regular basis.

Johnny Isakson: 01:51:18 I would confirm that that's true. And it works both ways. I have called to seek his advice.

Mel Steely: 01:51:24 How do you assess his governorship so far? We're three fourths of the way through his first term.

Johnny Isakson: 01:51:31 Roy may be the brightest guy, and this is not to be negative on any former governor, but I don't think anybody argues that, intellectually, he's probably the most stimulating of the governors since I can remember, all the way back to Vandiver. Roy has this partisanship which- and you got back into the question you asked me somewhere back in this interview about
the difference in styles between me. And you used Newt and John as an example. Well, it seems to me like I have the same quarrel or differences that I had with them on style, I have with Roy on style and the way they've taken partisanship.

Mel Steely: 01:52:16 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Johnny Isakson: 01:52:20 But I take nothing away from the man. He's very bright. He's a great-we raised our families in the same county. I've recommended him as a lawyer. He's recommended me as a real estate broker. I've been cross examined by him in a court of law in a case where I was an expert witness and his client was trying to get a zoning and I was the crux of the final decision. They were both trying to tear me apart. I've been with him. He helped me when my parents were sick and dying. I've been with him when his parents were having difficulties.

Johnny Isakson: 01:52:55 And so, like I said, I've built my whole life trying to make friends not create enemies. So, he certainly is a friend. But I would say that I think that, for what we might've been accused about in terms of partisanship at one time, to try and carve our way into some degree of standing, he is taken to the same level in terms of trying to keep us from getting there.

Mel Steely: 01:53:18 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Johnny Isakson: 01:53:20 And I just make that observation.

Mel Steely: 01:53:22 I think it's accurate. I think he and the speaker both, because I remember the speaker, Murphy being told, you have to allow some chairmen to be Republicans. And this was in '97. And he said, I'll do it when Gingrich puts some Democrats in as chairman in the congress.

Johnny Isakson: 01:53:38 Right.

Mel Steely: 01:53:39 Which is a fair statement, if you were partisan.

Johnny Isakson: 01:53:41 And he didn't, and he didn't.

Mel Steely: 01:53:43 Neither the one of them did. Neither one of them did.

Johnny Isakson: 01:53:45 That's right.

Mel Steely: 01:53:46 And I remember talking with him and his great disdain, and that's the best word I can think of, for Pierre Howard. I understood that Pierre just gave in to Republicans.
Johnny Isakson: 01:53:58 You mean the speakers?

Mel Steely: 01:53:59 Yeah.

Johnny Isakson: 01:53:59 The speakers, yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:54:02 The speakers. And I remember Pierre asked me one day, why doesn't Tom Murphy like me? I said, well, he thinks that you haven't got no backbone. He thinks that you just give in to the Republicans whatever they want. You won't stand for anything. He said, he really believes that? I said, yeah, he really does. You know. He is partisan to the core.

Johnny Isakson: 01:54:22 He is.

Mel Steely: 01:54:22 But it's not a mean- it's fun, like taking Gingrich and putting him over in John Lewis's district.

Johnny Isakson: 01:54:28 Oh yeah.

Mel Steely: 01:54:29 I mean, some people see that as mean. I don't think Tom thought of it as mean.

Johnny Isakson: 01:54:33 No.

Mel Steely: 01:54:33 He thought of it as fun.

Johnny Isakson: 01:54:35 Fun. That's right.

Mel Steely: 01:54:35 Yeah. That's-

Johnny Isakson: 01:54:37 He accomplished his purpose too, you know, so.

Mel Steely: 01:54:40 That's right.

Johnny Isakson: 01:54:40 Of course, in a way he did. In a way-

Mel Steely: 01:54:42 In a way he didn't.

Johnny Isakson: 01:54:43 In a way he ended up with like seven more Republicans than he thought he would.

Mel Steely: 01:54:46 That's right.

Johnny Isakson: 01:54:46 But-

Mel Steely: 01:54:46 He had a happy moment, but then it cost him.
Johnny Isakson: 01:54:50 And I guess that's a good point for me to inject one thing. You talked about how long I'd been in politics. You study politics on a longitudinal basis and you find out that the law of unintended consequences when you go too far, either way, in actions ends up being the governing law. The unintended consequences of what Murphy tried were eight more Republicans- seven more Republicans from Georgia in Congress within four years. The unintended consequence, I think, of the deeply divided partnership with the governor today and Republicans may do a similar thing at the ballot box. I think there's a limit to where—now that doesn't mean people are just going to go vote for Republicans.

Johnny Isakson: 01:55:45 But it means, if we can be smart enough in this election to recognize, regardless of what you think about it, the flag is not an issue upon which you build a party and can stick to the issues. If we can keep from going after the red meat and instead go after the tenderloin, which is where Georgians really care, that will play well. But if we succumb to what I call rearview mirror politics, you don't ever get where you're going if you're looking in the rearview mirror.

Mel Steely: 01:56:19 Well, you talked to them. I've talked to some of them.

Johnny Isakson: 01:56:21 I know.

Mel Steely: 01:56:22 It is hard. There are so attracted to that. They want it so bad.

Johnny Isakson: 01:56:26 It's easy.

Mel Steely: 01:56:26 Yeah, they can get into it and they're playing right into the hands.

Johnny Isakson: 01:56:31 Let me tell you something else too. I learned long time ago in politics and I've experienced it, when you succumb to the easy route, you always lose. When you take the difficult route, it may take you a while, but you almost always win. I'm going to tell you, and you remember this, when I was being bludgeoned in the under currents of politics in 1996 over the abortion issue, I finally sat at home one night and I said, you know? I am not going to let these people just explain my position on this issue for their political benefit anymore. I'm just going to run a commercial and put two hundred thousand dollars, and at that time it was close to my last two hundred thousand dollars. And my wife said, if you do, I want to sit there with you. My daughter said the same thing.
Johnny Isakson: 01:57:28 And we ran a commercial that said, look, I think abortion is horrible. And we ought to do everything we can to prevent it, but I'm not going to make a criminal out of my wife or my daughter or their doctor, which is exactly the way I feel about it, which is what the approach of the party was at the time. Well, everybody said, well, you're in it. They had a sheriff's deputy watching my house. Everybody said all these things were going to happen.

Mel Steely: 01:57:53 Nothing happened.

Johnny Isakson: 01:57:53 Shoot. People who disagreed with me said, I don't disagree with that really. I appreciate you explaining it. Same thing on the gay resolution in Cobb County.

Mel Steely: 01:58:04 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Johnny Isakson: 01:58:05 The county was getting torn apart and there I was trying to get the Olympics for the county, the Olympic softball. And those guys did that thing and I made this Kiwanis Club speech. And I said, well, I'm just going to tell it like it is. And I made that speech and I said, the Bill of Rights doesn't have an asterisk that says this doesn't apply to gay people. That was the speech. Everybody said, well, your career is finished. And the sheriff patrolled my house. Shoot, the exact opposite happened. People said, well, thank God somebody said. I don't like that lifestyle either, but it's theirs. It's not mine, and we should- you know.

Mel Steely: 01:58:39 Yeah.

Johnny Isakson: 01:58:39 So, probably the two toughest social issues which I've had to deal with in public life, I dealt with them the way I really felt. Which, when you let other people explain, it was certainly contrary to where a lot of people thought they felt. But, when I confronted it and got in front of a camera and said, okay, I respect your opinion, but here's what I think. All of a sudden people say, well, I don't know if I totally disagree with that.

Johnny Isakson: 01:59:05 It taught me a great lesson, which goes back to my point that there are some issues about which I think our party is right and can move the party in this state forward. And we ought to move on those issues and take them to the voters, and not sit there and say, well the flag gets everybody excited. Let's just run against the flag. Because if you do, you're going to harden your vote. You're going to harden his vote, and all the vote in the
middle is going to go to him because they think you're a fool to be making that such a big issue.

Mel Steely: 01:59:34 Some people that are hard on the flag are already against Barnes.

Johnny Isakson: 01:59:39 And the people that think he did the right thing are already for him. And he ain't changing any of them.

Mel Steely: 01:59:42 That's right.

Johnny Isakson: 01:59:43 And the people in the middle who think you think that's the biggest issue are going to go the other way.

Mel Steely: 01:59:48 On either side.

Johnny Isakson: 01:59:50 Absolutely.


Johnny Isakson: 01:59:51 Absolutely.

Mel Steely: 01:59:52 Our time has about run out. Next time we talk, we're going to look at Congress and all of that. But you know better than I do what you've covered, what you've done. I don't sometimes know what questions to ask, because there are things that have brought up that have happened in your career that I don't know about. Is there anything like that that you want to put in at this point that's important? That scholars, or journalists, or researchers later on who are going to be watching these tapes ought to know about?

Speaker 1: 02:00:19 And we've got three minutes left on the tape, so.

Johnny Isakson: 02:00:23 Well, I can tell you all I know in three minutes twice. No, I basically think- I think you've done an excellent job. I-