

## David L. Boren

The first person in state history to hold office as governor, U.S. Senator, and president of OU.

### Chapter 01 - 1:15

#### Introduction

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**Announcer:** David L. Boren has served Oklahoma as governor and U.S. Senator and became the thirteenth president of the University of Oklahoma. He is the first person in state history to have served in all three positions.

To begin his political career Boren served four terms in the Oklahoma House of Representatives. His campaign for Governor became known for the “Boren Broom Brigade” to demonstrate his pledge to “sweep out the Old Guard”. At age thirty-three, he was the youngest governor in the nation.

In 1979 he was elected to the U.S. Senate where he was the longest serving chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

Boren led the way in organizing the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence which recognizes students and teachers and helps establish private local foundations.

Boren became president of the University of Oklahoma in 1994 and initiated twenty major new programs since his inauguration while increasing the donor base from 18,000 to over 100,000 friends and alumni.

The Boren family has produced three generations of public service, his father Lyle Boren, served in the U.S. House of Representatives and his son Dan Boren served as an Oklahoma Representative.

Now listen to David Boren as he talks about his life of public service and heard on [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com).

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**Chapter 02 - 6:20**  
**Covered Wagon Days**

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**John Erling:** My name is John Erling and today's date is March 24, 2016. It happens to be a Thursday this year. David, would you give your full name, please?

**David Boren:** David Lyle Boren.

**JE:** Your date of birth?

**DB:** April 21, 1941.

**JE:** That makes your present age?

**DB:** Seventy-four. I'm glad I can say that for another month.

**JE:** Right. We're recording this here on the facilities of Voices of Oklahoma. Tell us where you were born.

**DB:** I was born in Washington, DC, in the old hospital across from Georgetown University Hospital, right on the edge of Georgetown. It's been turned into a group of condos since then but I was born there.

**JE:** Let's talk about your father first and your family and maybe a bit about the Borens coming to Oklahoma.

**DB:** Well, the Borens came to Oklahoma shortly after statehood. When they first came here by dad was about six years old. They came in a covered wagon. My grandfather was an entrepreneur of sorts. His family and my grandmother's family, my Grandmother Boren, who was a Weatherall, both families had come to Texas very early on. And my Grandfather Boren's father had come with Stephen Austin and the original colony to Texas. So that made me eligible to be a member of the Sons of the Republic of Texas, which I had a lot of fun saying to Texas audiences and then saying, "I realized the dream of every Texan when he got to come to Oklahoma." So he was an early Pioneer.

He had another great grandfather on my grandmother's side that had the first subscription school in East Texas too.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**DB:** So there were early educators, entrepreneurs. My grandfather Boren had the first ice cream parlor in Texas, that was one of his ideas was to have ice cream. I'm not sure how successful that was but among other things he had head of a construction company and by subscription they built levees along the main rivers of Texas. I've forgotten which river that he was building a levee. He had a farm too, he had a cotton farm. And while he was trying to build the levee a huge flood came along and wiped out the levee. And with it, wiped out everything that my grandfather had, all of his financing. He had nine children and the farm, which was mortgaged, and they finally just lost everything and came to Oklahoma in a covered wagon.

So they came across the Red River in a covered wagon with my dad had a little stick horse that he said he ran behind the covered wagon riding his stick horse. And I think spent the first night in Oklahoma at the wagon yard down around Waurika.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound). Your father's name?

**DB:** Was Lyle Boren.

**JE:** He went on to become?

**DB:** A congressman from Oklahoma. Well, he was a school teacher first at a rural school in Seminole County. Some of his students were older than he was. It was at an early age.

And then he ran for Congress in 1936, and got elected. We're never quite sure how old he was. We think he was twenty-five at the time but we're not sure because his birth certificate was lost and my grandmother, he told her to put his age in the family Bible that would make him eligible to run for Congress that year. So we're not sure if he was really twenty-four when he was elected to Congress or twenty-five, but he was the third youngest since Henry Clay at the time he was elected.

**JE:** But he was also a farmer and rancher at—

**DB:** He was a farmer and rancher and, in fact, after he left Congress and we came back home to Oklahoma, he operated cattle ranches fairly near Seminole and he was one of the founders of the Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association. So he has a long history there. And used to take me as a child around to go sign up all these ranchers in places like Woodward and all over the state, up in the Osage, just close friends of the Drummonds up there and others that were a part of the early formation of the Cattlemen's Association. So that was a fun experience.

**JE:** That was a cute story about he sold a cow for forty dollars to finance his first year in college.

**DB:** Yeah I think that's true.

**JE:** At East Central.

**DB:** That's right, at East Central, and that's where he met my mother. He was a student at East Central getting his teaching certificate. They used to have a practice school that was attached to East Central called Horace Mann School. And my mother, who had grown up in Maud, the schools weren't too adequate there at the time. My grandparents moved temporarily to Ada so she could go to the Horace Mann Teaching School at East Central. So she went to that high school at East Central and my dad turned out to be one of her teachers.

She said she always remembered at the end of the semester and she had kind of fallen for him. And he obviously had, he told her, "You can't enroll in my class next semester."

And she said, "Well, why?"

And he said, "Because I'm not allowed to date any of my students and I intend to date you." So that was the beginning of that.

**JE:** He attached himself to the Oklahoma Democratic party.

**DB:** Absolutely.

**JE:** How did that come? Was that a natural progression?

**DB:** Well, I think that probably the failing had been Democrats in Texas, and, you know, of course, Oklahoma was so overwhelmingly Democratic at that time. And he was very active. Then became active, even in college, in what was called the Young Democrats fraternity. We call it the Young Democrats today, college Young Democrats. He became very active in that. Virtually the whole state was Democratic, it was total one-party rule. The principle thing he believed in was giving equal opportunity to everybody. And he had a real sensitivity to those who were underprivileged.

And, after all, my grandfather had to become a tenant farmer. He had very successful but he lost everything. Came to Oklahoma, they lived over near Lawton, they lived in about seven or eight different locations. And he had all these kids and they had a struggle.

My father went to all these different high schools. And he said he can remember they used to take in stray kids too that they needed to feed and so on. My grandmother and my grandfather, they had to put water in the gravy and everything else. They just literally barely had enough to eat so—

**JE:** You're talking about the Great Depression time, aren't you?

**DB:** Yeah absolutely.

**JE:** Right.

**DB:** So this was the '30s, and Dad was first elected to Congress in 1936. A lot of it was sensitivity to people that had not had a lot of privileges. And I remember one rule in our household: You could never use the word *class*. You could never say, "He's middle class," "He's upper class," whatever, you could never use that word. He said, "Well, they have classes in Europe, places like Britain, they believe in the class structure. We're Americans, we believe everyone is equal, we don't believe in classes."

So if you said the word *class* at the dinner table you were asked to get up and leave the dinner table, literally. I was asked once to leave the dinner table when I misused that word. He had very strong feelings about that.

## Chapter 03 - 5:20

### President Roosevelt

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**John Erling:** He was a very convincing speaker, wasn't he?

**David Boren:** Yes he was.

**JE:** Yeah. And, as a matter of fact, he was called to campaign for Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

**DB:** He was and I still have some pictures of him on the back of the train, introducing President Roosevelt. He was very independent-minded, it was interesting, he was a very strong Roosevelt supporter, but at the same time, he was conservative, he was a conservative Democrat when it came to financial matters and other matters. Sometimes he didn't vote with Roosevelt, which caused some consternation from the President from time to time, but he never ceased supporting him, and, in fact, took me over to the White House when I was three years old and put me on the President's lap.

I wish I could claim that I remember being on Franklin D. Roosevelt's lap but I don't. Just vaguely remember it.

**JE:** You remember his aura or anything?

**DB:** All I can remember about him was he was very kindly in a wonderful warm way. As a child you sense that.

One of the things Dad always did with me is he shared his political experience with me. One of his very close friends was Sam Rayburn, the Speaker of the House for so many years. Very often he took me to see Mr. Rayburn when he went.

And then later on when I was in college and in high school, I would go out and Mr. Rayburn would tell my father to sit outside and wait on me, he had some things he wanted to discuss with me. And then he would let me come into his office. We had these long conversations and he would tell me what he was working on and what did I think?

Well, you can imagine, for a sixteen-year-old or seventeen-year-old, the Speaker of the House asking you these things in his ornate office in the capitol was quite an experience. And in fact, I tried to remember that all the rest of my life. When I got to the Senate a lot of days there would be FFA kids from Oklahoma, or other high school students and kids coming up. It would be a very busy day and my secretary would come in and say, "Well, there's this couple of young kids out here in the office that want to see you. But you don't have time to see them?"

I said, "No, I have to." I always thought in my mind, "Well, I want to pay Mr. Rayburn back for the time he spent with me as a kid."

**JE:** And I was reading where your father was that kind of person, would talk to everybody at every level, not class, level.

**DB:** Every level, yeah, he certainly wouldn't say class. See, that was another thing he taught me. I would go with him and we would be campaigning. And say, we'd see a mechanic under a truck or we'd see a farmer out in the field on his tractor. My dad would say, "We're going to go talk to this man," whether it was the mechanic or whether it was the farmer or whether it was the bank president. He'd take me in there too. He said, "Now when we get through I want you to tell me what you've learned from that person."

Because,” he said, “there’s not a person in this world you can’t learn something from because they all have different experiences than you do and different insights. So I want you to tell me what you learn from listening into our conversation. What did you learn from him or her?”

And it was really a wonderful lesson.

**JE:** You were known as a moderate Democrat.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** You spoke about your father being that.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** Is it where the seed of that was planted in you to be one?

**DB:** I think it probably is where the seed was planted and also kind of being a renegade, because I was a renegade certainly in the party. I remember my friend Frosty Troy once said about me on Halloween, “David Boren’s going to come masquerading as a Democrat.”

I got a lot of teasing about it, but I think that’s what I saw from him and I heard from him always was, “Think for yourself.” And the other thing that I took from this, including thinking about young people especially, he had a real special interest in young people, was he used to say, “If you’re ever going to run for political office keep your bags mentally packed.” What he meant by that was, “Don’t ever want to hang onto the office so badly that you cast a vote against your beliefs or your principles or you compromise yourself in a basic way. Don’t ever do that. Always have your bags packed that you can say to yourself, ‘I don’t need this job, I can just pack up and go home,’ because you won’t stay true to your principles if you want the job more than you want to stay true to them.”

It was a really good lesson, and I’ve had to say to myself many, many times, “Are your bags really mentally packed?” when you had to take a position that maybe wasn’t too popular.

**JE:** And since you went on to be a public servant, how many times you meant to say to yourself, “How blessed I was to have this father who taught me all these lessons”?

**DB:** I was so much. You know, he was just a person of complete integrity. Sometimes almost to the point of being rigid because he had such strong beliefs about things and he just would not compromise an inch.

My mother was pretty much the same way so I guess I came from hardheadedness naturally.

**JE:** I was going to ask you a bit about her, her personality.

**DB:** Well, she was very gentle. He could be gruff, certainly I never wanted to displease him because if I did I heard about it in a hurry. She was more, I would say, the indulgent mother who thought her son could never do any wrong.

You know, it’s been interesting, I love to read biography. So often behind a lot of these great people are mothers that just dote on their sons. Well, I have to say, my mother did

dote on me, and sometimes hid me from the wrath of my father over something I'd done. She was very kind, very, very kind, but she was also very strong-minded and stubborn when it came to something she really believed in or thought should be done.

**JE:** Siblings of yours?

**DB:** I have a sister. My sister, Susan, who is seven years younger, who claims that I was a bossy brother because I was so much older and that I've never changed my ways. But she lives in Washington, DC.

## Chapter 04 - 4:45

### Johnson / Truman

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**John Erling:** Your parents were married, they moved to Washington, DC.

**David Boren:** Yes.

**JE:** Sam Rayburn took him under his wing, as you said. And he had a—

**DB:** Yes he did.

**JE:** ...fellow congressman push for a bill that created the National Cancer Institute.

**DB:** Yes. The National Cancer Institute, which became the National Institutes of Health, NIH. He was one of the two original authors of that bill that created NIH. He was very proud of that. The other congressman, as I recall, was from Alabama, and he had a friend who was dying of cancer. And so he talked to my father about it and they introduced this bill.

**JE:** Lyndon Johnson was instrumental in your father's training.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** And John Nance Garner.

**DB:** Yes, John Nance Garner, and I have pictures of my grandparents with John Nance Garner. And Lyndon Johnson and my dad were young people working for a federal agency—I've forgotten which federal agencies—during the Depression, right at the end of the Depression. And they were living in the same boarding house in Washington.

Then Dad went home and ran for Congress and got elected in 1936. The very next year the congressman died in Johnson's district, he went home and got elected. So Ladybird Johnson and my mother were young congressional wives. They both had just gotten married. They remained friend throughout their lifetimes, and Lyndon was very close to my father and kind of became one of my patrons. Lyndon Johnson and Senator Kerr, both figured very much in my beginning in politics and opportunities given to me.

**JE:** Interestingly, you lived in Washington, DC, near the National Cathedral.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** And you made friends at that point from many different backgrounds, I would imagine.

**DB:** Yes, yes I did.

**JE:** Living during the war years there, was their fear of enemy attacks because it's the capitol?

**DB:** There was, I mean, we had to roll down the shades, the blackout curtains and so forth, in case there was ever an air raid warning or anything like that. You know, I have only vague memories as a child of those times, but I definitely do remember, I remember the blackout curtains. I remember certain events happening. I remember we had to drive back and forth to Oklahoma at that time. We were halfway back to Oklahoma from Washington when we learned the President had died, Roosevelt. So we had to turn around and go back. There are just certain of those things you remember.

But I certainly remember the war. You know, you, you're in the middle of a war.

**JE:** Did your father get involved with Harry Truman in '48 election?

**DB:** Yes he did. That was a wonderful experience. I kind of relived it not too long ago because Molly and I decided, well, we'd been up to Hyde Park recently, to the presidential library at Hyde Park Roosevelt Library. And we said, "Here's the Truman Library so close, five-hour drive or something. We haven't ever gone up to Independence, Missouri."

So we just drove up there for the weekend and went to the library, the museum, and it was wonderful.

Dad was very close to Harry Truman, in fact, they played cards. And Speaker Rayburn had a hideaway where about a dozen of them played Gin Rummy all the time. My dad was one of them, he was kind of the mascot because he was the young one of the group. And he said that he was there the day the call came to Harry Truman from the White House, telling him that the President had died.

Then a very close relationship. So when he whistle-stopped through Oklahoma, by then Dad had left Congress. He'd been defeated in the 1946 elections, Dad had come back and we were living in Seminole and I was in the first or second grade. But Harry Truman came through Seminole on the whistle-stop tour. So school let out. Seminole has about ten thousand people but there were fifty thousand people there.

And my dad was on the train with Truman. In fact, since it was Dad's hometown, he introduced Harry Truman in Seminole. He was going on to Holdenville and Wewoka and McAlester, I think, on the train.

So when they were up there on the train, I was just there with my class at the school. Why, a Secret Service man came down and picked me up, I mean, literally lifted me up and carried me back to the train and told my teacher, "Don't worry about him, I'll take care of him." So they put me on the train.

Dad was up there and he'd said, "There's my son down there," and President Truman said, "Bring him up here." He insisted. President Truman said, "Well, I want him to ride with me."

You know, I rode all the way from Seminole to Wewoka to Holdenville on the train with the President. So the President came back and wanted me to come sit by him in the presidential car and he wouldn't let anybody else in there. "I just want to talk to David." You know, he was just enjoying this break, I'm sure, from the campaign, but to me it was just overwhelming to have the President ...

And so when we were at the Truman Library there's a little place where you can punch a button and all the places he went on the whistle-stop tour, and you can hear part of the speech he made at that particular town. So I could hear the speech again he gave in Seminole, Oklahoma, in that campaign. And it brought back all those memories.

I was around President Truman several times.

**JE:** And you were seven years old then in '48.

**DB:** Yes, yes.

**JE:** So that's—

**DB:** Seven years old, seven years old.

**JE:** ...all meaningful that you can remember that.

## Chapter 05 - 3:00

### Music-Artist-Religion-Politics

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**John Erling:** Three of your uncles were ministers, right?

**David Boren:** That is correct.

**JE:** Two with Church of Christ and one was Methodist.

**DB:** One was Methodist. My aunt was something of a Christian Scientist and there were eight of the siblings still living when we had family reunions. When I was a child we had family reunions. So they had incredible religious discussions. And of course, my Methodist minister uncle, Uncle James, he was also one of the first presidents of Southwestern at Weatherford and started the pharmacy school at Weatherford. He was Methodist, and then I had two uncles that were Church of Christ ministers. But they all would get in these terrible religious fights and get mad at each other.

The parents would be saying, "We're leaving," and the car doors would slam and the family reunions would end. But they were lively places.

And then, of course, my Aunt Mae was a songwriter and her son, Hoyt Axton, was a great singer.

**JE:** Her name was?

**DB:** Mae Boren Axton. She wrote "Heartbreak Hotel" and a lot of other things.

**JE:** Elvis Presley's first hit.

**DB:** Elvis Presley's first hit. And I, of course, heard a lot of stories about that.

**JE:** And you had a famous cousin too, Hoyt Axton.

**DB:** Oh yeah, Hoyt Axton, and then James Boren, who is a humorist. And then I had another cousin who was the first art director of the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City. He failed at the Cowboy Artists of America and started the Kerrville Art Museum.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**DB:** For cowboy artists. So at family reunions we had art showings, we had family members that were artists. Unfortunately, I had none of those talents. We had singings and performances by Hoyt and other people. And then we had religious discussions. Those were the three things. And then, of course, there was politics, which certainly was a lively topic of discussion because my Uncle Dale bolted the Democrat party. And he was the State Chairman of Democrats for Eisenhower, much to my father's dismay.

So we had political arguments, theological discussions, country-western concerts, and art showings, all at the family reunions. It was a real three-ring circus.

**JE:** Was there any thought in your head that you too become a minister?

**DB:** Well, I suppose at one time I thought I might, I thought I might.

**JE:** Was there any time early on that you enjoyed the political world and you could see yourself drifting that way?

**DB:** Yes. I really decided probably when I was six years old or seven years old that I wanted to run for office. And do what my dad did. Because I went with him. I made my first speech for him on the radio when I was five years old. We used to paint rocks and things because we didn't have enough money for posters and other things. I would go with him everywhere and listen to his speeches. And those were the days too when they had sound trucks and you'd go into small towns.

Dad would get out on the sidewalk with a microphone and the sound truck and make speeches right there impromptu on the main streets of these little towns. It was fascinating and I found the people fascinating.

That was the most interesting thing to me was just all the kinds of people you met and how he seemed to be able to talk to and relate—going back to his lesson of you always learn something from everybody—he always seemed so interested in every person he met. And I think genuinely so.

**JE:** Yeah.

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**Chapter 06 - 3:30****Fear of Speaking**

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**John Erling:** Now this is hard to believe, but when you were in high school in Debate, you had a hard time talking before an audience.

**David Boren:** Oh I had a terrible time talking in front of an audience. And I had a great high school debate coach who was also the principal of our high school, H. B. Mitchell. From our little town in Seminole he had produced more national champion debaters than anybody else in the country, any other coach. And, in fact, the National Debate trophy, even today, is named the H. B. Mitchell Trophy.

So I took Debate class. I was just terrified at the thought of speaking, and speaking in front of a group, the class even, so he finally, near the end of the semester, told me, "You're going to get an F if you don't get up and speak."

**JE:** Oh because during the course you—

**DB:** I'd never spoken. I just sat there while everyone else got up there. I was too terrified to get up there. So he made me do it. He broke the log jam, I guess, but I was still very shy. I never would let my parents come to hear me speak in debate tournaments or anything like that.

Even later, I did let them hear me a few times when I first ran for office, but even the first time I ran for office, I'd gotten over the fear of public speaking, but the fear of just going and meeting strangers and asking them to vote for me, I was terrified of that.

I remember I was twenty-five years old, running for the legislature. I decided I'd go over to Wewoka where my grandparents lived. There was a little road out the edge of town that just had four or five houses along it and I thought, "Well, I'll start here." I literally sat in the car for forty-five minutes, at least, maybe longer, with my brochures and all, going over and over in my head what I would say to the person that answered the door. I was so worried about it.

A lady answered the door. She was cooking chocolate chip cookies and she said that she was a friend of my aunt's. So she said, "I'm already going to vote for you. Come on in here and tell me about your campaign." You know, I didn't even have to give my little spiel. She had me come in and she gave me a chocolate chip cookie and a glass of milk.

Well, it was about the fourth house before anyone turned their dog loose on me and by then I had my confidence built up.

But years later when I was governor, I was coming from Wewoka to Tulsa, just going down the road. The Highway Patrol trooper was driving and we passed her house. I had not seen her ever seen I'd been there that first day when I was running for office. And

that had been ten years or something. So I thought, “I wonder if she’s still alive. I wonder if she’s still there.”

So I said, “Would you pull into this driveway, the driveway?”

And here came this wonderful woman, she didn’t look that much older, she still looked great. And she had on her apron and she was making cookies. And she said, “Well, Governor, what are you doing here?”

And I said, “Well, I stopped to thank you for something.”

She said, “What’s that?”

And I said, “I don’t think I’d be Governor today if it weren’t for you. Because if the first door I’d knocked on had been some mean person who slammed the door in my face, I’m not sure I’d gone on to the second house. And you were so wonderful, you built up my courage to go on and campaign these other houses. And that broke the barrier of my shyness to go approach people.”

So she really gave me a special gift.

**JE:** Anybody listening who is shy should learn from you on that, despite the fact that you were around a father who was so gregarious—

**DB:** I know, very gregarious.

**JE:** And a public speaker.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** But yet you had that shyness in you.

**DB:** I had a lot of shyness. And you know, I tell students that today, you know, “Don’t think you can’t go ahead and do these things just because you’re shy. Or hold back because you can get over it.”

Now everyone is saying, “We wish Mr. Mitchell had not broken his barrier of public speaking. He didn’t know when to stop.” And I’m sure other people say, “Maybe it would be better if he were a little more shy.”

## Chapter 07 - 1:45

### It Takes a Village

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**John Erling:** I understand the publisher of the *Seminole Producer*, Milt Phillips—

**David Boren:** Milt Phillips.

**JE:** ...influenced you to pursue a career in public service.

**DB:** Yes, you know, I was so lucky. And in Seminole at that time, there were some just remarkable, remarkable people. And Milt Phillips was one of them. He was the typical

small town, crusading editor. Wasn't afraid to write about anything. Very controversial, kept up with world events and everything that was going on. He encouraged me when I won the Rhodes scholarship when I was going to be at Oxford, he dubbed me the Foreign Correspondent of the *Seminole Producer*. So he asked me to write a column called "Okie at Oxford," if you can imagine.

And I traveled in a lot of countries at that time, in the Middle East and Europe. He always ran my columns and my reflections on where I'd gone. And then when I came back home he did encourage me to go ahead and get involved in politics.

The other person in our town was our mayor, Fred Adwan, the father of Alex Adwan, who was for many years the editor of the editorial page of the *Tulsa World*. Alex had been my Sunday school teacher. Fred was an older man who was in politics, a very interesting man. He spent a lot of time talking with me too and encouraging me and sharing thoughts with me.

You know, small towns, particularly at that time, I'm sure it's still true, had just some wonderful people of real ability and real insight and they were willing to spend time with the children of the community. You know, I think sometimes it's why I'm passionate about children. We talk about *our children*, well, I think children belong to all of us as a community, the whole community ought to take care of children.

I've just been so lucky to have had so many people who took the time to mentor me and help me. It really was a village. The book, *It Takes a Village to Raise a Child*, and it's really true.

**JE:** Yeah.

**DB:** And at that time there were a lot of people in Seminole that took that on themselves.

## Chapter 08 - 4:18

### Desegregation

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**John Erling:** In Seminole and back in the '50s, this state was a segregated state.

**David Boren:** Yes.

**JE:** And so—

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** ...I believe while in high school—

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** ...you experienced a desegregation—

**DB:** I did.

**JE:** ...of public schools.

**DB:** They desegregated the high school when I in school. I think I was a sophomore in high and it was a traumatic occasion. Again, I tell my students this, "You can't imagine what it was like back then." I went through the desegregation of the high school. I participated in the first desegregated high school debate in Oklahoma. I was in the first desegregated All-State band in Oklahoma. Living through that in an interesting way.

And I supposed I'd grown up with some of the same feelings, they were sort of ingrained into you from the culture at the time. That all seemed very natural back then. But I remember someone called me the day they were going to desegregate the schools and said, "We're going to boycott the school today." All the white kids. We were going to go demonstrate with placards and so on, "Don't desegregate our school," and then we were going to go home, everyone was going to go home.

My father overheard me talking on the telephone and he said, "What do you intend to do?"

And I said, "Well, they're going to all demonstrate against this."

He said, "Oh no you're not. If I have to lock you in your room you're not going to go up there and do that. You'll regret it the rest of your life if you ever do anything about that." He said, "Can you imagine how scared those children are, those other kids that are coming for the first time to a white school from the other side of the railroad tracks? Can you imagine how they feel? You're not going to hurt your feelings and you're not going to be a part of that. Or you're not going to school. I'll lock you up here. I'll stay here and guard you."

So I didn't demonstrate and I did go to school and I stayed in school because, for one thing, I was too terrified not to if my father ordered me to do that. But how farsighted on his part was that?

And then when we participated in the first debate, Mr. Mitchell played a similar role. We learned, we'd drawn—at that time I think it was called Muskogee Emanuel High School. And we were to debate them and it was at East Central University. The other members of the debate team said, "We're not going to do it."

So Mr. Mitchell just said, "Well, if you boys are not going to do it you're off the debate team because I never forfeit a debate." And so that was it. He just told us right then and there.

Then we got through debating, the custom, of course, is to go across and shake hands with the other debaters. Well, our team decided we weren't going to shake hands. I'm not sure they were any more enthusiastic about shaking hands either. And the audience was divided on racial lines, the parents sitting out there. The debate ended and it was time to shake hands and we were still standing, not going to shake hands.

I'll never forget, I looked across and there was the debater from the other school. He looked so hurt, I'll never forget the look in his eye, and I thought, "I have to go shake his hand." So we shook hands and then everybody shook hands and then it ended.

You remember those things and, of course, later in life I've had to deal with various incidents on the campus and otherwise. And the society we live in, it's such a different time. And now I'm shocked when I see it, you know, and it doesn't take me one minute to know right from wrong where that's concerned, you have to call it out and stop it and have zero tolerance for any of it.

So I've seen the whole transition in our state from the very beginning of the times changing. But it was very rigid. The Little Dixie area, and we were on the edges of it in Seminole County, we were on the edge of Little Dixie, and especially in Little Dixie in Oklahoma, segregation was as rigid as it was in Mississippi, back in that period of time.

**JE:** One of your professors, George Henderson—

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** ...I've interviewed for Voices of Oklahoma.

**DB:** Yes, yes.

**JE:** Talks about going down to Little Dixie and after his speech was driving and a car was following him—

**DB:** Yes, yes.

**JE:** ...and he really thought he was going to give his life up for that in that belief.

**DB:** Yes, yes, yes he did. Of course, he has become such a dear friend to me over time. We've gotten to know each other years ago, working with underprivileged kids when I was a teacher at OBU. We've been friends a long time, ever since he came to Oklahoma. But he's told me that story. He was fearful for his life and, of course, they became the first people of color to buy property in Norman, Oklahoma, and break the race barrier of that all-white town, at that time.

Again, it comes full circle because as I've had to deal with different things at the university, how fortunate I have been to have him as a friend and advisor through it all. It has just enriched my life greatly.

## Chapter 09 - 4:10

### John Kennedy / Robert Frost

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**John Erling:** So your father takes a job in Washington.

**David Boren:** Yes.

**JE:** And then you have to change high schools.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** And then you went to which high school?

**DB:** Bethesda Chevy Chase High School.

**JE:** I believe in your junior year.

**DB:** Yes, a large public high school.

**JE:** And you were on the debate team there, I would imagine.

**DB:** Yes I was.

**JE:** And I suppose, a writer too?

**DB:** I did, I was editor of the school paper. Having grown up in a town with Milt Phillips, the Crusading Editor, I decided to become the Crusading Editor. So I wrote lots of editorials against our student government and other things that later the president of the student government, who became a federal judge, he still always remembers me as the pesky newspaperman.

**JE:** As editor of the newspaper, which was the *Tattler*, you invited a young senator at that time—

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** ...to speak at your commencement.

**DB:** Yes I did. It was a remarkable thing. I was on the committee that picked the graduation speaker. I invited John Kennedy to come, he was not yet president, he was about to run for president. He agreed to come, so he spoke at our commencement.

And then our baccalaureate speaker was Robert Frost, the great poet, who I had gotten to know one day when I saw him walking down a street in Washington. He took daily constitutional walks. He was Poet in Residence at the Library of Congress.

So I used to go park my car in advance and pretend to bump into him. He got wise to me and he'd say, "Why don't you walk with me for awhile?" He would recite his poetry to me and it was a great experience, so I really got to know him.

Then one day I asked him, I said, "I've been asked to ask you if you'd come."

And he said, "Yes I will."

So we had John Kennedy and Robert Frost, that was quite a duo for a high school commencement ceremony.

**JE:** Yes. You graduate in '59.

**DB:** 'Fifty-nine.

**JE:** Thoughts about college? Your father probably wanted you to be a cattle rancher.

**DB:** My father did want me to be a cattle rancher but I think he'd kind of given up on that. But I did learn a lot of good lessons. I learned how to build barbed wire fence, and I learned how to do a lot of things because when other kids were getting off to the Saturday movies my dad was packing a lunch pail for me, and off to the ranch we went. So I learned how to

brand cattle and do a lot of other things, but I did it enough to know that that's not what I wanted to do the rest of my life.

Molly and I now have a little forty acres we live on. We get kind of claustrophobic in town. We love the space. And I think the love of the land came from my dad. But no, I did not want to be a rancher.

**JE:** Which school did you select?

**DB:** I went off to Yale. My father had to know, well, he had this bias but, of course, having gone to Yale and then after that I kind of picked it up myself, but he said, "You can go anywhere. I'll pay your tuition anywhere but you can't go to Harvard." I don't know why he thought that but he said, "They're just too snobbish, you can't go there."

**JE:** Yale wasn't?

**DB:** It probably went back to his idea of the classes, but Yale wasn't so it was okay. So I debated between OU, because I really wanted to come home to Oklahoma. I still had most of my friends in Oklahoma and Yale.

And finally, a lawyer in Washington, an elderly lawyer who had gone to Yale, talked me into at least going up there and "See how you like it."

So I did, and I liked it and I stayed.

**JE:** You probably had some professors there that really that you connected with.

**DB:** Yes, yes I did. And that high school, Bethesda Chevy Chase, was a wonderful high school and it sent students to all the great colleges and universities of the country. I had teachers, including my journalism teacher, my English teacher, who encouraged me to go to Yale, see if I didn't like it okay.

**JE:** I think you were elected as Speaker of the Yale Political Union.

**DB:** I was.

**JE:** At one of your first campaigns then?

**DB:** I guess one of my first campaigns, yeah. That was an interesting experience. My little brother, so to speak, the guy I mentored, who was a couple of years younger than me in the Yale Political Union was a fellow named John Kerry, who became Secretary of State, and he was my mentee, so to speak, in the Yale Political Union. So we had a lot of experiences there.

Again, as I said, I was a pretty conservative person and I became very friendly with William F. Buckley Jr., who had graduated from Yale and he had a home fairly near Yale, it was out in Connecticut in the countryside. I used to get invited to Sunday lunches at his house.

**JE:** He was a leading conservative thinker at the time.

**DB:** Leading conservative thinker, so I got pretty well acquainted with him and had a lot of interesting experiences with him. And he introduced me to Barry Goldwater, for example. So I had a pretty strong run across the spectrum of politics.

**Chapter 10 – 7:15****Sen. Robert Kerr**

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**John Erling:** In the presidential campaign in 1960, Senator Robert Kerr asked you to get some publicity among the Yale students?

**David Boren:** Yes, Senator Kerr called me. Senator Kerr would always help me get my summer jobs. He had a great influence on my life because he just sort of took me under his wing and he helped me in different ways. And got me jobs in the summertime when I was in college.

So he said, “You know, we need to get a lot of publicity.” He said, “I want you to get in some of the national press. I want you to start a Yale chapter for Lyndon Johnson.”

I said, “Senator Kerr, everybody up here is for Kennedy and the Ivy League in New England, you know. And I don’t know what I’ll do but I’ll try.” So I found a few students from Texas and Oklahoma. We formed a chapter of Yale for Johnson. We put up posters and we made a lot of noise. We managed to attract the attention of a fellow who was a stringer for *Time* magazine, so he wrote a big article in *Time*. And in a surprising move there’s a big Johnson movement in an Ivy League school.

Senator Kerr was thrilled to death. He said, “I told you you could get it done. You’ve gotten this publicity in *Time* about Yale for Johnson.” We had about twenty members, probably. And that’s all. But he was very pleased about it.

And then later on, because I sort of became known then as a Johnson person up in the Kennedy country. Well, Kennedy, of course, won the election. Johnson, Vice President. So when I called to get my summer job back that I’d had in the building next to the White House the summer before, the fellow said, “I’m sorry, but we’re only taking Kennedy people.”

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**DB:** So I called Senator Kerr and he said, “They told you what?” And I told him that and he said, “What’s your phone number? You sit right there by the phone, don’t you move.”

Within fifteen minutes the guy who’d told me I didn’t have the job back called me and said, “Well, we made a mistake. Yes we’d love to have you back again.”

So Senator Kerr intervened on my behalf several times. And when I was like nine years old, I was his page at the convention when he ran for President. And I guess that was in 1952. I was sitting with him when he heard the roll call. He only got about twenty-five votes, or something like that, and folded up the campaign.

I was around him a lot. Sometimes when I was with him he’d say, “Now let me tell you, here’s how you do politics.” And I remember one time he said, “I’m getting a County

Chairman from Le Flore County.” I’ve got him on the phone and they exchanged greetings, and he said, “How are you coming on that appreciation dinner for me down there?”

And the guy was saying, “Well, we’re kind of making progress.”

He said, “I’ll supply all the beef, you supply the appreciation.” So he supplied all the money to pay for it and all the food and everything else. And he said, “David, you just have to have your own appreciation events or otherwise they might forget about you.”

**JE:** So d—

**DB:** So I dusted some of those off. When I ran for the Senate, after I’d been Governor, all the counties where I’d done something, built a bridge or fixed the road or done to the school or whatever, I’d have big ads like, “Such-and-such a county is not forgotten. That David Boren did this for the county.” And I’d remind them of all the things I did. So, “We appreciate him,” and, of course, I paid for the ad and I always thought, “God bless Senator Kerr for teaching me how to do it.” And he did.

**JE:** It didn’t hurt to have the most powerful senator in the United States, at that time, on your side.

**DB:** He was, he was definitely the most powerful senator in the United States. So that’s how I got my job back and other things.

**JE:** If he walked in this room, is he a gregarious guy?

**DB:** Very outgoing.

**JE:** Yeah.

**DB:** And he always wore a bright red suspenders, great big, wide, bright red suspenders. He was a really colorful, brilliant person. He had a first rate mind. He didn’t get where he got without being a very smart man. He was very gregarious.

**JE:** He and Kennedy were friends?

**DB:** They were friends. Kerr was so gregarious and outgoing that he sort of hid his competitive street, but he also is very competitive. He always wanted to win. There was a story that after he got quite wealthy and they had the Kerr-McGee Oil Company and so on, Senator Kerr had his own plane. He liked to play Gin Rummy with people that were with him flying on the plane and he’d have them circle until he got ahead. He’d never let them land till he got ahead in the game. He was a very competitive man. Very nice man, certainly to me.

**JE:** You had the House Speaker, Carl Albert from Little Dixie.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** On your side, I mean, he urged you to run for Congress.

**DB:** He did.

**JE:** This line-up of people that you had, obviously they saw something very special in you.

**DB:** I don’t know.

**JE:** They didn’t do it just because. But you had him too, Carl Albert.

**DB:** I did. And he just was a wonderful friend. It was like Mr. Rayburn. He would always spend time with me alone, if I went out to his office he would always talk to me about what he was working on. But I learned pretty early on that he liked to work in his office on Sunday afternoons. So when I was home from college and so on, I would go out on Sunday afternoons. I'm sure he was overjoyed to see me, seeing as he was trying to catch up on his work, that I would come by and want to say hello to him on a Sunday afternoon. I knew I could catch him if I did that.

He had a great administrative assistant, Charlie Ward, who ended up living in Tulsa in his last years. Charlie had been his administrative assistant for years and years. Very often the two of them would be there and they would both talk to me.

And when I was Carl's campaign manager they redistricted him into my county and my legislative district after I got in the legislature and became part of his district. I was his campaign manager in his eight new counties and I used to drive him around all the time. He was wonderful too. We would go to these schools, little, tiny schools on gravel roads, not even on paved roads. And, of course, he'd gone to a school like, Bugtussle, and he would say to me, "Okay, we're going into this school and we'll have questions and answers. I want you to pick out which kid you think is promising to be a future leader, a future public official." We would do that from town to town, school to school. A lot of just wonderful experiences with him.

He said, "I want you to promise to run to succeed me some day," and that was always my plan. But it never worked out at the right time. Of course, I was never going to run against Carl Albert, my goodness. I got so mad I ran for Governor, that's really what happened, with what was going on.

But Charlie Ward figured in my life very strongly too because—and they both said to me, "We want you to promise to run for Congress."

I said, "I'll only do it on one condition, and that is, if Charlie Ward will come and be my administrative assistant." So he had retired when I finally ran for the Senate. He'd been retired five or six years. I called him up and I said, "Charlie, are you a man of your word?"

And he said, "What do you mean?" He got kind of angry on the phone.

I said, "Well, you promised that if I ever ran for Congress, if I ever got to Washington, you'd be my administrative assistant." So I said, "Will you?"

So he did, he came out of retirement and he was my administrative assistant for six, eight years.

**JE:** Let me circle back twice. We should point out, you were talking about Senator Kerr and then McGee, that KRMG in Tulsa is Kerr-McGee.

**DB:** Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives), it is, I didn't realize that.

**JE:** Yeah. And Senator Kerr, when he wanted his radio station to be set up, he wanted a clear channel radio station covering everybody day and night.

**DB:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JE:** And they said, “Well, you can’t have that because KBOO is clear channel.”

**DB:** Right.

**JE:** So he said, “Well, then give me daytime, full coverage,” and then it was twenty-five thousand at night. And then he said, “But beam the signal to Oklahoma City so that everybody will hear my radio station.”

**DB:** Well, as I say, he always had a plan, he always had a plan.

## Chapter 11 - 4:10

### Martin Luther King

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**John Erling:** When you were in Yale, the subject of civil disobedience came up.

**David Boren:** Yes.

**JE:** And you had a problem with it because it meant breaking the law.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** Tell us about an experience.

**DB:** Oh.

**JE:** You were seated at a luncheon next to Martin Luther King.

**DB:** I was and William Sloan Coffin, our chaplain at the university was a famous freedom writer and so on, in the South at the time. And I had told him I didn’t believe in civil disobedience, take a stand but don’t break the law. So he seated me next to Martin Luther King at lunch ’cause he wanted Martin Luther King to convince me I was wrong.

So here’s Martin Luther King, and you talk about patience, and here was I, this college kid at that time, thought he knew a whole lot more than he knew. So I proceeded to tell Martin Luther King, of all people, that I didn’t believe in civil disobedience. And, you know, I’m sure his patience was really tried but he spent a lot of time just talking to me about it and why, and why I was wrong, and so on and so forth. Of course, at the time we still left the dinner table he had not convinced me, but today, I think he was absolutely right. And peaceful civil disobedience was absolutely the only thing that could have worked at that point in time.

So I had a whole change of view about a lot of things. But you know, there are times when I have students, I’m sure it wouldn’t surprise, who think they know a great deal and maybe think they know more than they know, just like me.

I remember one student who came in one day in the office. And my secretary was just, “Why are you spending so much time with that kid?” I spent probably two and a half

hours arguing with me about something because he came in to tell me why I was wrong and he was right. I just kept on and kept on. My secretary, "Why did you spend so much time with him?"

And I thought back and I thought about Martin Luther King and people like that who spent time with me. Just think of the patience they had to spend time with me, you know. The least I can do is have patience with some of these people who think they know everything too, just like I thought at the time.

**JE:** After speaking with Martin Luther King, did you feel this man is special? Or articulate?  
Or—

**DB:** Yes I did.

**JE:** ...did you see something?

**DB:** Yes I think he was articulate but I think, you know, he was a very forceful man and fearless and very blunt but you did have the feeling that there was a real kindness at the core of him. As I said, I'm not sure I would have had the patience that he had with me. I'm sure he just wanted to reach over and knock me out of the chair a time or two, but he didn't, he was really very patience. I did sense something special about him, and of course, as I grew older and as I read more of what he'd said, I came to appreciate him so much.

And it led to one of the votes that I cast in the Senate that, probably one of the first really difficult votes I cast. And that was creating the National Martin Luther King holiday. Here I'm the college kid seated next to Martin Luther King, who was disagreeing with Martin Luther King. So comes the proposal for a Martin Luther King holiday. My mail ran 900 to 1 against it from the state, 900 to 1 against it. There was something like a hundred thousand that wrote me against it from Oklahoma. But I voted for it. I voted for it because I'd come to admire all of the qualities about him that I first disagreed with when I was a college student. So I'd come full circle.

I wrote an eight-page letter back to all the people that wrote me against it, explaining why, and explaining how I thought it was very important for us to be an inclusive society. Besides his value of nonviolence and all the other things. That African Americans had to feel that they were full-fledged Oklahomans and Americans. And it wasn't up to us.

Some people wrote me and said, "Oh, it should be Booker T. Washington Day," or something else. But I said, "No, this group of people will feel included. They have to pick the person that they can most closely identify with and admire." So it was interesting.

Several of them wrote me back, say I wrote a hundred thousand letters, I maybe got ten thousand back. Some of them said, "You've convinced me." And the other half said, "You're worse than I thought." So I never convinced them, but interesting that that was one of my first controversial votes.

**JE:** The state newspapers, how did they treat that decision?

**DB:** I don't think they were too favorable. I can't remember specifically, but not too favorable.

**JE:** Yeah.

**DB:** Most of the paper weren't.

**JE:** Wow.

## Chapter 12 - 4:40

### Oxford

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**John Erling:** You were so active at Yale, the Skull and Bones, a secret society.

**David Boren:** Um-hmm (affirmative). That secret society.

**JE:** You met Prescott Bush, the father of George H. W. Bush.

**DB:** Yes. He took me under his wing when I was a college senior. He had been at Skull and Bones and, of course, George Bush Sr. had been at Skull and Bones. And George Bush Sr., at that time, was, I'm trying to think what he was doing then, maybe our ambassador to China or something, but it was before he was President. So Prescott Bush, while he was still alive, said, "I want you and my son to get acquainted with each other."

So it was his father who introduced George Bush Sr. to me.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**DB:** And that was the beginning of a long very close friendship.

**JE:** So you graduate Yale summa cum laude, by the way.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** And bachelor's degree in History.

**DB:** Yes. That's right.

**JE:** Then you planned to go back to Oklahoma, go to law school.

**DB:** Law school, right.

**JE:** But then something happened in the way here.

**DB:** Well, one of my professors at Yale said, "You should apply for the Rhodes scholarship." And I didn't know too much about it and I'd never had that ambition before, to be a Rhodes scholar. But he said, "You really should, you just really should go back and interview for the Rhodes scholarship."

So I said, "Okay, I will." I think it's because I was so relaxed about it, it wasn't, "Oh I've just got to win this," it was something I just sort of said, "Okay, I'll do it."

And then I got back, Dr. George Cross, President of OU at the time, who later became a great mentor to me, he was chairman of the committee. The minute I got into the interviews, however, I did become competitive. I thought, "Well, I'm here, I might

as well win this thing.” So I was doing my best to pass the interview. So I did win the scholarship and had the chance to go to Oxford to school.

**JE:** And then we should point out, it was another Oklahoman, matter of fact, he was from Tulsa, Jim Woolsey [Robert James Woolsey, Jr.].

**DB:** Jim Woolsey.

**JE:** Also was selected.

**DB:** Yes, that’s one of the few times, I think only twice, in Oklahoma history we had two in one year. Usually the don’t pick two from the same state, but we both got selected in the regional competition and became good friends. He later became the CIA Director and the Secretary of the Navy and other things, and so later on as a senator, while he was getting all these appointments, I always had to appear at his confirmation hearings and testify in his behalf. We’ve been good friends.

**JE:** At Oxford, living conditions? Are they good? What would you—

**DB:** Primitive, primitive living conditions, yeah. When I was at Oxford at least, they’d never heard of central heat and air and anything like that. My room at the college, which was founded in 1263, had been occupied by Adam Smith, the economist, the famous Invisible Hand. I always laughed, the walls were about two feet thick, stone. All we had was a little one-bar electric fire. It was quite cold in England and very damp in the winter, and you just froze to death. So I said, “They hadn’t done anything to the rooms since Adam Smith lived there.”

There are also no plumbing facilities where I lived. You had to walk all the way across a huge quadrangle to another building where the plumbing facilities were. It was not a very convenient place to live but it was a very interesting experience and a very broadening one.

**JE:** You meet people there that you continue to know beyond?

**DB:** Yes, yes I did. Funny things happened too. The person who became my best friend was from Australia. He was an Australian Rhodes scholar. He went back home and he had been an ambassador and other things. At the end of his career he was appointed head of the equivalent of the CIA of Australia. And I, at that time, was Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Interestingly, the fellow that I rode with on the crew at Oxford, which was sort of the junior varsity, it wasn’t the first boat, but it was kind of like an intramural crew, he later became the head of MI5, the British Intelligence Service.

So the head of the Australian CIA and a former staffer of mine was head of the American CIA, and the head of the British MI5, they used to all meet with each other, along with the Canadian Intelligence Chief. The four of them met once a year, off at some island. You know, they’d go to Tahiti or someplace out of the way to meet.

One day I was in my office and the RCI Director called me and said, “I have two friends of yours on the phone. We’re here, you know, the four of us.” Canada, Australia, Britain, and the United States were all meeting. Three out of the four, I knew them all, so you talk about a small world where you have the four intelligent services, the heads of three of them I’d known very, very well. It was really coincidental.

**JE:** You could have stayed on for a doctorate degree but you chose to move on.

**DB:** Right.

**JE:** I think you were also recruited to write for *Time* magazine.

**DB:** I was recruited to write for *Time*.

**JE:** But you came home to the OU law school.

**DB:** I kind of always wanted to do that. And I kind of promised Dr. Cross I would do that. And Dean Sneed, who was Dean of the law school at that time.

## Chapter 13 – 2:22

### State Legislature

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**John Erling:** So in 1965 comes an opportunity to run for state legislature.

**David Boren:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**JE:** And your youth was an issue because—

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** ...you were all of twenty-four years old.

**DB:** Yes that’s right. I was going to turn twenty-five just in time to meet the legal deadline. Yeah.

**JE:** You were also called a carpetbagger and all sorts of things.

**DB:** Yeah.

**JE:** I mean, you talked earlier about some shyness but maybe you’d gotten over that by this time?

**DB:** Well, no, that was the first race. That’s the race where I sat in the car for a long time before I handed out my brochures.

**JE:** Okay, that was—

**DB:** So I was almost twenty-five years old and running for the state legislature for the first time. But I really did have to work to overcome my shyness.

**JE:** Your family, your father, people help you in that?

**DB:** They helped me, of course, Dad moved to Washington in the meantime.

**JE:** Okay.

**DB:** So that’s why I was called a carpetbagger. I didn’t own a home, I was this young guy in college. I was running against an established attorney and a sheriff of the county that lived

in the county and had young families. But I decided to jump in and try and I got a lot of students at OU to help me. And we mapped out the towns, how we'd hand out brochures and work door to door. We worked really, really hard.

My dad certainly made calls and things like that to try to help me with old timers in the county.

**JE:** In that election it was a close victory and there was even a recount in it.

**DB:** There was a recount. I won by ninety-two votes in a runoff. I was in a runoff and then we had a recount and I ended up winning by an even one hundred votes. Out of about eight thousand.

**JE:** District Judge Lee West presided over that.

**DB:** District Judge Lee West presided over that, he was the judge from Ada. And they wanted to have an out of county judge to preside over the recount. There weren't voting machines, they were the old stamp, the X ballots. We had to have guards sleep with the ballot boxes overnight to make sure the other side didn't tamper with the boxes. Everybody had a watchdog there. They'd look and they'd say, "Did this get stamped twice?" Or "Who did they intend to vote for?"

So Lee West, he laughed later because I later recommended that Lee West be appointed federal judge. He's a wonderful wit, as you know. He loved to get up and say, "People ask me, 'How did you get appointed federal judge? Was it your great legal mind?'" And he said, "I was the best recount presider that ever was." Of course it was his talent, it really was his talent, but he was the presider.

**JE:** And I should point out for those listening to this, that I've interviewed him and his interview was heard here on [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com).

**DB:** Oh great, that's wonderful.

## Chapter 14 - 3:18

### David Hall

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**John Erling:** So then you ran for governor in 1974. You're thirty-three years old.

**David Boren:** Yes.

**JE:** And you're running against an incumbent by the name of David Hall.

**DB:** David Hall, yes.

**JE:** Set the scene there because it was a cloud of corruption, which hung over his head at the time.

**DB:** There was a cloud. There were a lot of investigations. It was known, the media knew about a lot of these investigations. There were charges that there were gratuities given

to get state contracts. Or if you wanted to be on the Highway Commission or some other commission, let's say, you paid a certain amount that somehow ended up in the coffers of the sitting governor, or his friends.

Interestingly enough, I had helped write David Hall's announcement speech. There were three of us that wrote his announcement speech when he announced for governor and ran, the first time when he got elected. He was District Attorney here, of course, and I felt a very crusading District Attorney and a reformer. I was attracted to the reform.

And then later on, when things went the other way, I went down to his office several times and said, "I hear rumors of this, this, and this. You need to know this kind of corruption is going on."

And finally he told me, "Don't bother to come back."

I said, "Well, I won't. Next time I come back maybe I'll be governor." And it was the next time I came back. I was coming back, he was greeting me as Governor Elect.

But I have to say this, I think there was sort of a tragedy, in a way, that all that took place, because David Hall was a person of enormous personal ability. The single most charismatic Oklahoman I've ever seen in politics. You talk about know everybody's name in a room. Fill a room, absolutely charm. I always said he could sell air-conditioners to Eskimos. He could do anything. He could have been a national political figure but, unfortunately, these things did take place.

And we still talk to each other even after all those things. And recently he visited me down at the university. He was back in the state for a visit. We probably spent two hours together just talking about old times and things. It's interesting, I think that people think that because you cross swords with people in politics, you can't have a friendship. And unfortunately, politics is getting too much like that, it's getting way too personal.

But for example, I mean, it's like Jim Inhofe and I, we ran against each other for governor forty-two, three years ago, and he was the Republican dominee. A couple years ago we spent probably four hours together in my office. He'd brought his grandson down. We were just visiting about old times.

You know, I think that's the really nice thing, with the passage of time you forget about how mad you were at a certain time about something. Or what a difference of opinion you had. And all you remember is the shared experience of living through those events together. And you always could hear the other side of the story. It was always kind of funny to hear what they were really doing to you. You weren't really paranoid, they really were doing it to you. Which, well, I won't tell that story now, I'll tell it later. It had to do with Gene Stipe, but I'll tell that later maybe.

**JE:** Um, when David Hall was back, I interviewed him and I have that on the website as well. Time hasn't done anything to how he views whatever he did in office because he still denies that happened.

**DB:** No, he denies that it happened. And, you know, I just have to respectfully disagree with him about that. And I think that there was too much evidence.

## Chapter 15 - 2:40

### Race for Governor

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**John Erling:** But you were an unknown legislator in the state. You really weren't statewide name recognition. A few gave you a chance to win. You were thirty-two, a professor, a state legislator, I mean, what was in you thinking, "I can do this"?

**David Boren:** Well, I don't know what was in me. First of all, I was just angry at some of the things I saw that I thought were wrong that that were going on. I didn't like some of the things going on in the legislature. They, for example, used to be able to close the doors of the Rules Committee or whatever and kill bills without a roll call. No one ever knew who killed the bills and how they were killed. The whole House could meet as a committee the whole and not take record votes and kill bills.

I'm the one who authored the roll call machine that's in the House and Senate chambers today. Because I wanted it up on the board the red and green lights so people could get a record of how people were voting.

And there were all sorts of noncompetitive bids on state contracts. The underpass in front of the state capitol, for example, the dirt that was excavated in the project was given to the contractor, and then a few weeks later they bought it back under a change order and paid him nine hundred thousand dollars. I called it the "Dirty Deal" to get the dirt back that they'd given under the first contracts. There are all sorts of things going on and the air was filled with all these accusations.

I thought, "Somebody is going to beat the incumbent governor and it might as well be me." No one else, no major figure was running at that time, so when I announced it was long before Clem McSpadden announced. I remember hearing on the radio when Clem McSpadden announced, I almost ran off the road 'cause I thought, "That's the end of me." I was going to be the only alternative and I thought I might just have a chance.

**JE:** He was former president pro tem of the State Senate.

**DB:** Right.

**JE:** He was a congressman, he was a rodeo announcer.

**DB:** Oh yeah.

**JE:** He was the nephew of Will Rogers.

**DB:** Yes, yes.

**JE:** He had it all going for him.

**DB:** Oh my gosh. And he was even giving the rodeo prayer in a movie about rodeos that was on at the time. So he was even in the movies at the time, so I just thought, “Well, there’s just no—” He and I had been friendly when I was a young state legislator. Clem was always invariably nice to me and I just knew that would be really tough but I had already announced and I was out there running. And then he got into it later. And I just thought, “Well, that’s the end of me.”

But I did have a tactic, I went to all the rodeos I could find. Now you might have thought, “Well, that’s a foolish place to go. They’d all be Clem supporters.” But he was always sitting way up in the rodeo box where he would announce it or give the prayer or whatever. And I would go along the fence with all the cowboys and all the spectators and I’d say, “Well, I’m running for governor, you know. Clem, he’s up there in the box, he’s already forgotten you. I’m down here with you, I won’t forget you.”

And it’s really interesting, I came very close to carrying and did carry a few of those rural counties where rodeo was very strong. And yet I was able to win those votes.

## Chapter 16 - 6:46

### Broom Brigade

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**John Erling:** There’s something really notable that somebody, when I said I was going to interview you, he’s young and he said, “Hey, I remember the Broom campaign.”

**David Boren:** Yes.

**JE:** The Boren Broom Brigade. And that was started with your cousin Jim, I think.

**DB:** My cousin Jim, the humorist. The one who started the National Association of Professional Bureaucrats, to make fun of bureaucrats and bureaucratic ways. He loved history. He remembered that when they ran against the Pendergast Machine in Kansas City years ago that the people carried brooms to try to get rid of the Machine. We were into the campaign and he suggested two things to me. I was doing okay but not well, I mean, I started out way behind, I was definitely running third. I was going to have to get struck by lightning to win, some way or another.

So he said, “Why don’t you take the broom as your symbol?” And he said, “You won’t have to say anything negative about the Governor and these investigations and

all this. Just carry the broom, it's time to clean up Oklahoma. Everyone knows what a broom's for."

And I never did make personal attacks on the Governor, but I said it was time to clean up Oklahoma and I even had a song that the Wilburn Brothers sang for me that my Aunt Mae wrote, "Heartbreak Hotel," wrote for me and it went all around the song tracks, "Let's clean up Oklahoma, Boren is our man."

He said, "Take that broom as your symbol, everyone knows what it is and you don't have to say ugly things." And then he said, "You ought to start walking from town to town." And Lawton Chiles had won the senators' race in Florida at that time and he was known as Walking Lawton. And he said, "It worked for him, why don't you call him up?"

I didn't know him at the time, of course. I later served with him in the Senate but I said, "I'm just curious."

He said, "I'll send you diaries I kept as I walked across Florida." He said, "It was the most beneficial thing I ever did." He said, "I got all this free publicity that I couldn't afford to pay for. I was on every nightly news with me walking along the road." But he said, "Also I stayed with different people, I talked to all these people along the way. I learned what was on the minds of people, I knew what they really cared about. I really, really came to know the people so well, what they wanted." He said, "It's worth it."

So I said, "Oh my gosh." At first I said, "I just don't want to be governor to make myself so foolish as to walk from town to town with a broom." But you know, as time wore along and the polls hadn't moved very much I found I did want to be governor bad enough to take the broom and walk from town to town. So I did and it was an incredible experience.

There's still people I can remember, I'd drive down certain highways in Oklahoma. I've walked from Broken Bow to Idabel. I walked up in the Miami area up when Picher was still a going community, and out West, and all over different segments. I got in every media market and television market so I could get on all the stations walking from town to town and I had the broom. And then I had broom rallies.

My final on the night before the election, I held a broom rally on the steps of the State Capitol building. Well, my supporters and my cousin said, "Well, let's just have everybody there carry a broom with the Boren sign on it."

Dr. Cross went and carried a broom. I always love him for that. You know, he never got into politics, ever, but he carried a broom and went to this broom rally. They had the picture in the paper of Dr. Cross, President of OU, with this broom.

And I arrived on the street sweeper with my Wilburn Brothers song blaring out. Now this was the ultimate, a big old street sweeper. You talk about corny in the nth degree, but it absolutely caught on and people did know what the broom was.

And you know, what happened is during the primary, Clem McSpadden said some pretty strong things about Governor Hall. He said some pretty difficult things. I didn't, I just had the broom. I just said, "Everyone knows what the broom's for. We've got to clean up Oklahoma."

And so when it came to the runoff, Hall came in third. I'd never said anything about him. The other candidate said some things about him, and the Hall supporters said, "Well, we're going to vote for you. You weren't mean to the Governor." So it all worked out.

**JE:** Well, that was in the primary, of course. And McSpadden had thirteen thousand more votes than you.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** And then, of course, as you said, Hall trails and is defeated. And then you defeat McSpadden—

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** ...by a difference of thirty-seven thousand votes.

**DB:** Yes. It was a hard, hard race, I tell you, it was a really hard race. We did it the old-fashioned way, we went from town to town and we had loud speakers and we handed out leaflets. And we didn't just sit in the TV studio or do direct mail. It was retailing.

**JE:** Then in the general election you faced Republican Jim Inhofe.

**DB:** Right.

**JE:** And you've alluded to that already. I've interviewed him too. He says both of you said nice things about each other.

**DB:** We did.

**JE:** And probably didn't think that Hall was going to lose and then this kind of backfired on him.

**DB:** Yeah, Jim said, "I'm never going to say anything nice about my opponents again." Because here's what happened, he and I had known each other and we'd been in the House together. We'd sponsored a lot of bills together, even especially in open government kind of reform type bills we'd sponsor together. So he kept saying, "If the Democrats were smart enough to nominate my friend David Boren I wouldn't even be running." Knowing all the while that I would not win and that when it was over my supporters would switch over to him and vote for him against the Democrat in November.

Well, lo and behold, I win the domination. So we hired a guy who came to the press conference for Jim was, it had one of those sort of "Eat at Joe's" signs, you know, on the front and back and it had all these headlines from the papers, "I Wouldn't Run If Democrats Nominate Boren," somewhat, I forgotten who it was, which member of the press. We strongly suggested to them that what they should ask was, "Jim Inhofe Fair to Announce His Withdrawal?" because he had said if the Democrats were smart enough to nominate me he wouldn't run.

The planted question got asked, I'll never forget it. I was watching it, I think on television. Jim got a little flustered and he said, "Well."

So then the reporters said, "Well, what do you have to say about your friend David Boren now?"

And Jim said, "He's changed. It just pains me to say all the things he had to do to get that Democratic nomination. He's just a changed man."

We had a really good laugh about that, as I said, when we got together recently. And we do talk often. We had a good laugh about that. In his later races he said, "I've learned the lesson, I'm never going to say anything nice about one of my opponents."

**JE:** Well, you won in a landslide, you received 64 percent of the more than eight hundred thousand votes. It was a new record in Oklahoma gubernatorial elections.

**DB:** You know, one of the elections later I broke a national record in a US Senate race, the last time I ran for the Senate. Nothing is ever as exciting as when it happens to you the first time. And when you start as such an underdog, you know, it just uh, it just oh, it touched me. I literally shed tears over it, it meant so much to me.

## Chapter 17 - 2:33

### Youngest Governor

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**John Erling:** You were inaugurated January 13 of 1975. And you were the nation's youngest governor, thirty-three years old.

**David Boren:** Long time ago.

**JE:** Thirty-three.

**DB:** Yeah.

**JE:** And when you look back at that—

**DB:** I know, I look back on it and I think, "Oh my goodness, how lucky that I was not impeached or something." I was lucky about one thing, I had a lot of sage old advisors, including my father and his circle, his friends who were the wise old folks of Oklahoma politics. I at least knew enough I'd better listen to the advice.

You've seen that movie where the candidate wins and all of a sudden he was alone and he says, "What do I do now?" My, well, that is what I wanted to do but I certainly knew I was young and green and there were a lot of things I didn't know and I'd better get a lot of help.

**JE:** Twenty-first governor of Oklahoma. One of your first items of business, you did away with the inheritance tax between spouses.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** Was that an issue during the campaign?

**DB:** Absolutely, a huge issue in the campaign.

**JE:** Yeah.

**DB:** And there was a woman from, I think she was from Heavener, she had a daughter who later was an intern in my Senate office. Her daughter, I think, was in Girls State or something. Anyway, they'd come up with the issue that, let's say, a woman and her husband were farming a farm together. If the husband died the woman had to pay tax on everything, as if she had contributed nothing. She was obviously working there as a housewife and working as a farm wife and working as a partner. She was given no credit for any of that as if she never earned anything, as if the woman had never contributed anything. She had to pay tax on everything, even if it was joint property she had to pay tax on it.

Well, I just said, "That's terrible, it's not giving women—" and this became kind of the first women's issue in Oklahoma.

And when they came to see me about it, this girl this time was about fourteen. She had presented it at All-State or something and her mother was the idea behind it. She just said, "We think you can reach women all across the state, especially women who they work together in a small business, they work together on a farm, they work together on other things, the woman is given no credit."

I said, "There shouldn't be any inheritance tax between a husband and a wife. They are a team, they work together, the woman ought to be given full credit for half of the property and so on." So that was a big issue in the campaign. And it really did mobilize a lot of women in Oklahoma behind the campaign. It became really important.

So it was the first bill that I presented to the legislature when I got elected as governor. And, by the way, it was good running for governor, why wouldn't it be good to run for the US Senate on the same thing because the federal law was the same way. The federal inheritance taxes. So the first bill I introduced as US Senator was to do away with the inheritance tax between spouses at the federal level. I passed those bills in both places.

## Chapter 18 - 5:35

### Senate Race

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**John Erling:** Well, then, let's move on to that. In '77, you were wondering what your next move would be. And at the time, Senator Dewey Bartlett was fighting cancer.

**David Boren:** Right, yes he was. Really, I'd come to know Senator Bartlett quite well and I liked him very much as a person, as I did Senator Bellmon as well. In fact, the two of

them three different times tried to convince me to change parties. They said, “We feel we all kind of feel alike about a lot of things.” Of course, at that time the Republican party was a much more moderate party than it is today probably in the state, but we became close friends.

And so one day, Senator Bartlett called me on the phone and he said, “I know you’re trying to make a decision about whether or not you’re going to run for reelection or run for the Senate.” He said, “We need to talk.”

So he and I got together. He was quite ill but still hoped to recover well enough to run and thought there could be, but the doctor just told him no, it wasn’t going to happen, he was not going to be able to do it. So he said, “I want you to be the first person to know.” He told me, a Democrat, the first person that he told.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**DB:** And he said, “So you should prepare if you want to run for the Senate. In about two months I’m going to announce that I’m not going to run. So you need to have everything in preparation so that you can then announce almost immediately that you’re going to run, that you’ve been holding off out of respect for me,” which I had been.

I told him, I said, “I want you to get well. And if you can run for Senate I’ll run for reelection for governor. But if you can’t, then—” He and I had had the conversation previously that I want to run for the Senate. I thought, “I don’t know how if anybody could survive and still remain halfway popular after eight years as Governor. It’s a hard, hard job.”

So he told me that and he said, “I just want you to know you have my blessing, and you’re the first person I’m telling.”

So I will always have a soft spot in my memory for Dewey Bartlett, he was so good to me.

**JE:** You wonder if the Republican party knew that he was giving heads up to a Democrat.

**DB:** Can you imagine that? But that’s how much our politics has changed. When he was Governor and I was in the legislature I had handled several bills for him.

**JE:** Okay.

**DB:** One to make state deposits in banks have to go out for bid instead of letting the state treasurer, which then Leo Reynolds put it in all the favorite banks. In fact, I was censured by the Democratic caucus in the House by a vote of seventy-five to three. Can you imagine there were seventy-eight Democrats at that time? Seventy-five to three because I had introduced Governor Bartlett’s bill.

So he and I had really been friends and Mrs. Bartlett too. She was wonderful and she used to visit with me a lot about things.

**JE:** And I’ve interviewed her and her daughter, as a matter of fact.

**DB:** Is that right?

**JE:** On Voices of Oklahoma.

**DB:** I don't even know if they know about Dewey's call to me.

**JE:** No, they didn't say anything.

**DB:** And I've told the mayor, Mayor Bartlett knows that story. And then Dewey III became my student at OU. So things run full circle. He was in my Government class at OU and was just really an outstanding person. That's a person I hope has a future leadership position in Oklahoma some day. I don't care what party, he's just a sterling person.

**JE:** In 1978, you announced, and you're still young, you're thirty-seven years old.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** When are you going to get old here?

**DB:** Well, it certainly happened, we'll say that.

**JE:** So then, interesting in the primary you face some big names like Ed Edmondson.

**DB:** Yes, yes.

**JE:** He represented the second congressional district—

**DB:** Yes, yes.

**JE:** ...for twenty years. His younger brother, J. Howard Edmondson, who is the Governor.

**DB:** Yes, yes.

**JE:** And served the final years of Senator Robert's term in the Senate.

**DB:** Right.

**JE:** It's another one of those things. And your families have been friends.

**DB:** Oh, Edmondson family, you know, Drew Edmondson and his brother, we're friends and we always have been. I think Ed just really sort of got into it without fully thinking that I was definitely committed. I think he maybe had hoped that I wouldn't but I was too far into it. We kind of became accidental opponents, sort of like how Jim Inhofe and I became accidental opponents. I think we both just sort of happened into it.

And then Gene Stipe was in the race and there were what? Nine others? You probably know better than I. In the first primary there was something like eleven candidates. It was quite a dirty race. The idea was that the sitting governor, they thought if they could force me into a runoff they would be able to defeat me.

**JE:** While you label Edmondson as too liberal for Oklahoma and called yourself an Oklahoman Democrat.

**DB:** Yeah I did definitely. And he was being funded being a congressman, and he was well thought of in Washington, rightfully so. He was getting a lot of contributions from big donors out of state.

And one of the things I did in one of my ads, I remember one of the contributors was the Seafarers Union of Brooklyn, New York. I ran on the screen, I said, "David Boren is getting his money from grassroots Oklahomans. Where's Ed Edmondson getting his money?"

They ran on the screen, "The Seafarers Union," and had some others.

And I said, "What in the world is the Seafarers Union doing having an interest in an Oklahoma landlocked race?" So that became an issue that we used successfully.

**JE:** You defeated him by nearly one hundred thousand votes.

**DB:** Right.

**JE:** September of '78.

**DB:** Right.

**JE:** And then you go on to the general election and your opponent then is?

**DB:** Robert Kamm.

**JE:** Robert Kamm, right.

**DB:** President of Oklahoma State.

**JE:** Right. An issue that stands out in that campaign?

**DB:** This particular issue I think that he felt that I had tried to get regents that I had appointed to be against him as president, which really was not true. It was a misunderstanding, really. They used to have a Vice President for Agriculture and they downgraded it to a Dean. And I jumped on that because I said, "Agriculture is too important to be downgraded."

But you know, later, afterwards it was over he and Maxine Kamm, they were lovely people, they were great leaders at Oklahoma State. It was not a mean campaign. The primary was harder. Gene Stipe was in the primary too.

## Chapter 19 - 3:48

### Gene Stipe

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**John Erling:** Did you have a story about Gene Stipe that you were going to tell?

**David Boren:** Well, I have to tell you this, I would never tell it while Gene is still alive.

**JE:** Who was Gene Stipe?

**DB:** Gene Stipe the sort of uncrowned king of the state senate. He was known as the greatest political power in the state senate in Oklahoma and in rural Oklahoma, just extremely, extremely powerful and had a lot of patronage at the prison and things like that. Some called him the Prince of Darkness because he was not known as a person that was reform-minded, I'll put it that way. There were some pretty virulent attacks made on me during the campaign. Very mean attacks, things were done.

When I got elected years later, I was in the Senate and Gene, he'd been in the state senate from birth, almost, he was in it for forty, fifty years. And he had become not well. So he called me, and again, we would run against each other. I was the Champion

Reformer, he was called the Prince of Darkness, we were often pitted against each other, and he was an opponent of all the reforms. He said, "I need to come up and see you because I'm gravely ill. There's some things I want to tell you. Can you see me?"

I said, "Well, Gene, of course I'll clear my schedule of anything. I'll see you."

So he came to Washington to see me, we talked maybe four hours. He said, "I just have to get off my conscience some of the things I've done to you over the years, dirty tricks I've pulled in political campaigns and otherwise." And by the way, he had been a big McSpadden supporter too. And when I had won that race for governor I said, "He was part of the old guard, you know, the champion of the old guard." I was the new young Turk, you know, clean out the old guard. I used the broom, "Let's sweep out the old guard," and that was another part of the slogan.

So he began to tell me all these things. Some of these things I thought I knew, some of these things I suspected, and then there's some other things that I had no idea where some of those dirty tricks came from that were played on me. And he told them all to me.

I said, "Gene, you're going to get well. And you're going to be sorry that you told me all these things."

He said, "No I'm not but you've been a better senator than I ever thought you'd be. I just have to confess it, I just feel like I owe it to you to tell you that I'm sorry that these things happened and I hope you'll forgive me."

And I said, "That's a long time ago and I forgive you." I later wrote a letter to a judge, when he was convicted of some things, asking for clemency for him. But I said, "You're going to fully regret this."

Well, about a year or two later I decided to resign from the US Senate and come home to be president of OU. Meanwhile, Gene did get well and he was still in the state senate, he was still chairman of a committee with great party. So I go back and I'm out at the state capitol, going down the hallway trying to get money for OU, a never-ending battle. Gene comes out of his office, which is at the end of the hall, he comes up to me and he puts his arm around me, and he said, "David, I just want to ask you about something. Could you step into my private office for a minute?"

And I said, "Yes, Gene."

And he said, "Do you remember that time I came to Washington and told you that I regretted some of the things I'd done?"

But I said, "Yes, Gene, I appreciated it so much, you know, I just remember every word."

He looked at me and he got up and he put his arm around me again and he said, "Now, David, if you ever need anything out of here at the Senate, you just come and you ask old Gene to help you."

So this again is another story about how many twists and turns politics has. If I've learned anything from it, hopefully I've learned a few things from it, but one thing is, never burn any bridges. You should never make someone into a permanent enemy. There're always times that people can come back around, just always make room, don't ever burn any bridges. I've certainly learned that because there have been a lot of people that started out as adversaries that ended up having a friendly relationship.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative). Good point.

## Chapter 20 - 3:55

### Senator Boren

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**John Erling:** On November 8, '78, you made history as being the first Oklahoma sitting governor to win a United States Senate seat.

**David Boren:** Yes.

**JE:** You were tabbed a moderate and you were. Frosty Troy writes, "Boren obtains the dream of every politician. Almost everyone thinks he's on their side, and he is about half the time."

**DB:** Well, Frosty, he had some great one-liners. Of course, I didn't always think they were so great at the time he wrote them, but looking back on them he certainly had some great one-liners. And I would say he is a person too that we had our differences of opinion. You know, Frosty is not very healthy now and I think he was a great champion of education in Oklahoma all the years they had the *Oklahoma Observer*.

And as we've started, some of the things we're working on now trying to get Oklahoma to vote for a penny sales tax for education, really to save education in Oklahoma, I just think if Frosty were well and he still had the *Oklahoma Observer*, I just don't know if he could get in the habit of writing nice things about me but I think he would be joining this crusade.

**JE:** Yeah, I think so too.

**DB:** If he possibly could.

**JE:** Fortunately, shortly before he showed signs of ill health I interviewed him and—

**DB:** Right.

**JE:** ...he also was a great storyteller.

**DB:** Oh great storyteller.

**JE:** Committees that you've served on as a senator: the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in '87 to '93. You must have had tremendous experience there and stories to tell out of that.

**DB:** Well, it was an incredible experience, and, you know, I'd always been interested in foreign affairs. When I first got to the Senate someone said, "Do you want to be on the Foreign Affairs Committee?" The other choice was to try to get on the Finance Committee, which, by the way, Senator Kerr was the ranking member of the Finance Committee and it handles all of taxation, including the oil and gas taxes. It handles social security, it's like the Ways and Means Committee in the House, it's definitely the most powerful of all the domestic committees.

Everyone said to me, "We want you to go be like Senator Kerr. We want you to be a really powerful member of the Finance Committee."

So I couldn't be on both of those committees, they were exclusive, you had to pick one or the other, so I went to the Finance Committee. But I always wanted to find a way to get involved in Foreign Affairs. Well, Intelligence Committee doesn't count, it's not an exclusive committee, you can be on it and still the Finance Committee. So I did get on the Intelligence Committee. The late Robert Bird appointed me to the Intelligence Committee. That was a direct appointment of the leader.

He appointed me and he called me into his office, he appointed three people that day. I remember Senator Bradley was one of the others. He said, "I've appointed you at 9:10, the next appointment's going to be at 9:11. They're all on the same day. The next one at 9:12." He said, "That means you have seniority on the committee, and that could become important."

Well, you can only serve on that committee eight years, by rule. After I'd only been on the committee two years, everybody ahead of me all became chairmen of other committees or got defeated or something happened. So, all of a sudden, I became the senior member because I was appointed one minute earlier than Senator Bradley was. And I'd only been there two years, so I got to be Chairman six years, that's the longest of anybody in the history of the Senate's ever been Chairman of the Intelligence Committee.

The great thing about that was it put you in direct touch with the presidents. Because there were so many things that the President of the United States is obligated by law to only inform the majority, minority leaders, Speaker of the House, and so on, there's a gang of eight. And the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Intelligence Committees. A lot of secret appropriations for things and covert actions and secret actions, so the presidents have to deal with you. They have to really talk to you several times a week, probably.

That also gave you an opportunity that I might say, "Well, you know, I'd like this or that based in Oklahoma," or "I'd like this change in the wheat," or whatever. It was fascinating because I was so interested in the subject matter. But it was also very helpful to Oklahoma for me to be able to have that relationship in dealing with the President directly on so many things.

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**Chapter 21 – 7:20**  
**Friend to Presidents**

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**John Erling:** In '91, you voted against the Persian Gulf War.

**David Boren:** Yes.

**JE:** And why did you?

**DB:** Well, that's a very interesting story. We had three different intelligence groups, we had the Defense Intelligence Agency and the CIA and another intelligence agency. They did estimates of what would happen if we went into Kuwait and started the war there. I'll just give you an example, this not a real number, let's say the Iraqis, Saddam Hussein had ten thousand tanks and we were only going to have four thousand. You'd think from that that we were going to have a tough time of it.

And so all the intelligence I was seeing was static intelligence. So many people here, so many people there, so many tanks here, so many tanks there, this and that. President Bush Sr., who I developed a close friendship with, he was getting most of his intelligence from the other intelligence agency, Defense Intelligence. They had information that was very important.

For example, our tanks could shoot two thousand meters further than their tanks. So it didn't matter if they had twice as many tanks, if our tanks could shoot further they'd just come out and sit there where their tanks couldn't hit ours. We could destroy all theirs. So he felt there would be far fewer casualties and that it would be far, far less difficult.

So that was one of the things we later learned only by talking to each other afterwards that we were getting two different sets of intelligence briefings at the White House and in the Congress. So I just felt we would have less loss of life and so on then to just draw a ring around them, you know, not let them come out beyond Kuwait, but not try to go in and invade Kuwait.

I'm not sure whether I was right or wrong, once we later learned all this wrinkles of the intelligence. One part of the government was not talking to the other part.

**JE:** Did the President talk to you about that after that vote?

**DB:** Oh yes, yes he did. President Bush Sr., and I, again, being friends, we had the closest relationship of friendship, really, that I had even with a Democratic president. But we probably had the stormiest relationship at the same time. Some of the times I just went down, and I think this something that, oh, I wish it could happen again in this country, I hate to see all the partisanship.

When President Bush sent a letter to Tariq Aziz, the foreign minister of Iraq, and said, "You have to withdraw from Kuwait at a certain time," and he was waiting for an answer.

He had decided that if there was a negative answer there was going to be war, an invasion, and he was hoping there'd be an affirmative answer.

General Scowcroft, the president's National Security Advisor, called me. He knew the President and I were close friends. He said, "David, could you just come down to the White House? The President is walking up and down in his office just like a caged animal. He's so nervous and so stressed.

I came down, and we had already had some preliminary discussions about whether he should go to war or not and I'd said that I didn't think so. I said, "No, this isn't the time."

One time, I bet there was two hours when I was just in the room with him, no one else but me, and we didn't exchange a word. It's just that I was there as a friend. I wasn't there as a senator, I was there as a friend at this difficult, terrible moment in his life. And so we had that kind of relationship. And—

**JE:** It's interesting that he wanted you there, he knew you were against the war.

**DB:** He knew—

**JE:** But he—

**DB:** ...but he just wanted me there as his friend. It was totally a friendship thing, it was not anything to do with where we stood on this issue.

**JE:** So what you say is you're humanizing the president.

**DB:** Oh very much so.

**JE:** Yeah.

**DB:** I had those kinds of relationships. I remember President Carter called me one time at eleven o'clock at night. Mrs. Carter was out of town and there was something he was working on and worrying about. He just wanted to talk, not necessarily about politics or anything, just talk.

And with President Reagan even, during the Iran-Contra affair and there was worry about impeachment.

Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee was a great friend of mine. I admired him very much, he was a very nonpartisan person. He was just temporarily Chief of Staff. They had fired the Chief of Staff at the White House and they'd brought Baker in as temporary Chief of Staff. He called me and he said, "The President is so depressed and he's due to make a speech to the country. And I'm afraid he's going to be defiant and just say, 'Impeach me,' and I think it's going to go badly." So he said, "Would you talk to President Reagan?"

So I said, "I'm going to sit down and write a letter to him." Because he had given up hope, he said, "My presidency is over." He was considering resignation or defiance, those were the two things. "I'm either going to defy them or I'm going to resign."

**JE:** And again, it's over Iran-Contra?

**DB:** It was over Iran-Contra.

**JE:** Right.

**DB:** He was due to make a speech to the nation.

**JE:** Yep.

**DB:** So I wrote him a letter and I said, "I'm a Democrat, you're a Republican, you're the only President our country has. And I'm an American first and I want you to succeed for the good of the country. And you can do more, there's much you can accomplish on the rest of your term. You've had this problem but there's much you accomplish, especially in arms control." I said, "The Russians are afraid. You can do an arms control when probably no one else can." Because they were all afraid of him. Remember Star Wars and all these things? And I said, "I will help you, I promise to help you and the Intelligence Committee, we'll be sure to help you with your arms control efforts."

I'd had the little letter I'd written hand delivered, Senator Baker hand delivered it to the President.

I went over to the White House the next day, Vice President Bush, then, we were in the Cabinet room and Democrat and Republican leaders, and he said, "The President wants to see you alone in the Oval Office after everyone leaves."

I said, "Do you know about the letter?"

I was surprised, Vice President Bush said, "He called several of us in and read the letter out loud to us." So he said, "He wants to see you." And he said, "It's real important to go and see him."

So I went in and President Reagan was staying in there by himself in the Oval Office. He pulled out the letter, my letter, and he started to talk about it to me. He said, "You'll never know how much this meant to me at the moment I got it. You forget these people are human beings." And he started to cry. He wept. And we were alone. There I was with the President of the United States and he is weeping.

I kind of made a gesture like, "There, there, Mr. President, you know, it's going to be all right." It was kind of an awkward moment because it wasn't just tears in his eyes, he was weeping.

He said, "It convinced me that I can do some good things still and I will, I'll cooperate." And he gave them that speech in which he was cooperative and reached out his hand and said, "I'll work together with Congress on reforming the system so that everybody has to be told what's going on and everything else."

So that was a really moving moment. It's really interesting, I wrote that letter by longhand and I thought I'd kept a Xeroxed copy because it wasn't typed. But I could never find it.

After President Reagan died, we couldn't find it, we couldn't find it, so we called the Reagan Library. And a librarian there spent a week looking for it and finally called me one

day and she said, "I found the letter." And he had written on it, "Will respond in person." And his initials. Now in my papers at OU there's a Xeroxed copy of the letter from the Reagan Library.

You know, that's what I learned working with these people up close, presidents and various people like that, they all have very human feelings, you know. We just forget that. I think that's something that always has to be understood and you always have to give the other person a little room to stand on.

## Chapter 22 - 3:03

### Iran Contra

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**John Erling:** For students of history, quickly, the Iran-Contra and the president didn't know.

**David Boren:** Yes.

**JE:** Just capsulize that.

**JE:** Well, the Congress had cut off aid to the Nicaraguan rebels that were fighting against the Communist government there in Nicaragua. The President was very much in favor of giving the aid. I thought so too, in fact, I'd even been down there among the Contras, the freedom fighters, I'd gone down to Nicaragua myself and talked to some of their leaders. I'd been on his side, but the theory was that he allowed someone to sell weapons to get money for the US Treasury by selling American property to people in Iran. And took the money and then gave it illegally because Congress had voted to cut off the aid to the Contras, which would be an impeachable offense if it was known that he did that.

Colonel North was involved, Admiral Poindexter, some other people. And Reagan always claimed that he did not personally know. And I actually believed him that he didn't personally know. The reason I believed him was I never had reason to question his honesty, he always shot straight with me. But he was a big picture person.

Yeah, Jimmy Carter, who was a good friend of mine, and I was only the second governor to ever endorse him for President at the time when he first started to run, so we were always good friends. But he delved into every minutia, he even scheduled the White House tennis court. He knew every little detail.

Reagan was the big picture person but he wasn't intellectually curious about little details or anything, he just wanted this big sweeping picture. And I can very well believe that people could be doing things down in the details that he didn't really know about.

The other thing that made me think that and it made me think this later too, it was really later, at first I thought, "Well, he's such a big picture person," because a lot of times

I'd go talk to him about details of things and I could tell that unless someone had written a briefing paper for him he didn't know what I was talking about. I'd have to educate him about things that you would have hoped he would have known.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**DB:** But the other was, his memory was already slipping. Senator Nichols and I once went to see him about something and—

**JE:** Senator Don Nichols.

**DB:** Republican from Oklahoma. We went over to see him about, I think, an oil and gas tax matter. We explained it to him and thought that he'd understood it and so on, and we went on to another subject. And then pretty soon he came back and said, "Now what does that term mean again? And what was that tax you were asking me about?" And we explained it.

We went again and talked about something else for a minute. Reagan says again, "Now what was that that you came over here to talk to me about?" He'd forgotten it already. Four or five times he had forgotten, in the course of thirty minutes, what we had already talked about several times. So I began to be concerned. I'm not sure he was in full blown Alzheimer's while he was still in the White House.

**JE:** That was second term of his?

**DB:** That was probably in his last year.

**JE:** Yeah.

**DB:** And I began to really see slippage in memory. So that was another thing, I'm not sure exactly when that all started, at least not as serious as it was later, but it might have started earlier too. So I always felt he was probably not knowledgeable of the details, which were illegal. I'm not sure he would have blessed those.

**JE:** Yeah.

**DB:** You know, I didn't agree with him on a lot of things but I'm not sure he would have blessed those things.

## Chapter 23 - 3:40

### Run for President

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**John Erling:** You became known as a bridge builder in the Senate. What had been bipartisan discussions had become more divisive. We know today the way they are, even more stringent maybe then.

**David Boren:** Oh yes, by far.

**JE:** Is there a way, do you think it was in this time period that they started that?

**DB:** It was starting already before I left the Senate.

**JE:** So are we saying in the '90s it started?

**DB:** Yeah, maybe even in the late '80s.

**JE:** Yeah.

**DB:** I began to see it with every passing year, maybe six or seven years in a row, more, more, and more partisan. Fewer people, that's how everybody here used to say, that played between the fifty, forty-yard lines. He always said, "Those are the people that really decide the matters, the middle." But that group was shrinking, you know, it might have been forty, then it was thirty, and then it was twenty, and now I think it's probably like four. There's just not many left that are trying to bring the two sides together.

That was part of my frustration, that's part of the reason I think I resigned two years early. I'd always wanted to be president of OU. I'd written that in my diary when I was at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar that some day I hoped I could be a US senator from Oklahoma and I hoped that I could be president of OU. So when the opportunity came and they talked to me about it, I was frustrated enough with the growing partisanship that it was more attractive to me to come home at that time. I felt I could do more, it'd become so partisan.

**JE:** In '92, you were encouraged to run for president, I mean, you were in the Oval Office counseling these people.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** And you know you were just as capable, if not more, than some of these people sitting behind that big old desk.

**DB:** Every senator thinks they're more ready to be president than the President.

**JE:** You were encouraged to run for president. President Bush, H. W., was running for reelection.

**DB:** Yes, was running for reelection, and that's when Clinton ran against him and beat him.

**JE:** Right.

**DB:** And there were a lot of people that came to me and said, "You're far better known than Clinton. You're a moderate Southern-type Democrat, you have a great chance to knock him off. And I thought I might have. I also thought that George Bush Sr. wasn't a shoe-in for reelection, even though he'd been very popular at the time of the first Gulf War. But he'd taken his eye off the economy, the economy was in trouble.

It's kind of like I felt when David Hall was running for reelection, somebody's going to beat him. I was not the most likely person, by any means, I was very unlikely to be the person, but I thought, "Somebody is so it might as well be me."

Well, there were people that came to me that sort of said, "This is the same kind of time, somebody is going to beat George Bush Sr., he's gotten too out of touch on the

economy. And it might as well be you, and you're as well known as some of these others that we've talked about." Like Clinton, who I'd known also.

**JE:** From Arkansas days.

**DB:** Yeah, we knew each other even before we became governors. On Rhodes scholarship selection committees and things. But I decided not to. I don't regret it a bit, and it has to do with what we talked about a minute ago. It has to do with friendship.

George Bush Sr., not George W. Bush, but George Bush Sr., was my personal friend. It didn't have anything to do with politics, he was just my personal friend. He might even discuss with me when he was having a fight with Barbara and what it was about. We were personal friends. And to run for something you have to feel it so strongly. And if you're sitting there saying, "Oh I don't want to be mean to my friend," I couldn't bring myself to run against a personal friend, even though we were of different parties. I just couldn't. I thought, "This is a town where too often personal friendships are not real, they're just used to manipulate people with. And he's my real personal friend and I just can't run against him." So I decided not to.

**JE:** You were frustrated then at that time, you had served in the US Senate for fifteen years. That was longer than Senator Robert Kerr, by the way.

**DB:** Yes, yes, yes.

## Chapter 24 - 5:13

### Nelson Mandela

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**John Erling:** Let me just bring you to Nelson Mandela. He was President of South Africa from '95 to '99.

**David Boren:** Yes.

**JE:** And he had served twenty-seven years in prison.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** He was initially committed to nonviolent protests, but then became more militant.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** He was leading a sabotage campaign against the government, and he was arrested.

**DB:** Right.

**JE:** And he served twenty-seven years.

**DB:** Right.

**JE:** Talk about that.

**DB:** Yes, Senator Nunn from Georgia, and I went to South Africa together. That's where we first became really acquainted with Ambassador Edward Perkins, our ambassador to South

Africa. The first African American ambassador to be appointed to South Africa. Later came to OU. I appointed him to head our international college now, international programs. We became great friends. He briefed us a great deal. He had been working for the release of Mandela and he thought we could be helpful when we were meeting with the President of South Africa and other officials there. We really pushed the agenda of Mandela's release.

So we continued to work on that after we got back to Washington. I went to see then Vice President Bush, well, I think he was then almost President elect. And he announced a change in policy. Reagan had allowed trade with South Africa and Bush was going to announce a change that we would boycott South Africa economically until they released Mandela and moved toward democracy. And I was very much involved in those discussions.

By the way, being in South Africa, and seeing how the people were so exploited and not given equal opportunities for—they weren't being educated. Walter Sisulu was in prison with Mandela and I met with his wife; she became a dear friend of mine and even came and visited us in our home in Washington later on. She was allowed. She was kept under house arrest. That was one of the first things I asked President Bush to ask for when he became President, for her ability to travel and be released from house arrest. She was guilty of fighting for equal education for black children.

I told her, I was sitting in her little house where she was under house arrest in Soweto, "Some day you're going to be sitting in our living room and you're going to come into Washington and you're going to come and see us."

"Oh, I'll never get there."

I said, "You will." A year and a half later she was sitting in our living room. President Bush Sr. had authorized me to speak to the South African government to demand a release and to say that his policies, that he was going to make a lot of decisions based upon the things they did like that. So I got very heavily, heavily involved in the whole campaign to free Mandela.

And then Ambassador Perkins would secretly send me messages of what I needed to tell the President, or what I needed to tell the Secretary of State about his negotiations and where the pressure points were. So we all worked together.

The President then, so not knowing that I was working with their own ambassador to do what he said to bring the pressure, so Mandela was released. And then, of course, he came to the United States.

Ted Koppel, the journalist, had a town hall meeting on the air for three hours from Harlem. It was quite an extraordinary event. Mandela was, of course, the centerpiece of it all. I was invited to go up and be there, kind of at the back of the stage, there must have been forty people on this big stage and an audience of ten thousand in this big auditorium. I didn't expect that all of a sudden Ted Koppel said, "Senator Boren from Oklahoma is here today and I want him to stand up."

I stood up, and he said, "I want everyone to know that he worked very hard to get sanctions put back on South Africa until they agreed to free elections and freeing Mandela. And that he's played a key role in this." And he said, "Senator, how is it that you got involved in that? Is that popular in Oklahoma politically for you to be for putting sanctions on South Africa?"

I just said, "Well, Oklahomans are a moral people and we know what's moral and what's not. What was going on in South Africa was immoral and I absolutely feel that the people of Oklahoma would share my feelings about this."

And then, I guess, it's one of the most remarkable things that ever happened to me in my lifetime, Mandela stood up himself. We have it on tape, I still have the tape. He started applauding, and then he turned to Ted Koppel and said, "Ted, I've giving Senator Boren a standing ovation for the role he's played, not only in my release, but in bringing democracy to South Africa."

You know, it was just the most touching, gripping moment, I mean, I was just really in tears over it. I don't think I've ever in my whole career been paid a greater compliment than that. You fast forward to other things that happened in your life, like a racial incident that happened on our campus where we were kind of put under the spotlight nationally and with some of our students, especially our student athletes, we had a gathering after that. And the Athletics Department called over and said, "Do you have a copy of that film of what Mandela said to you?" So they played it for all the student athletes at OU during the time we were going through this thing. But it had been years and years before.

It was very meaningful and I think there's nothing that will intensify your sense of social justice than going to a place like South Africa used to be. Where people were just virtually living in slave-like conditions.

You know, that was one of the good things too about being Chairman of the Intelligence Committee and involved in some of these foreign affairs questions. You had the chance to go do things like that, that was very meaningful to me.

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## **Chapter 25 - 7:25**

### **President of OU**

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**John Erling:** You became the thirteenth president of OU. It probably wasn't a tough decision but they came to you. I believe regent Steve Bentley came—

**David Boren:** Yes.

**JE:** ...to see if you had any interest in this. So the process went along. In fact, you supported education all your life as Governor.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** And Senator. You were a trustee for Yale University.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** You had also been asked to be considered to be president of Yale, as a matter of fact.

**DB:** Kind of indirectly. It was hinted at.

**JE:** Right. So now you come home. Then I guess one of your first challenges was to raise funds for OU.

**DB:** Oh yes, I found OU had many strengths but it was so under-funded and there needed to be so many things done. And so I really realized that we couldn't do it with just state support. It was simply inadequate and, of course, it's continued to shrink, even since then very drastically. So we had to reach out to try to raise funds from the friends of the university, the alumni of the university. And they have been wonderful. They have surpassed every bit of my imagination of what could happen.

During the twenty-two years I've been there, almost twenty-two, we've raised about two and a half billion dollars from the donors to the university, and it's transformed the university. We've been able to start programs and do things that we could never have dreamed of in the past. And set, really, national records. As I mentioned, more national merit scholars than any university public or private in the United States last year and the year before. So we've come a long way.

**JE:** Well, when you came there, 15 percent of the alums contributed to the school, while Yale grads contributed at the rate of 91 percent.

**DB:** Yeah that's true.

**JE:** So you've increased that percentage.

**DB:** And now, now much more. I would put it this way. When I first came we had in the rolodex of university fourteen thousand people who had contributed at one time or another to the university. Last year we had 130 thousand in the rolodex. But it's built on itself and then I think students having a good experience become alumni who really care about the university as they go out and as they become more successful themselves.

Now we have a whole new generation of really committed alumni and friends of the university who are continuing to help make it flourish, really.

**JE:** When you said you had a difficult time walking up and knocking on that door asking for a vote—

**DB:** Yes?

**JE:** ...you don't have difficulty asking for money now, do you? There must have been a time you were asking for money for the campaign.

**DB:** Oh, it was very hard to ask for money for campaigns.

**JE:** Yeah, but not—

**DB:** When I was asking for myself. I'd usually call someone like Mr. Helmerick in Tulsa or somebody else and say, "Would you have a fundraiser for me? And would you ask all your friends to come and bring a check?" I didn't want to call them myself. But I'm not asking for myself, this is for our students, this is for the next generation.

**JE:** Easier ask.

**DB:** It's a much easier ask, in fact, some of my friends have said, "Well, we used to be limited to being able to give you five thousand dollars or ten thousand dollars, you know. Now you ask us for millions."

The two first people I ever asked for money, I had to work up my courage to ask. I remember Helen Walton, the late Helen Walton of Walmart. I had lunch with her here in Tulsa. She said, "I'll drive over. I'll meet you in Tulsa."

So I came over here. I was going to ask her for five million dollars to start the Honors College and I had a little red book and I thought, "Well, we'll have lunch and maybe over dessert and coffee I'll break the news to her about how much I'm asking for," which I thought, at that time, that's a huge, huge amount.

So we didn't even have the food yet, I'm just talking to Helen, casually, she was a wonderful person and she just reaches over and grabs this proposal that I had that I hadn't even given her yet. And she said, "All right, I want to know, what page is it on, the total amount that you're asking me for?"

So I heard myself say, "Oh, Helen, it's only five million dollars." I thought, "Did that sound just come out of my body?" I really was horrified that I was saying this.

She said, "Well, okay, okay. We'll talk about it after we finish lunch."

Then the other was Michael Price, who ended up giving twenty-plus million dollars to OU. The college of business is named after him. He was at our house and he was going to fly back to New York. I had the Dean of Business with me, and Molly. At first, he said, "I can't eat dinner, I've got to fly back to New York." Then he said he wanted to look at our house.

We had just restored Boyd House and he wanted to see all over it. So they went on a tour. They took an hour or something to look at the house. They came back and he said, "I guess I will stay and eat anyway."

We didn't have any food or anything in the house. We had to run and get carryout really quick and bring it into him. And Molly was all planned, she said, "Well, I'm going to excuse myself from the table because I know you want to talk business."

And he said, "No, I don't want you to leave. I want you to stay here because you should be embarrassed of the amount of money your husband's probably getting ready to ask me for."

And, of course, she was just so uncomfortable, and I was too, and it was the same sort of thing. He said, "Okay, let's just get down to it. How much is the total?"

Again, an out of body experience, I heard my voice say, "Oh, it's only twenty-two million dollars."

He said, "Okay." They had it all in categories, a million for this, two million for this, and so much for this. I think there were twelve categories. He said, "Will you be at your office in the morning at eight o'clock?"

I said, "I certainly will be."

And he said, "I'll call you from New York." He was going to go get on his private jet and fly back to New York.

So he calls me, of course, I was not late to the office. I was there waiting for his call. And he said, "Do you have your copy of the proposal?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Well, I'll do one, two, three, and four, I'm not interested in five or six. I'll do seven, eight, nine," whatever. He said, "But that only comes to seventeen million dollars." He said, "Is that okay?"

I said, "That will be fine."

Switching from asking for five thousand and ten thousand to asking for five million and twenty million was a big adjustment, but it was, strangely, easier to ask for twenty million for students than it was for five thousand dollars for myself. I found it much easier. I'd never thought of myself as a good fundraiser. I still think I get more credit than I deserve because a lot of people approach me and say, "I want to help the university. How can we help?" But just a lot easier to raise money for a cause you believe in than for yourself.

**JE:** Well, by now, some say there's the Boren effect and whatever you've done to contribute to that there is that going for you.

**DB:** Yes, yes.

**JE:** Continuing on at OU, one of the neat things I thought you did, you brought back fifty retired professors, twenty new programs were added to the curriculum.

**DB:** Right.

**JE:** Talk to us about the retired professors and why that was meaningful.

**DB:** Well, when younger professors are trying to earn tenure and they're publishing and they're doing all these things, sometimes they don't have as much time to spend teaching and with the students as you would want them to. I think great teaching has to be at center. I'm a great believer in research too And it helps the state and it's a great benefit to the state and our economic growth. But great teaching just changes lives.

So I felt, well, you know, some had retired and they're still very alert and they've been full professors and they have just recently retired. Why not bring them back to teach a class

or two and to spend time with students, mentor students? Because they're among our best and brightest ever. And you could have them back for five or six thousand dollars instead of a hundred thousand dollars, seventy thousand, or sixty thousand like you might have to pay a sitting professor, for next to nothing, and they would enjoy it being useful and being helpful to the students. And they could spend the time, they're not under other pressures.

That's how we started that idea and we've had very successful participation from a lot of our retired professors.

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## Chapter 26 - 4:00

### A Letter to America

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**John Erling:** I'm holding in my hand here, "A letter to America, David Boren." On the front, is that your hand?

**David Boren:** It actually is my hand. It is my hand.

**JE:** I was going to ask you that.

**DB:** It is my hand on the front. It is my hand, probably not as gnarled then as it is now, but it is my hand. They actually took a picture of my hand.

**JE:** That was in 2008. It was interesting because you said you were serving on the Rhodes scholarship selection committee for India.

**DB:** Right.

**JE:** These are very talented finalists. And by chance, you said, "I asked the first candidate, 'How long do you think the United States will be the world's leading super power?'"

**DB:** Yeah.

**JE:** And that seemed to throw that young man because it never occurred to him, "Could this great country of ours ever lose that leadership role?"

**DB:** Right, yeah, I could tell he just wanted to say, "Forever. Forever, of course," because we've always been, as far as his memory was. That disturbed me because I thought, "Doesn't he realize there's not the Roman Empire anymore? I'm sure they thought it was going to last forever. And the British Empire." I read some of Churchill's diaries he kept before World War I of when the world was on the edge of change and yet oblivious. He and the colleagues that were all with them, they were not even ever thinking about it. As they looked at the ruins in Greece they weren't even thinking about the possibility there could ever be the decline of the British Empire.

So it worried me. And I got to thinking, "We're losing our economic edge. Countries like China and India are becoming very competitive, there are other things that are going

on in our country, our infrastructure, our educational system. And if we don't invest in the right things and do the right things we're not going to remain competitive, we're not going to remain a leader." But I thought there was too blithely going along not even thinking about these major issues.

**JE:** So can you answer that today in 2016?

**DB:** Well, that's very hard for me to answer. I know the answer is not forever because history would tell us it's not so. But I'm very hopeful that we have many more years. But I have to tell you that from the time I first asked the Rhodes scholars that question to now asking our honor students at OU that question, even this year, now many of them say, "We already aren't." Or they say, "Ten years." I ask them to guess, "Will it be a century? Will it be fifty years? Ten years?" They guessed ten years or less, the majority of them. So it's just turned that first result on its head.

Then I go home and I'm worried that they're overly pessimistic. They don't have enough confidence in the future of the country. I think that we have to do some things very quickly. We've been a leading country in the world and we've certainly been economically the leader because we've been the best educated people in the world.

It used to be you had to go to high school and pay tuition or you couldn't go. Most people couldn't afford to go. Free public high school transformed this country into a productive country. The biggest jump in the economy in this country's history productivity came after the GI Bill when we sent so many more people to college free, that had been in the war. But what are we doing? We're disinvesting in education as fast as we can, for example.

And there are other things that we have to do as well. The two parties used to get together and have bipartisan for—the old saying was, the saying I grew up with, "Politics stops at the water's edge, then you unite." Not now. Not now. No partisanship and foreign policy and everything else. So just a lot of things we need to do, I think we can do them.

I'm an optimist mainly because of our students. Students I rub shoulders with every day, they have great values. They want to give back. They want to do things for other people. They're compassionate. They're really remarkable, they're highly intelligent, so they give me optimism.

The other thing that gives me optimism is we're a free society. So when you start to talk about China is going to overtake us, or India with her myriad of religious problems, or some other authoritarian countries, India not being one, but Russia or China. I think they underestimate the value of freedom itself in the long run. A free society is so much more creative. It has so much more ingenuity.

And so, I'm still going to put my bets on a free society anytime. I think we're probably the freest society on the globe and I think that that's ultimately going to pull us through.

**Chapter 27 – 6:28****Education Penny Sales Tax**

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**John Erling:** Now you're on a campaign, maybe your last campaign.

**David Boren:** May be the last one.

**JE:** You're suggesting a penny sales tax to boost school funding.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** And you're collecting signatures to places on the ballot in November of 2016.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** You need over sixty-five thousand signatures. What brings us to this point?

**DB:** Well, just seeing what's been happening in Oklahoma, I mean, when you're first in the nation in cuts to education—first of all the states since 2008—we were forty-ninth, I'd be surprised if we're not at this moment fiftieth in the nation on what we spend per child to educate children in Oklahoma. That's just not Oklahoma, that's not who we are. Our parents, grandparents made sure there were some great teachers who changed their lives there for us. We owe that obligation to our children. It's a basic human obligation to educate the next generation.

So I just felt that the future of the next generation is at stake in Oklahoma. I feel like the future of the state is at stake because you can't build a state on ignorance. You've got to build it on education and knowledge and we're in a knowledge-based economy. What would it look like if we said as our slogan for economic development, "Bring your jobs, bring your company, bring your families, come to Oklahoma. By the way, we're dead last in what we spend to educate our children." It's a disaster for economic development and job creation in our state.

I feel like Oklahoma has given me every good thing I have in my life. The Oklahomans let me be governor. Oklahomans let me be senator, President of the University of Oklahoma. Oklahoma gave me my wife, I mean, Oklahoma has given me a host of friends, and I just feel like I could never give back to Oklahoma as much as Oklahoma has given to me. But if I could in a small way do something to get our state back on the right path, I want to try to do it.

**JE:** Well, the sales tax, the state is four and a half cents.

**DB:** I believe that's right.

**JE:** And then this would bring it to five and a half.

**DB:** Yeah.

**JE:** And in some communities when you add their tax on then—

**DB:** Yeah.

**JE:** ...it comes close to that—

**DB:** Nine, ten—

**JE:** ...10, 10 percent, ten cents on the dollar.

**DB:** Right.

**JE:** So you probably have that going against you.

**DB:** Yes.

**JE:** But our teachers' salaries are averaging just over forty-four thousand dollars.

**DB:** Well, we have forty-five thousand children in the state right now in classrooms that don't have a trained teacher. Every state that joins us, every single state, New Mexico, Arkansas, Kansas, of course, Texas, pay their teachers far more than we do. You can go across the border to Texas and get a ten thousand dollar signing bonus and eight thousand a year more. Our brightest graduates out of the colleges of education we're paying to train them in Oklahoma go right off to other states because they want to earn a good living. They're going to have children. They're going to have to put a roof over their head. They're going to have to educate them.

It's just terrible what's happening, so we just have to turn that around. And the tax rates, it's odd sort of to me that different states have different preferences on taxes. Some states seem to rely on the income tax. Some states rely on the property tax. You go across the border to Texas, property taxes there are two or three times as high as they are in Oklahoma, but they have a lower income tax, they have a lower sales tax.

We have, seemingly traditionally, seem to favor the sales tax as the way to pay for things. I've often heard, "Well, everybody pays it." But there's some things about it that are definitely not ideal, but you have to look at the total tax burden. Add up income taxes, property taxes, sales taxes, franchise taxes, and so on. So when you look at the total tax burden, Oklahomans are about fortieth in the nation, and the bottom ten in our total tax burden. There's certainly room for us to pay more to educate our children.

So I think we have to bear in mind that, yes, we might have a higher sales tax but other states have higher other things, income taxes, property taxes, and other things. One thing is for certain, and politicians don't say this as often as they should, and maybe earlier in my political career I didn't say it as often as I should, there's no free lunch. There's no free lunch. You can't give everybody tax cuts and still have quality education and quality roads and quality mental health and healthcare and so on. You can't do it, you have to pay for it. I'm sorry, in life things are usually not free, you have to pay for it. We have to make sacrifices. Well, parents and grandparents sacrificed for us, it's our turn.

I think that's who Oklahomans are, you know. I'm always so proud when they do a national survey of, "In what states do people give the most per capita to charitable organizations, churches, charitable organizations of all kind, or the most hours of volunteer service?" Oklahoma always ranks near the top, always in the top five. And I'm really proud of that. It's just not Oklahoma to be at the bottom of what we're spending,

giving to our children. They deserve to have a toolkit to be ready for success in life every bit as much as we did. And it's just not right that we are not doing it.

We had a speaker at OU the other day, he was a Harvard professor, and he startled me by using a word that I didn't expect him to say. Out of the clear blue he said, "It is a sin for us not to provide an adequate education for our children."

I thought to myself, "It is, that's a word that Oklahomans understand." It is a sin that we're not doing more to educate our children and help them with their futures.

**JE:** Well, because of our state budget and the lack of funds, it was in the paper this morning, Oklahoma City has to release 208 teachers.

**DB:** I know.

**JE:** Can you imagine what that does to class sizes?

**DB:** Ah, class sizes are going to shoot up. It's just terrible.

**JE:** So this initiative would grant five thousand dollar yearly rates for teachers.

**DB:** Yes, yes it would. It would for teachers' salaries. It also provides well over 300 million for K through twelve education and it provides sixty million for early childhood. So it would help the school budgets in other ways too. And then for higher education, 100 million. Still enough that I think that we could stop all these tuition and fee increases on students and their parents that many of them can't afford. They're working extra jobs trying to make ends meet to go to college or to send their children to college. It's just not right that we keep passing the bill on to them when many of us can afford it ourselves more easily.

**JE:** And we should point out, in '85 you developed the Foundation for Excellence.

**DB:** Yes, yes.

**JE:** Which supported many grants for education. So this is not a new thing for you.

**DB:** No, no it's not a new thing. This, again, was trying to set up private contributors for all the school districts in the state, as many as we can. We're first in the nation in a number of these local foundations we have, to give grants to teachers, to do extra special enrichment things for the school children. And it's been very, very helpful, I think, in a lot of schools across the state.

## Chapter 28 - 2:30

### Boren Advice

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**John Erling:** Students ask you, "What should I do when I leave?" and they ask you about public service. Career politician sounds like a bad word, I suppose, but what do you say to all those students at OU?

**David Boren:** Well, I hope many of them will go into public service. I hope they'll even go into elective office because if nothing else, for fear that the people who occupy those offices will not be equipped to do so. We desperately need people with good values and high intellect and a real commitment to be servants. And I always tell them, "Public service is not about power, it's about service." We desperately need good public servants. So I keep preaching that.

But there are a lot of other ways you can serve too. And I guess I started out my life, I decided when I was six or seven years old that I wanted to run for office some day. I wanted to be a congressman like my dad. Well, I guess a lot of kids want to be what their dad is or their mom is. So I had that from the beginning.

But it was funny, after I'd got in Washington and I'd been there awhile, I hoped I was being a good public servant. But I realized there are a lot of other ways to serve too. Teachers, what great public servants teachers are. They touch the lives of all these kids. I'm so grateful that in my life I've had so many great teachers, I mean, they totally changed my life.

Like my speech coach who forced me to overcome my shyness. I would never have gone very far in politics if I had not been able to make a speech.

**JE:** Yeah.

**DB:** But teachers helped me out on everything.

**JE:** You've become a very great speech-maker, by the way. And people always enjoy listening to you speak. For all the things you've done, how would you like to be remembered?

**DB:** Oh, well, for what I've done, not to help myself but what I've done to help other people, that's what you want to be remembered for. Another thing in our society that concerns me, we might be losing civility in other things in our society.

Someone asked me what I wanted to have put on the base of a statue that they have at OU for me that I won't let them put up until after I'm departed. I said, "I want you to put on the base of the statue, 'Never underestimate the power of kindness.'" Because I've seen it in my life, kindness comes back to you many times over. And, you know, the way we treat each other, in many ways, will determine the future of our society and the real strength of our society. As much as even military power, economic power is, but how we treat each other is going to really determine the real strength, the bedrock strength of this country. So I hope that will be on my tombstone.

**JE:** Well, you've been very kind to us. For Voices of Oklahoma and oral history, this was great, and I appreciate it very much.

**DB:** Thank you very much, John.

**JE:** You bet.

**Chapter 29 - 0:33****Conclusions**

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**Announcer:** This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time, on [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com).