Fred Risser and Doug Moe

Forward for the People, the Autobiography of America's Longest-Serving Legislator

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Host: Stu Levitan

SL *Hello again, friends, and welcome to Madison BookBeat, your community radio home for Madison authors, topics, book events, and publishers. I'm this week's host, Stu Levitan, and today we touch them all, as I'm joined live in the WORT news studio by the authors of a book I have been eagerly awaiting for years and which more than met my hopes.*

It's called Forward for the People, the Autobiography of America's Longest-Serving Legislator by the Remarkable Fred A. Risser, the Democrat who represented Madison in the State Assembly from 1957 to 1963, and then in the State Senate until he retired in 2021, and the award-winning journalist and author Doug Moe, making his fourth BookBeat appearance.

Forward for the People is now available from our good friends at the Wisconsin Historical Society Press, and it is required reading for anyone interested in modern Wisconsin government and politics. It also provides a revealing look at Fred Risser as a young man, running track at West High, serving as a medic in the Navy hospital corps, working in a logging camp, hitchhiking around the country, even working a carnival as a not-quite-on-the-level mentalist, I kid you not.

But Fred Risser was born to be a Wisconsin legislator. His father, Fred E. Risser, served 12 years in the Senate. His maternal grandfather, Ernest N. Warner, served a term in the Assembly, was the author of the state's civil service law, and yes, is the namesake of that large city park on the North Side. Great-grandfather Clement E. Warner was a Civil War hero who served terms in both houses.

Throughout his extraordinary adult career, Fred Risser was a proud and staunch liberal, a steadfast champion of public health, open and clean government, women's rights, public employees, unions, Madison, and the University of Wisconsin. Pretty much everything that's good about Wisconsin, Fred Risser fought for. Pretty much everything that's bad, Fred fought against.

Doug Moe's career is only about 50 years long, but it includes repeated recognition as Madison's favorite columnist and a series of engaging and insightful biographies of Madison's great women and men and entities. It is a pleasure to welcome to Madison BookBeat Fred Risser and Doug Moe.

FR: Thanks, Stu. That's quite a buildup.

Well, it's quite a career, and it's quite a book. And I really, as I say, it more than met my expectations. I learned a lot about Wisconsin politics and a lot about you.

The book is dedicated, quote, "To Pop, who inspired and encouraged me." Your father was in public office from before you were born until you were almost 22 years old, including six years as Dane County DA and the 12 years in the State Senate that I mentioned. Did you like growing up the son of a politically prominent man from a longtime politically prominent family?

I was very proud of my father, and I enjoyed campaigning with him. As a young boy, actually as a real young boy, I used to go out and nail up the Risser signs where they're not supposed to be. He would sit in the car and say, you go over there and put it up on the side. They'll take it down in a couple of days, but it'll be up for a while. And so I was campaigning when I was just able to walk around.

But how come you made a point of going to Minnesota for college, then Oregon for law school? You even changed your name officially from Frederick to Fred, so you wouldn't be just seen as Frederick's son.

Well, my dad was very active in politics, and everyone knew him as Frederick. And so I changed. My name was Frederick officially. But I went to court, changed my name from Frederick to Fred. There are several reasons, but one reason was that the state legislature was required to use your baptismal name on the ballot. And so I didn't want to use the name Frederick on the ballot. I wanted the name Fred. So I changed it.

See, if only Margaret Miller had known to officially change her name to Midge, she would have been much happier. So what did you learn from your father then in his years as a politician and later as his law partner?

Well, my dad was, as far as I'm concerned, a perfect father to me and to the family. He was always out campaigning, and he campaigned hard day and night. And one thing I learned was that if you're going to run for office, you have to do it full time. This part time running for office is not going to work if you really want to get in there. My dad was always out on weekends. He would go out to various religious dinners and whatnot. And of course, he always represented all of Dane County. So it wasn't just the city like I represented. He represented the entire county. He was district attorney for three terms. The first one in Dane County to serve three consecutive terms. He was always campaigning. And what I learned was to work hard. And he was always out talking to people. And he was a great person to follow.

I mentioned your unique legislative lineage. There was a point right after you graduated from law school at the University of Oregon where you almost started a law practice in a small city outside Eugene. That opportunity kind of fell apart. Would you really have gone through with that? Or did you always know that you were going to follow your forefathers into that big white building with the gold lady on top?

No, I really didn't know. At that age, you have several thoughts. And I thought, well, I might start practice in Oregon and stay out there. Or my dad thought I ought to come back and at least take the bar exam. You know, if you graduate from the University of Wisconsin, you don't have to take the bar exam. But if you graduate from a different school like Oregon, you have to come back and take the bar exam before you can practice here. And at that age, things are not definite. You try different ideas. I would have gone into private practice if I'd really had the opportunity. But the card didn't fall that way. The cards fall a different way. And I figured, well, I might as well come back to Wisconsin and pass

the bar exam and spend a couple years with my dad. I could always go back to Oregon if I wanted to.

And so you sort of backed into a 64-year-old legislative career?

Yes, well, when I got back to Madison, what happens is you tend to fall in love with someone. And I did, and I got married and settled down and finally decided, well, Madison was a pretty nice place too. Okay, well, we agree with you on that.

I have a question about your father's last election. It's a pivotal election in political history. It needs a setup. You already know the facts, so I'm going to give the setup straight to the listeners. Okay, listeners, here's the deal. Fred's father, Fred E. Risser, was a member of the Wisconsin Progressive Party. And when it disbanded in 1946, party co-founder Senator Robert M. LaFollette Jr. went back into the Republican Party, and so did Fred's father. While another Progressive Party member, a young war veteran from Clear Lake named Gaylord Nelson, who had come to UW Law School and was then in Madison, Gaylord joined the Democratic Party. Of course, in 1946, LaFollette lost the Republican primary to Joe McCarthy. We know what happened after that. Two years later, Fred's father didn't have a primary but faced that new young Democrat, Gaylord Nelson, in the general election and lost. And we know what happened after that.

So, Fred, two questions for you about that. First, did you and Gaylord ever talk about that campaign, especially whether Gaylord would have run against your father if your father had become a Democrat? Would Gaylord have run against your dad in a Democratic primary?

I don't know about that. I never talked to Gaylord about that, but I have talked to Gaylord on a lot of occasions. And he and I got along very well when I got into the legislature, becoming his chairman of Joint Finance and working with him. Gaylord and my dad were always close friends. I never heard a single word adverse to Gaylord by my dad. Of course, that's true with my dad on all occasions. He never actually spent much time talking about his opponents. He figured, why give your opponents that publicity? You just want to push yourself. And so my dad, as I say, never really was antagonistic to anyone he ran against, which is something I carried on. I always got along good with the people I ran against, and I think that it's important.

But Gaylord, yes, Gaylord and I talked about my dad. Many times he indicated that he got in the campaign because they were looking around for someone to run against my dad, and they couldn't find anyone. So they picked on Gaylord, and he ran and he won. And I think he won because the Capital Times, which gave my dad a 100% rating, good rating, at the very last day came out with an editorial saying there's a difference between Democrats and Republicans, votes a straight Democratic ticket. And, of course, Truman won that election, and all the Democrats in the state won that year. It's a really unique situation.

Given all that Gaylord would go on to accomplish as governor and U.S. senator, do you think the right man won that election?

I think that Gaylord had done a tremendous job. He's one of the best governors we had, and I was glad to support him. Whether he won the election or not, of course, I'd like to

have seen my dad win, but since he won, he went ahead to make a real name for himself. And I was pleased with Gaylord. I supported him all the time and was happy to be in the legislature as one of his lieutenants.

And he put you on the building commission, which is how you were able to funnel tens of millions of dollars to the UW and downtown Madison and building projects. Did you and he ever joke that he ended your pop's career but gave you a big boost up?

No, I think once you're in politics, sometimes you don't talk about these things. I don't remember joking with him about it, but Gaylord was very supportive of me, and I was very supportive of him. I was chairman of the Joint Finance Committee during Gaylord's tenure, and I was actually at that time the youngest to ever be chairman of the Finance Committee. And he and I worked together on many issues, especially the issues of trying to unionize state workers.

We're talking with Fred Risser about his new memoir, Forward for the People, the autobiography of America's longest-serving legislator. And in a moment or two, we will bring co-author Doug Moe into the conversation. But right now I want to ask the legislator about legislation. Fred, of the 240 bills which you authored which became state law, which of the two or three do you think did the most good for the state and people of Wisconsin?

Well, you know, it's not always the bills. It's a lot of the work behind the scenes that helps the people of the state of Wisconsin. I think one of my greatest accomplishments was to bring state government back downtown, and that took a lot of work. It took effort by, in effect, we had to condemn buildings downtown. We had to come up with the idea that state government belonged downtown. That was one of my major efforts.

As far as bills are concerned, I worked on smoking for over 20 years. When I first started out, you could smoke anywhere in the state, and I remember going to a theater and the guy's smoking in front of me bothered me to the point where I couldn't watch the movie. And I said, my God, that's terrible. Anyway, we worked 20 years on smoking, trying first to stop the sale to minors. Very interesting. I remember one of my first bills was to try to keep people from 16 from smoking. And then one of the legislators got up and said, you mean to tell me you're going to keep the kids from buying cigarettes for the old man? The idea was that cigarettes were available everywhere at any time. We finally passed the bill, but it took many years.

A bill on making organ transplants easier was a bill that was very important. Bills to help the University of Wisconsin and on the building commission, having an opportunity to work on many university buildings, many buildings from the state. A lot of activity other than just individual bills is involved in being a good legislator.

That smoking legislation I think is the one that I most appreciate purely for how it affected me because I had the same reaction to you too, but when I looked into it, Wisconsin was not in the forefront of passing statewide bills on smoking. Utah and Montana even passed bills before us and we also had, was that because of the power of the Wisconsin Tavern League that held the bill up that long?

They had a good lobbyist, very effective, and the Tavern League, yes, but not just Tavern League. You had other lobbyists, had lobbyists working for restaurants, you had lobbyists working for tobacco interests, you had lobbyists for other events that had to do with smoking. A lot of people said, well, people ought to have the privilege to smoke if they want, but smoking bothers others and that makes the difference as far as I'm concerned.

A bill of yours that did not pass that I wish had was your so-called death with dignity bill which would have allowed terminal patients to hasten their death through prescribed medication. You introduced that bill in 10 separate legislative sessions and it never even got a vote in the Senate. Why was that such a priority for you?

I don't really know why it didn't get a little support. After all, Canada has adopted the action. Other states have adopted this provision. Other states, Oregon, have been on. And why the event was, why it didn't get any impact, I really don't know, except that probably legislators had other ideas. But why was it such a priority for you that you introduced it session after session? There was a group of people that felt very strongly that that bill should be adopted or at least come to a vote. And so I kept introducing it, hoping that we'd get a vote on it. And sometimes, like my cigarettes, I had to introduce it for 30 years before I was successful. It's an effort to get a vote on the subject matter because this was an issue that a large group of people felt very strongly on. And I thought that whether you liked the issue or not, it's entitled to a vote.

Near the end of the book, we're going to talk in a moment about a bill that you did give a vote on, you did allow a Senate vote on that you might not have wanted, but we'll talk about that in a moment. Near the end of the book, you give a very exciting insider account of when the 14 Senate Democrats went to Illinois to try and block the enactment of Scott Walker's union busting bill. Was Act 10 the legislation you most regret not being able to stop? Since we're speaking, having this conversation on Labor Day?

Well, that was one. I don't think you'd say that it was the only one. There were bills affecting women's rights, which I was very active on. Bills giving women the right to handle their own bodies. Bills that give people the opportunity to express themselves. I wouldn't say that that was the only one, no. There were a lot of bills.

How demoralizing was it to be in the minority? The Democrats had the Senate majority from 1977 to 1993. How demoralizing was it to suddenly be in the minority, especially to the new breed of Republicans who were extremely partisan, not that bright, and willing to change or break the rules to enhance their power? How demoralizing was that?

Well, being in the minority initially was not too bad. In fact, I enjoyed being the minority leader because we would blame everything on the majority. We'd go in and blame the weather on them. Anything that went wrong, we said it was the majority's fault. And we had quite an effort in the Senate campaigning to try to change the Senate from Republican to Democrat. The Senate had been a Republican for many, many years. The Democrats hadn't been in there for, well, I think about 46 years. And we, as minority leader, had quite

an effort to change it, but I enjoyed being the minority leader because it gave me a chance to express myself. When you're in the majority, you have to be a little more careful sometimes.

We're talking with Fred Risser about his new memoir, Forward to the People, The Autobiography of America's Longest Serving Legislator. And I promise you that in just a bit, we are going to bring Doug Moe into the conversation. But first, Monona Terrace and some personal business.

Fred, your 64-year legislative career started with a controversy entirely of your own making when you filed a court order to block the city's condemnation of your apartment building on Butler Street for a parking ramp because the legislators are immune from civil process while the legislature is in session. You spoke a moment ago about condemning property to build downstate office buildings. You filed this court order literally the day after you were sworn in in 1957. Why did you do that?

What you're talking about, Stu, is the fact that I lived downtown. I did not live at home. I had an old building that I had revamped a little bit, and I lived downtown. And the city came and wanted to use that for parking, and I said no. And I actually pulled my legislative immunity shortly after I was elected to the legislature. A newspaper said, "Risser's on his last term before he even starts because of so forth and so on." Anyway, actually what happened is that I settled with them. I was a little upset at the time, but you sometimes question activity with the idea that that's part of the long-range plan. In other words, if your property is picked up on condemnation, it's sort of tax-free, for one thing. And another thing is you sometimes get in an analysis of the value of the property, which is different. I was a young person at the time, and I wanted to find out what was going on, and I thought I'd check my legislative immunity to see if it worked. It worked for a couple days anyway. Then I settled out.

Well, it apparently did not hurt you politically. You ran unopposed in 1958. That was a great year for Democrats. First Democratic governor and the first Democratic assembly since 1935. Was that purely because of the recession and it was Eisenhower's second term, the midterm elections, or did the so-called Metzner Bill, which the Republicans had passed to block the Frank Lloyd Wright Monona Terrace the year before, did that have anything to do with it?

I think that has something to do with it. I think Gaylord Nelson ran a very excellent campaign at the time. He won. And I think the Nixon problems hurt the Republicans all around, and Democrats did well because, in part, of the Nixon activity going on. People were all upset with the Republicans, and they wanted a change, and they had a change, and so the Democrats took over. I think Monona Terrace was part of it. I think Gaylord Nelson ran a good campaign. I think that the fact that the Democrats were on the up because of the Republican downers, there's a lot of reasons.

And then the first thing in January 1959, your first bill enacted into law repealed the Metzner Bill and allowed the project to go forward. Of course, it didn't, but that's a different story. Among all the legislators, you had a unique perspective on Frank Lloyd Wright because you and your father had actually sued him on behalf of a client whose bill Frank did not pay. How did that all turn out?

Well, I put in a book a little incident. Maybe I should have left that out of the book. But I liked the activity. I mean, the action of the Monona Terrace was something that I thought was good. But when you're a lawyer, you represent your clients, and we had a client that thought that he was owed some money. But we got nowhere trying to get it out of the owner.

And Frank was not a responsive defendant.

No, he wasn't.

And then more than 30, one of the amazing things about this book is how many stories come around and around and around. And more than 30 years later, in the fall of 1991, you had another big Monona Terrace matter. You got the Senate to pass Tommy Thompson's offer of $15 million to Monona Terrace for a parking ramp. Did some Senate Democrats actually support that just to help you turn back that primary challenge from Michael Christopher, the former Eastside alder?

You know, I really don't know the motivation of some of them. I suspect that some did. Since Monona Terrace wasn't in their district, they didn't have the direct account for it as I did. And I think that some of them came around to help us out. I have always had good relations with the Democrats. They selected me as president of the Senate on five separate occasions.

Well, did you convey to some of your colleagues that it would help in that primary campaign to be able to show Madison voters that you got this?

I think, Stu, they probably know it. We, in political life, know what is going to be good or bad for our constituents, whether we talk about it or not. Whether it's good or bad for our voters is something that we know or we wouldn't be there.

Speaking of primary campaigns, some of our listeners may recall that four years after your Michael Christopher campaign, I also ran against you. And we have slightly different takes on the dynamics of that 1996. But I want to say I appreciate very much how gentle you were with me in the book. And I want to state unequivocally right now on the radio that the right man won. And I am sorry I put our wives and our friends through all that. I guess I thought it was a good idea at the time. I was wrong.

Well, Stu, we had a good campaign. You were a hard worker, and I was a hard worker, and we worked that as a democratic effort. It was a good campaign on both sides. And I'm glad to say that we can fight a campaign and still end up good friends. I appreciate that. And again, I want to say the right man won.

And speaking of wives, you write with great love and appreciation for your wife, Nancy. We can imagine what she has meant for your personal life these last 40 years. What has she meant for your public and political life?

Never underestimate the power of a woman. The power of a woman is great. And as far as politics is concerned, having the right wife politically is extremely important. And Nancy has been my strongest supporter. Without her, I probably wouldn't have won some of the campaigns. Anyway, she works very hard. We did a lot of telephoning, asking people to

support me. One of our ideas was asking people not for money but ask them for their name. Would you be willing to support Senator Risser? And I'm not asking for money. In one campaign, she called over a six-month period close to 10,000 people. And we know that. We had all the lists. She was a tremendous supporter, and I can't speak highly enough of her activities.

You even got Karlton Armstrong to support you. He was on the list. We'll have to talk to Brother Karl about that. And what a first date you had, walking around Lake Wingra, through the Arboretum, lunch at the Laurel Tavern on Monroe Street. You probably even remember what she had for lunch.

Probably a hamburger.

You talk about some of the material you had to work with. You had an absolute treasure trove of primary source archival material. You had letters, travel journals, contemporaneous political notes, the family newspaper you put out in high school. As you went through all that material and you considered the totality of your life, did you learn anything about yourself or about others?

Well, I suppose I was learning as I was going on. You learn as you move along. And, of course, you learn as you have, as you move along in the course. Actually, I tried different things, and I enjoyed actually what I was doing. I've enjoyed my life, and I think I've had a fortunate time and a fortunate spouse to work with.

But when you were working on the book, when you actually sat down to write this book, to look back at your life, and you focused on your life as it unfolded, did you learn anything about yourself in that process?

Well, I learned that I'm not a book writer all by myself, and that's why I picked Doug to help me out.

Well, that's a perfect segue. You could be a radio host someday, Fred, if you're next career. That's a perfect segue to bring Doug back into this. Doug, in your long career as Madison's favorite columnist, you've now carved out this niche as Madison's biographer. What was the writing process for this book like?

Well, it was interesting because we got started during the height of the pandemic, so we spoke by phone quite a lot. And as you've alluded to, Stu, Senator Reser had an amazing archive. The most beneficial for me, especially in the early going, was he had written letters home from school in Minnesota and then undergraduate and law school in Oregon. Then when he went in the Navy and he was stationed in Panama, he wrote weekly letters home that his parents saved and then gave to him.

And so we went into the basement of his and Nancy's home and carted out these boxes filled with letters. And so we were able to recreate his time, say, in Panama, much more vividly than we would have been able to just by relying on somebody's memory of, you know, going back 60, 70, 80 years. So that was really a high point.

And then I would write a draft, say, of 30 pages or so, send it to Senator Reser. He'd go over it. We'd talk about what he liked, what maybe he didn't, what I'd forgotten. Did some other interviews with colleagues and family. I think it was a pretty good process.

The only thing I was going to jump in earlier when you were asking about what he thought about his life, you know, a couple of times he said to me, do you think they really want to read all this? And I said, trust me, Senator. They do want to read this.

Is the material making its way to the Historical Society archives? Nancy is shaking her head in an affirmative manner.

First of all, let me say the reason, Doug Moe, the reason you found everything in such good order is because of my wife, who put them in good order. And she did spend hours and hours doing it. But yes, the Historical Society is going to have options. It has the option to pick everything up when I'm gone.

I'm pretty sure it will take that option.

And by the way, they did come in to the legislature when I left. They picked up a lot of material. I have worked with the Historical Society, and I think they've done a tremendous job, and they can have whatever they want when I'm done. It'll be a big archive.

Interviews? Please tell me you tape recorded those interviews.

Taped them, yes. Well, that should make it to the archives, too. Actually, that will probably be in the Doug Moe archives.

What surprised you about Fred in writing his life story?

Boy, you know, not a whole lot, because I was a Madison citizen here now for almost 70 years. I was so grateful, you know, when we were talking about the bills and the work he's done. You know, having biked to Belleville this morning and back, I'd like to get in a plug for the state bike trails that he was instrumental in helping make happen on the old railroad lines.

Again, thinking about surprise, I guess the difficulty of campaigning and how hard the campaigns, how hard he worked on the campaigns. You know, from the outside, I always thought, well, Senator Risser is going to win again. He's won every time. But he always took it very seriously, took all the challenges seriously, and he said, worked very hard.

Yeah, I know he took it seriously. He made that very clear. You have now co-authored autobiographies of the conservative Republican Tommy Thompson and the liberal Democrat Fred Risser. Now, we've never really...

How's that for bipartisanship?

Yeah. That required several years immersion, like deep immersion in their policies and their personalities.

Now, you and I have never really talked politics, but did that immersion process of first a Republican, then a Democrat have any effect on your own ideology or politics?

I don't think so. I know how I tend to vote, of course. But I took each of these projects, I take all these projects too, as separate challenges. And I'm a storyteller. So, you know, politics is a big part of both of those stories, but it's certainly not the end-all, be-all. So I was most interested in telling a good story and helping them tell their story.

And, you know, in each instance, neither was particularly, you know, you mentioned that Senator Risser was a hardcore liberal, but he also, Brian Rood did a blurb for our book, Republican state senator. Neither Thompson or Senator Risser, to my mind, were rabid, you know, ideologues. They knew about government, and I guess I would take anything from having worked with both of them. I wish there were more current members of the Wisconsin political class that could adopt that kind of mindset.

Which is more fun, writing about politicians or sports figures?

Well, I'm going to go off the rails here, and Richard Ben Kramer is a great journalist. He wrote a book called What It Takes about politics. He also tried to write a biography of Alex Rodriguez, the New York Yankee star. And when someone asked Kramer, he said, people have it backwards. They think the sports guys are the really cool guys and the politicians are kind of, he said, they're wrong. I'd rather write about politics. Because why? I think he arrived at the sports figures at a time when they were all making so much money, they didn't have to talk to reporters anymore, and they were increasingly isolated. Whereas the politicians, you know, Kramer in his book, he hung out with Gary Hart and Biden, and, you know, it was in the 1988 campaign. And he loved those guys. Joe Biden, when Richard Ben Kramer died of cancer in his early 60s, Biden was vice president and went and gave a eulogy for a reporter.

So do you subscribe to that, that politicians are more fun to write about than sports figures?

Well, I had a good time with Mike Leckrone, who was not exactly a sports figure. No, I've enjoyed all my books.

You had a terrible time with Lyle Alzedo.

Yeah, a sports figure, that's right. That's right.

We're talking with Fred Risser and Doug Moe about the political book of the year, Forward for the People, the autobiography of America's longest serving legislator, just out from our very good friends at the Wisconsin Historical Society Press.

Fred, there are a couple of very big what-ifs in your career. One came in the mayoral election of 1961. We don't have to go into the details, but it was a no-incumbent election. You were seen as a likely candidate. You did not run, in part because the Cap Times endorsed the outgoing mayor's administrative assistant way too soon. Did you seriously consider running for mayor?

There's another reason. I did not want to go into full-time politics. I want to only go into part-time politics. The reason I ran for the legislature, it was part-time. I was a lawyer. I practiced with my dad. I loved the law and practiced with my dad. At that time, I didn't really want a full-time political job. I enjoyed practicing law, and I wanted a part-time job. The mayor was full-time. While I think had I run, I would have done pretty good. I really didn't want to give up my law practice at that time.

I'm pretty sure you would have won because the liberal who ran had the taint of Monona Terrace override on his forehead, and then you would have won. Do you think you'd have been happy as mayor?

Actually, I wasn't ready to give up the practice of law. I spent a lot of time in law school. I was working with my dad. I loved my dad, and I enjoyed the practice of law. At that time, I just enjoyed the practice of law. At that time, I had just gotten married and I was enjoying the part-time life in the legislature. And I had not really any interest in going full-time, whether it had been mayor or governor or whatever.

Okay. Well, then the next big what if was 1970. You apparently actively considered running for lieutenant governor, but didn't because Pat Lucey, who's from Madison, sewed up the nomination for governor very early. He needed someone from Milwaukee to balance the ticket. State Senator Martin Schreiber ran and won. If Milwaukee Mayor Henry Meyer had gotten the nomination, would you have...

I probably would have tried it, yes. The lieutenant governor, again, was not really a full-time job. And I could still continue with a legal practice at that time. Times have changed. The lieutenant governor used to be president of the Senate. He's not president of the Senate anymore.

You got rid of that.

Yes, we had to change the Constitution to do that. But you change your opinions as you get older, I suppose. And I probably had in the back of my mind the possibility, but I wasn't out campaigning for the job at that time.

Now, you and Governor Lucey had a very significant political disagreement his first year in office when you opposed his plan to merge the University of Wisconsin with the state college system. You pointed out correctly that it was bad for UW-Madison, and you voted against it, but you didn't really fight it the way you could have as the Senate leader. Why didn't you fight it?

Well, I guess the reason is political. The governor was very anxious that his program get through and was, of course, very upset that his leader in the legislature was against him. And I finally agreed to lay off of campaigning. In fact, one of the newspapers came out with a story, why isn't Rissler being more active? He's usually active on everything. But it was sort of a political decision. I figured I would vote by conscience. I would support my person in the area here, but I would not go all out against it. It was a political decision.

Do you think if you had actively worked against it, you could have blocked it?

It might have made a change.

Do you have any regret not doing that?

No, I think time has shown that it is a good experiment. I think we're still experimenting with the colleges. But at that time, the area, Madison community was united, I think, against it. And I supported my area, and I supported the university, which I thought was worth maintaining as an individual entity.

As you mentioned, that merger meant a lot to Lucy, both politically and administratively. How did he take your opposition, both then and going forward?

Well, as you pointed out, my opposition was verbal and knowing, but I did not go out politically fighting it. And so it sometimes makes a difference whether you politically fight something or whether you just vote your conscience. And at that time, I voted the way my constituents and my area and my personal opinion went. And Lucy was very strong on the other. In fact, we have a telephone in the Senate. We can phone our governor while we're in the Senate. And he was on the phone with me as the vote was being cast, pleading with me. And I told him, I said, well, I'm not arguing against it, but I'm not going to vote for it.

It's a pretty dramatic experience. It's a very dramatic moment in the legislature. You also fought Governor Nelson right after he put you on the State Building Commission, opposing his plan for the Hill Farms State Office Building. Why did you oppose that?

Well, again,I felt that the center of government at that time should be in downtown Madison. And I was head of a committee to help bring government to downtown Madison. I felt that building a facility out far on the far west side would increase traffic and be at that time, we didn't have the computers we have now, and the personal contact is very important. I thought state government should be downtown Madison, and I worked very hard to do that. When the governor wanted an office building out there, I thought it was a mistake.

And you know an interesting thing, and I didn't mention this in the book, the interesting thing is the original plan for that building was two stories higher, and it was the governor who thought they'd never fill the building up, so he took off the top two stories. I said, well if you're going to build it, you ought to build it big enough for the... But he actually cut off the building in size because he didn't think he could fill it up.

How important, looking back, do you think your work was in downtown planning, the state office buildings in downtown Madison?

I think it was essential to bring government back downtown. To take... Government was getting ready to spread around, and at that time I thought that government should be downtown.

And on the building commission we had to condemn property in the downtown area for office buildings. We had to have an office facility committee, which I was chairman of, do a

lot of work for many years. I thought that we were active to rejuvenate the downtown area, and I consider one of my legacies bringing government back downtown.

Now, different situation. You have communications by computer, and government is spreading out. Probably it can spread out more now, but at that time you needed government closer to the people.

You mentioned women's rights earlier. I want to ask about something that happened a long time ago, 1978. One of the things you did as chairman of the Senate Organizational Committee was adopt a new policy that if a bill made it through committee, you would bring it to the Senate Organizational Committee for a vote on whether or not it went to the floor of the Senate for discussion and vote. Previous chairmen, if they didn't like a bill, they would just hold it up in committee and not bring it to a vote.

In 1978, there was a bill to deny public financing for abortions for poor women. You opposed that, but even though you opposed it, you let the Senate Organizational Committee vote on it. One Democrat voted with Republicans. It went to the floor. It passed. Governor Schreiber vetoed it. A second version passed. You opposed the legislation that passed, and yet you brought it to the committee that let it pass.

Do you regret that you were so fair that you let a bill you opposed pass?

No, I have been able to defeat other bills, but some bills I feel that if they've gone through committee and the majority of the committee wanted the bill, that it at least ought to have a Senate vote on it. I could talk against it and try to defeat it, but I really had a feeling that the government is an activity of the people. People want to have a vote on something. Maybe they should have a vote on it. Many cases I used to let people vote, even though I may be against it.

You're kind of autocratic to turn around and put everything in the drawer that you don't like. It depends on the issue. My theory of government is if it's good for the people, let it go. If it's bad for the people, we can try to defeat it.

If I'm remembering right, Stu, in the bill you're talking about, they had to actually go to a hospital room.

They went to Tiny Krieger's hospital room to let Tiny Krieger vote on it, yeah. Right.

One quick question about family. None of your adult children went into politics. Wereyou surprised, relieved, disappointed? They all vote. That's important. That's what counts. We've got about two minutes left. You closed your career in early 2021. Events were canceled. They were moved online, including legislative sessions. So you did not get that final day to sit at your desk and look back on your amazing career.

If you could have sat in the Senate that last day, what reflections do you think would have dominated your memories that day?

Wow. That's quite a question, something I don't know if I can respond in the time.

Well, we've got a minute and a half to respond to, so think about it.

Well, I think it's government is something that we should be working for the people. Bills should be introduced to help society after. That's what we're there for. We're not there for purposes of pettiness or for personal reasons or for personal things. I thought that we were there to make society better, and I used to try to say whether this bill would be beneficial or not to society as one of the reasons to support it or oppose it.

But would there have been images that you think would have come flooding back to you as you sat there that last day after 64 years?

Probably. That's a tough question. As I say, when I started out in the Senate, there had never been anyone but white men for over 100 years, and there had never been any women involved. There's been a change in society, in open society, which is good. I think there's been probably good and some bad in government. As they say, life has changed. Oh, how it differs from the rocks.

I'm afraid that is all the time we have today with Fred Risser and Doug Moe. Again, the book is *Forward for the People*, the autobiography of America's longest-serving legislator from our very good friends at the Wisconsin Historical Society Press. You can see Doug and Fred live and in person on September 24th at the Madison Central Library presented by the Wisconsin Book Festival.

Sarah Batkie will be your host next week with her guest, Ron Rindo, author of *Life and Death and Giants*. I'll be back September 29th with Wauwatosa Mayor Dennis McBride, author of *A City on the Edge, Pandemic, Protest, and Polarization*. Until then, on behalf of News and Public Affairs Director Nate Carlin, engineer Andrew Thomas, and the entire Madison Book Beat Collective, I'm Stu Levitin. Thank you for joining us.

And now, as Ben Sidran plays us out with a little bit of *Little Sherry*, please stay tuned for Alex Wilding-White and *All Around Jazz*. You're listening to WORT, 89.9 FM, Madison, listener-sponsored community radio since 1975. Thank you.