Benjamin Eikey:

Welcome to Oversight Matters, a podcast series on legislative oversight. My name is Ben Eikey, and I am your host. This podcast is brought to you by the Levin Center at Wayne Law in Detroit, Michigan.

Senator Rob Portman:

Though, I join my colleagues on both sides of the aisle today in saying that this is one of those giants of the Senate who will be missed, and although I've only been here for four of his many years of service, I was privileged to serve with him a year back.

Senator Susan Collins:

Carl Levin has been a faithful trustee and truly, a senator's senator. I truly can't imagine this body without him, without his wisdom, his integrity, his insight.

Senator Bernie Sanders:

I just want to take a moment to thank Carl Levin for his friendship. I think as has been previously noted, Carl is recognized as having perhaps the greatest intellect here in the United States Senate. So I think Senator Carl Levin has been a senator's senator.

Benjamin Eikey:

That was Senators Rob Portman, Susan Collins, and Bernie Sanders on the floor of the Senate, in a tribute to Senator Carl Levin and his service to the United States Senate. On this very special episode of Oversight Matters, I had the privilege of visiting Senator Carl Levin at his home in Detroit to discuss his new memoir, and to share some stories from his time in public service.

Benjamin Eikey:

I had not met Senator Levin prior to this, and I was a little nervous. How am I going to take a decorated 36-year career in the Senate, plus his time on the Detroit City Council, and condense such a story into an engaging podcast? I just did not know what to expect when I arrived on a cold, rainy, cloudy, classic Michigan winter day with my backpack stuffed to the brim with the podcast recording materials and notes. I remember taking a deep breath, and introducing myself to Senator Levin and his wife, Barbara.

Benjamin Eikey:

What's mentioned the most often about Carl, I'm going to start using Carl now, as he insisted on being called by his name, after I used Senator Levin a few times, is his legendary questioning during committee hearings, his ability to work with a wide partisan array of elected officials, and his quality of judgment. While all of these things are part of this person, what struck me the most was his warmness of character.

Benjamin Eikey:

He knew my background, and he asked all sorts of questions to get to know me better. I felt like I was being interviewed every bit as much as the other way around. He asked about my family, my interest in public service and politics, and if I'm enjoying my work at the Levin Center. His wife, Barbara, was on the other couch. And in her eyes, I could tell she was delighted by this conversation and this chance to meet me, and to visit old memories.

Benjamin Eikey:

Just like that, my nerves were gone. I felt prepared. I felt welcomed. We were ready. I pressed record and I settled in for our discussion. Carl, thank you for the warm welcome. I am looking forward to our discussion this evening.

Senator Carl Levin:

Ben, it's great to have you as part of the Levin Center, an integral part of our effort there. And it's a real pleasure to do this together with you tonight.

Benjamin Eikey:

Let me start with asking you why you chose to write this book, and who you hope reads the book.

Senator Carl Levin:

Well, I learned a lot about the legislative process both in the City Council in Detroit and of course, in the US Senate, and I wanted to share what I had learned. I also learned a lot about politics and I wanted to share those lessons as well. And what I believe is something I also want to share, which is that public officials, including elected officials, ought to strive to do what is best for their constituencies, for the people they represent, and not necessarily what is popular.

Senator Carl Levin:

Because what is popular at the moment may not be what is best in the judgment of an elected official for the people that he represents. And he swears an oath to represent people and not just to vote for things which may reelect himself because they're popular. It's what I call a strategic view of your responsibility. It's not the populace view, it's a strategic view which looks at longterm made decisions that are best longterm for your people.

Benjamin Eikey:

So you've tried, and quite successfully I might add, to put 44 years of public service into some 300 plus pages. And the story starts, of course, right here in Detroit, where you were born and raised, working, in fact, as a young man for a short period of time in the auto plants, and even driving a taxi. And Detroit seems so important to who you are and the values you have. Can you describe what Detroit means, and has meant for you?

Senator Carl Levin:

Detroit is very, very dear to both Barb, my wife, and to myself. We not only were born and raised in Detroit, but we've also raised our kids in Detroit. And, of course, we went to school here in Detroit. Barb and I both graduated Detroit Central High School. We're proud of that. We live downtown now, and we've witnessed the ups and downs of Detroit.

Senator Carl Levin:

We've been here for good times and bad times. And it's something we're very, very loyal to. It's a city we're dedicated to assist in any way we can to continue a roaring comeback which it's had. And that was interrupted by a pandemic, but it's going to start again, we're confident when this virus finally kicks out.

Benjamin Eikey:

Regarding your experience on the Detroit City Council, you wrote the following in your book. "On the council, I focused my attention on trying to improve the state of the city after the riot. I'd like to think of myself as an idealist, but I don't want to be naive. And I am basically a practical person. I knew then, and I know now that no one, certainly no politician can wave a magic wand and displace the hate and fear that people carry in their hearts. Nor can any politician make people love or respect, or even tolerate each other."

Benjamin Eikey:

"But I do believe that a politician has an obligation to identify injustice, and try to eliminate or at least minimize it. And I do believe that politicians can write laws that will improve the lives of the people they seek to serve. And that is what I tried to do." Looking at your City Council experience, you write in the book that your service on the Detroit City Council helped prepare you for your time in the US Senate. What were the key lessons from your time on the City Council?

Senator Carl Levin:

I'd say the first lesson is to reinforce a belief that I was raised with, which is that government can truly make a difference in people's lives. It provides locally, police and fire protection. It gives us emergency hospital care, to get us if there's an emergency, with the EMS, snow removal, garbage removal, sewer maintenance, building maintenance and repairs, to make sure that our neighborhoods are as safe as possible, in terms of where people live and in the structures in which they live as well.

Senator Carl Levin:

But we also learned that when I was on the City Council, that the government can screw up. It can evade questions when its representatives come to the City Council to answer questions as part of the oversight responsibility of the City Council. And what you'll learn when you are on a local legislative body is how important it is to first of all, know the facts of what you're talking about. If you're going to ask questions of a bureaucrat, or someone who works for an agency, you've got to know the facts and not just ask them questions which they can easily duck.

Senator Carl Levin:

It's one thing to say I got a dozen complaints from this neighborhood about the neighborhood maintenance, and I want your response. What's going on in that neighborhood? Well, that's just too softball a question that's easy to evade. And so you have to know the specifics. What are the specific complaints of the neighbors, so that you can say, well, now wait a minute. You say that the lights have been repaired, but that's not the major issue that's been raised here. The major relation here is that the garbage is all over the alleys. The alleys have not been maintained.

Senator Carl Levin:

You got to know what the specifics are in any area that you're pressing an agency representative on. And I learned that here, in the city of Detroit. I got a reputation for knowing it. And I carried that belief and the importance both of oversight, but studying the facts, knowing the facts before you ask questions if you're going to really get good answers.

Benjamin Eikey:

When you got elected to the Senate in 1978, you got selected to be the chair of a subcommittee that had oversight responsibilities. It was called the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management. You stayed active in the field of oversight your entire Senate career. Why was that so important to you?

Senator Carl Levin:

I learned early at the City Council, the importance of how programs are implemented. It's just not enough to have a program or a policy in place. It's at least equally important and sometimes more so, that you really know if it's being implemented fairly and being implemented strongly. Or is it being ignored too much by the agencies that are responsible?

Senator Carl Levin:

I learned with HUD in Detroit, HUD is a federal agency that is supposed to provide housing, and instead it was destroying our neighborhoods in the city of Detroit when I was on the City Council, by keeping unprotected tens of thousands of homes, that once were homes but were now vacant houses, our ordinances require that they be boarded up, maintained safely. HUD violated our ordinance and we called them on it.

Senator Carl Levin:

We complained to our legislators about it, but the answer we got too often was that, well, that's an agency responsibility. And I wanted the legislators, our elected representatives to be responsible, to see that the programs were being implemented fairly. And as a matter of fact, I very early introduced with Senator Bourne, what was called Levin-Bourne Amendment, which required the agency involved which gave power to the Congress, to veto a agency regulation.

Senator Carl Levin:

We didn't want to just be told, well, that's up to the agency. We wanted elected representatives to be responsible. And that would require that they have some say in addition to oversight that they literally, if their oversight finds a failure, that they then be able to veto a regulation that's not working. Or a regulation is abusive, it can go the other way.

Senator Carl Levin:

You can have government agencies that are abusive of people, and you want to be able to call them on that, too. And if it's a regulation which should be repealed, and you want to have Congress have the right to repeal a regulation, either because it's not working, or because it's abusive of the public.

Senator Debbie Stabenow:

Mr. President, I could stand here for hours talking about his accomplishments, the footprints and handprints and marks he's made on Michigan, most importantly, the people in the communities of Michigan. But as we've heard this morning from colleagues, and we will continue to hear, they are small in comparison to the testament of his character, his compassion, his humor, and the unassailable strength of his convictions.

Benjamin Eikey:

Senator Debbie Stabenow, tribute to Carl Levin on the floor of the US Senate.

Senator John McCain:

Carl and I sat on opposite sides the aisle. The difference is quite obvious on any number of issues, but I hope it's also obvious how much I admire and respect my friend from Michigan. We've had our moments on the committee. A debate there can get a little passionate from time to time, perhaps a little more passionate on my part than Carl's, but that as all my colleagues would surely attest, is my problem, not Carl's. We are, however, both very proud of the committee's tradition of bipartisan cooperation, which Carl has worked diligently to preserve and strengthen.

Benjamin Eikey:

Senator John McCain, tribute to Carl Levin on the floor of the US Senate. You walk the reader through numerous investigations that you conducted. You looked into everything from Great Lakes' oil spills, to defense procurement, to the IRS, to the most complicated financial and tax transactions by corporations and individuals. Through it all, you sought and often accomplished, doing that work in a bipartisan way. How were you able to do that?

Senator Carl Levin:

Well, I learned on the City Council that it's important to work together for the good of your community with people who have different views. And so I took that very strong belief to the Senate. And you learn very quickly that if you want to get things done, that you've got to work with people who have different views, different beliefs, and are from different parties than you are. It's a better way to live as well, but it's also the only way you can accomplish important goals for the country.

Senator Carl Levin:

And most issues are not partisan issues. When it comes to the defense of the country, that's not a partisan issue. When it comes to what is necessary for the health and welfare of the people in the middle of a crisis right now, that should not be a partisan issue. And most issues that come before us are really not. But the trouble is that recently, almost everything's become a partisan issue. If you don't come to a legislative body to compromise, then you're not coming to govern.

Senator Carl Levin:

Because you can't govern unless you have a dictatorship with people who have different views, unless you're willing to listen, and then to compromise and find common ground. So, that's something that is truly essential. And I was able to work with a number of Republican colleagues very closely. Some of the best things that we got done, were done working with Republican colleagues at compromise. John McCain and I worked together on, for instance, tax reform issues. He and I took on the Apple company, because they were not paying taxes to the United States.

Senator Carl Levin:

They were avoiding taxes by trying and pretending that their operations were overseas when the money came from research which was done here. And most of their operations were conducted from here, even though they'd be manufacturing things in other places. They were not paying Uncle Sam anything like what they should have been paying. I got a lot of things done with Senator Coburn, a very conservative Republican from Oklahoma. And we were able to get a lot of things done because we directed our staffs, always in that subcommittee, to work together with the staff of the other party.

Senator Carl Levin:

The staffs frequently can work things out if they have the right attitude, the right approach, and if they reflect their boss's attitude. And that's why it's so important that the leaders of the committee, both Republican and Democratic, instruct their staffs to work together, end of the week have a drink together, share information that they gather so that, for instance, when interviews are made from witnesses coming before the committee, that those interviews be held together. It'd be transparent.

Senator Carl Levin:

That doesn't mean you always have to agree with the other party. There's frequent disagreements. I had disagreements with McCain, with Coburn. I had disagreements with one of my best buddies who worked with me on the Armed Services Committee, John Warner. But you don't have to agree on the remedies for problems. But you got to start with the right attitude, the right bipartisan attitude.

Benjamin Eikey:

So this is a different situation today in DC. What would you say to a young senator who wants to do what you did, but faces a very different landscape?

Senator Carl Levin:

Well, the value I would tell to a new senator of working together for a common cause is, it's still there. But it's harder to actually achieve and reflect that value when politics and the public are so polarized. It's much harder, but that just means that the leadership has got to be told by all senators, including new senators, that it's important to them that the leaders work together, first of all. That's not been the case recently.

Senator Carl Levin:

The Republican leader is very, very difficult to work with, I believe, but maybe that's too partisan a comment. But in any event, if the leaders, either one is rigid ideologically, and is driven by their base instead of by what they're trying to accomplish, then it's just simply going to fail to get things that need to be done for the country.

Senator Carl Levin:

So senators, new senators, old senators, I believe, should let their leaders know how important it is for the leaders to work together and to send the message to the more partisan basis in both their parties, that they're not going to govern here. The governing will be done by people who are willing to see the other point of view, to consider, to listen, be thoughtful, not be arrogant, not be it's my way or the highway approach. That's what they expect from leadership.

Senator John McCain:

Indeed, from Carl Levin's long and distinguished service in the Senate, Carl has obtained the respect of his colleagues on both sides of the aisle. We all listened to him, and we listened closest to him on the occasions when we disagree with him. That in my view, is a great compliment from one senator to another. It is a tribute paid to only the most respected members.

Benjamin Eikey:

Senator John McCain, tribute to Carl Levin on the floor of the US Senate.

Senator Claire McCaskill:

This is a senator's senator. There are no sharp elbows. There is no heated rhetoric. There is frankly no star power on cable TV. No one is dying to get Carl in front of a camera because he will say something incendiary, or he will pick a fight, which all of our friends are anxious for us to do, if we would only pick a fight. Carl is methodically doing the grind out work of legislature.

Benjamin Eikey:

Senator Claire McCaskill, tribute to Carl Levin on the floor of the US Senate. Turning now to the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, you write in your book that as a college student, you let a petition drive against then Joseph McCarthy, who was holding his anti-communism hearings, as chair of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations.

Benjamin Eikey:

Little did you know that you would eventually hold the same position. But your leadership on PSI was quite different and better than McCarthy's, of course. What did it mean to you to get the chairmanship of PSI?

Senator Carl Levin:

Well, it sure was ironic that as a student, we went to Washington to support the censure of Joe McCarthy, who is the chairman of PSI, and who misused it with his issuance of subpoenas. The President, excuse me, the chairman of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations has broad power, unusual power. Can issue subpoenas on his own as one of only, I think, two committees in the Congress where the chairman has the authority to issue in his own name, without getting committee approval, subpoenas. And McCarthy issued subpoenas.

Senator Carl Levin:

And then when people came in, he accused people of being communists, and communist agents, and communist supporters. He flung around that epithet or that label regularly. He was a person who is a demagogue on the subject of the communist threat. Obviously, there are very few Americans who support communism, and then very few then supported communism when he was there. But he had this list of names that he pulled out. He accused a huge number of people in the State Department of being cozying up to communism. And he abused his power.

Senator Carl Levin:

And I always vowed to use the power to the fullest, as I've described here in that book, to go after government wrongdoing, and to go after waste, and to go after abuse, to go after things which need to be corrected in the private sector, including parts of Wall Street, big banks. But you want to be able to use the power without abusing the power. And one of the things that he did, which was abhorrent was that when people came before him, following being subpoenaed by him, that he would be abusive if they took the Fifth Amendment.

Senator Carl Levin:

If they exercise their constitutional right not to testify, he would abuse them, ask them over and over again, the same question. And you have to respect people's constitutional rights. And we did that by a number of ways, hopefully. But in this respect, we told anyone who took the Fifth Amendment that you're excused as a witness. Period. We didn't pillory anybody for exercising their constitutional rights, whether it was the Fifth Amendment or anything else.

Senator John McCain:

More recently, I've had the honor and privilege of serving alongside Carl on the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. His tireless efforts and steadfast dedication to exposing misconduct and abuse by financial institutions and government regulators, have set a new standard for thoughtful and thorough congressional investigations.

Senator John McCain:

Whether the topic was the 2008 Financial Crisis, the Swiss banking secrecy, or JPMorgan's London Whale debacle, professionals in the industry and the public at large, knew that they could count on Carl Levin to get to the bottom of it with authoritative reports and hearings. Carl's ...

Benjamin Eikey:

Senator John McCain, tribute to Carl Levin on the floor of the US Senate.

Senator Carl Levin:

There was a statement of the senators in the 1930s who were investigating the Great Depression. I don't know if you heard this this morning or not. Did you hear my opening statement this morning by any chance?

Lloyd Blankfein:

Yes. Yes, I did.

Senator Carl Levin:

And what they said is that, "Investors must believe that their investment banker would not offer them bonds, unless the banker believed them to be safe." And ended up saying that, "While the banker may make mistakes, he must never make the mistake of offering investments to his clients, which he does not believe in."

Senator Carl Levin:

Now you turned that idea, which is a pretty fundamental idea, offering to clients investments that the banker does not believe in, you said you shouldn't have to be sure that an investment is good for a client. I agree with that. But that's not the issue.

Senator Carl Levin:

You can't guarantee an investment is going to be good for a client. The question is if you believe that it's a bad investment for that client, because you are going short against that at the same time you're selling it. That is what these senators back in the 1930s were saying was one of the causes of the Great Depression.

Benjamin Eikey:

2010 Congressional Testimony, Senator Carl Levin questioning Goldman Sachs CEO, Lloyd Blankfein.

Senator Carl Levin:

For their people, there's a fairness issue here, too. For people to be able to get away with tax evasion while other people are paying taxes is wrong, and it undermines confidence in the system.

Benjamin Eikey:

Comments made by Senator Levin to media after a hearing on tax evasion. You did dozens of very complicated investigations into the US financial world. Can you name one or two that were most satisfying?

Senator Carl Levin:

The financial collapse of 2008 was not caused by Mother Nature. It was caused by the greed of human beings. First, a bank in Washington that used false information on loans to homebuyers, in order to make money. They then sold those loans to Wall Street, that then put them in the form of bonds and sold them to people who were unsuspecting of the false information that those bonds were based on.

Senator Carl Levin:

And so it started with a bank in Washington State. And then the overseers of that bank failed to do their oversight work responsibly. The federal agency which was supposed to prevent the bank from engaging in bad practices failed to engage, or to use their oversight power. They treated the bank in their words, "as though they were a constituent," instead of as a subject of oversight.

Senator Carl Levin:

And then we had the bank. I guess the next one would be the credit rating agencies like Moody's. And they gave artificially high ratings to bonds which they knew were based on false information. And if they gave A rating or a B plus rating to a bond in order to keep up with its competition, then it's misleading the investors. And so the two major rating agencies, Moody's and Standard and Poor's, were responsible. And they paid a heavy fine for their responsibility as well. We changed the law to make them more responsible for what they represent to the investing public.

Senator Carl Levin:

And then the final part of our investigation of the '08 financial collapse was into the big banks, including Goldman Sachs and a number of other big banks we went after. So they paid big fines on that, too, for misleading, telling the public that this, implying that what they're selling is a good investment. When in fact, they themselves characterized the quality internally as crap, and junk, and shitty. That was their own description of their own products that they were selling to the public. And it was reprehensible, and a big part of the financial collapse of '08.

Senator Carl Levin:

We also went after the big banks overseas, like in Switzerland, that helped people hide their money. And we've effectively, with the things which happened as a result of our hearings, we have basically put an end to that. Switzerland no longer is a secrecy jurisdiction. There's other secrecy jurisdictions, by the way, but Switzerland has reformed their ways significantly.

Senator Claire McCaskill:

I have been blessed to have a front row seat to watch Carl Levin work. From a seat on the Armed Services Committee and a seat on the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, I have watched his excellent staff, but I have watched Carl Levin. This is a man who understands every nook and cranny of statutory construction.

Benjamin Eikey:

Senator Claire McCaskill, tribute to Carl Levin on the floor of the US Senate.

Senator Carl Levin:

You are taking a position against the very security that you are selling, and you are not troubled.

Lloyd Blankfein:

Senator, as I again-

Senator Carl Levin:

And you want people to trust you?

Lloyd Blankfein:

Senator, I think people trust us.

Senator Carl Levin:

I won't trust you if you came to me and wanted to sell me securities, and you didn't tell me that you have a bet against that same security.

Lloyd Blankfein:

Senator-

Senator Carl Levin:

You don't think that affects my thinking?

Lloyd Blankfein:

Senator.

Benjamin Eikey:

2010 Congressional Testimony, Senator Carl Levin questioning Goldman Sachs CEO, Lloyd Blankfein. Let's discuss the decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003, a decision which you voted against. You were the Senior Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, and you spent a good deal of time in the book laying out false and misleading information the Bush Administration used to get support for invading Iraq. Can you talk about that a bit?

Senator Carl Levin:

Well, I knew that many of the arguments for going to war that were used by Bush were false arguments. They were based on misstatements and falsities. Just to give you a couple of the most important ones, President Bush and his administration, particularly his Vice President and Secretary of Defense, made it appear, did everything they could to create an appearance that somehow or other, Iraq with their leader, Saddam Hussein, had been part of the 9/11 attack on this country.

Senator Carl Levin:

That was false. The CIA said it was false. The facts were very, very clear that there was no connection between Saddam Hussein and the attackers, which hit New York and Pennsylvania and Washington, and hit our country's psyche so hard on 9/11. And it took us to war. The people of the United States actually believed overwhelmingly, after listening to the President's misstatements, and the other in his administration who said there was a connection.

Senator Carl Levin:

The American people, by something like a 70 to 20% margin, believed that Saddam Hussein had participated and contributed to that attack. And that when you go to war based on false arguments, that's about as serious a mistake as you can make, because obviously, lives are lost. But there were many other examples where the President, Condi Rice, his Secretary of State, made false statements. For instance, we were told that looking for those weapons of mass destruction which Iraq allegedly had, and they didn't have.

Senator Carl Levin:

But nonetheless, the President kept saying that we're confident that they have these weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, which was the key weapon that he was talking about. And that the President, for instance, said that in his State of the Union message that the British have learned that Iraq is seeking uranium, yellowcake. It's called high grade uranium for nuclear weapons. The British have learned. Well, what's unbelievable about that statement is that we did not believe this story.

Senator Carl Levin:

We, the United States, the CIA, and our intelligence people, did not believe that Saddam Hussein was seeking yellowcake in Africa, in a place called Niger. And we even tried to persuade the British that it was not true. And yet, the President in the State of the Union Address, represents in a very, I think, kind of a way which is misleading. The British have learned. Well, we have a lot of confidence in the Brits, in the British government. And so when we say the British have learned something, the implication is in the context of the speech, that that's serious stuff.

Senator Carl Levin:

In fact, we didn't believe it ourselves. There were many other misstatements like that which led the people to believe that they had weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, that they would use them against us. And by the way, the statement made by Condi Rice about the Secretary of State, that we don't want the first site to prove that they have weapons to be a mushroom cloud. We don't want it to be a mushroom cloud.

Senator Carl Levin:

Well, as a matter of fact, she also said that in order to look for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, that the UN inspectors had been given all of the information about the location of nuclear weapons from us. We had provided the United Nations, all of the evidence that was significant so to where those sites were. That was false. And the Intelligence Committee of the Senate proved and found on a bipartisan basis, that that was false.

Senator Carl Levin:

As a matter of fact, we had not given a significant number of sites that we believed had weapons of mass destruction and nuclear material to the UN inspectors. And yet, in order to create the impression that we had to now go in and get them ourselves, and that we had done everything we can with the UN, but they have failed, and now we have to go in and get the nuclear material ourselves so it's no longer a threat, that's for the statement that was made to us. And again, it was a false statement. And the Intelligence Committee report, so found.

Benjamin Eikey:

what is our legacy in terms of Iraq?

Senator Carl Levin:

We made a fundamental strategic error based on false information. The legacy is if you're going to war, be darn sure that there's an imminent threat. There was none from Iraq. Or that you've been attacked and you're responding by going to war, either one, either being attacked or an imminent threat, it should be there before you take this country to war.

Senator Carl Levin:

We didn't. I hope the legacy is to learn from that lesson, the price that was paid in terms of human lives and human suffering, families that lost loved ones, wounded warriors, and a disrupted Middle East. And it contributed to all those things. And the legacy, hopefully is to learn from those failures and mistakes.

Benjamin Eikey:

You were supportive of our military action in Afghanistan, but that has turned out to be the longest war in US history. You were urging the role of the US to be that of training, as opposed to being the frontline military presence. How do you view our experience in Afghanistan? What should we have done that we didn't do? What are the lessons learned from Iraq and Afghanistan?

Senator Carl Levin:

Well, I supported are move into Afghanistan, because the Taliban had taken over the country. We supported getting rid of the Russians and we helped a group to do that, as a matter of fact. But after they took power, the Taliban came to power. And then as an extreme, radical terrorist group, were going to be the basis for terror after that. That's basically who also was supporting Bin Laden when he was in Afghanistan as well. So what I think we should have done better, was to then focus much more effort on training and equipping the Afghan Armed Forces.

Senator Carl Levin:

The Afghan people don't like the Taliban, they didn't like the Russians, and they want their own way of life to be preserved. That's true. And we can't just go along with the way in which traditionally, women have been treated. That's not something acceptable, but we helped bring about a big change in that. Our policy produced major shifts. When we were supporting Afghanistan with equipment and funding, we required that there be a much fairer treatment of women in Afghanistan.

Senator Carl Levin:

And it worked. Now, almost half the school children that go to school in Afghanistan are women. Before our effort, there were no women in schools. They weren't allowed. So what we should have put greater emphasis on, and we did by the way emphasize this a lot, but not enough, is the training, the equipping of the Armed Forces of Afghanistan. They were willing to fight the Taliban. They don't like the Taliban, but they've got to have the resources to do it. That includes helicopters, which we never provided enough of to them at all.

Senator Carl Levin:

We ran our own helicopter operation. It includes intelligence, the ability to obtain information about your enemy, and we kept that much too much to ourselves as well. So advanced armaments, advanced equipment and the use of that equipment, training pilots how to use modern helicopters, the ones that we should provide them, is what I believed would ultimately lead to our departure, being able to depart, leaving Afghanistan in a much better position than we found it.

Senator Carl Levin:

When I pressed that case, our presidents always, whether it was President Bush or Clinton or Obama, I still felt that that should be our goal and our focus. And when President Obama, for instance, said that he was going to increase the number of troops there, I pressed the case on him that we should keep the goal of reducing our combat personnel, but focusing on the training and equipping of the Afghan Army to a much greater extent than we had. And to some extent, that was our policy. But I don't think it was implemented strongly enough.

Senator Carl Levin:

And looking back, I would hope that that's also a learning experience. And that our legacy, would have learned that lesson as well that you can't just go in and be what's perceived by many people, including there, as an occupying force. If you're portrayed by the Taliban, our enemy, as occupiers, and Afghanistan has never liked occupiers, so if they view us and the other NATO Allies who were there with us as an occupying force, then that's trouble.

Senator Carl Levin:

And by the way, another difference between Afghanistan and Iraq is in Afghanistan, we had the support of the international community to go in, and including the UN. And this is critically important. That was not the case when it came to Iraq. And going in with local partners, Muslim partners into Afghanistan, was highly essential to try to maximize the chances of success.

Benjamin Eikey:

I'd like to take a minute and turn to a couple of other highlights of your book that address procedural issues in the Senate. And that's earmarks and the filibuster.

Benjamin Eikey:

As you know, there's been an effort recently, to return to earmarks. And in your book, you support the use of earmarks in which they had never ended. Can you explain what earmarks are, and why you think they're important?

Senator Carl Levin:

Well, when Congress appropriates funds, it used to not only say that X00 billion would go to roads, that it could identify certain, it did identify right in the appropriations, specific roads which in the judgment of the representatives and the senators from those areas, represented essential, critical needs. And the theory was, and is, that it's not just the federal agencies which make assessments of what we need in our roads or whatever.

Senator Carl Levin:

But it's the people representing the areas who sometimes have a better feel in terms of priorities. I think that we who represent states and districts have a better feel often for what are the highest priorities and the greatest needs of our districts and states. So I think to say that automatically, a federal bureaucrat is the one who should apportion these large chunks of money without the input, and at times earmarks of the members, I think it overlooks a really important source of vital information.

Benjamin Eikey:

Eliminating the filibuster is a very hot topic right now. It is viewed as possibly the only way President Biden can get his programs enacted, but you have opposed eliminating the filibuster. Can you explain why?

Senator Carl Levin:

Why I'm opposed to eliminating the filibuster? For a number of reasons, I was very much afraid. At the time that we were first eliminating it, I voted no. I was one of three Democrats that voted no. But at that time, the Republican leader was making it very difficult for our leader to get ... We were in the majority to bring up judges, Obama's judges, District Court judges, for confirmation.

Senator Carl Levin:

And so he wanted our Democratic leader to break the rule, which says, you have to get two thirds vote in order to change the rule. And I think it's a terrible precedent. It creates a huge amount of ill will in partisanship when you change a rule by breaking a rule, just violating what the umpire says is the correct interpretation. And the umpire being the parliamentarian, who said to our leader, you can't do that. And then he appealed the ruling of the chair and he got all but three Democrats to agree with him. And that, by that one vote, we broke the rule.

Senator Carl Levin:

The next thing that it led to was, okay, we got District Court judges, we should have done that by making the people who are threatening the filibuster, actually filibuster. But we didn't put them through that. We let them just threaten and get away with it, and we shouldn't have. We in the majority, had more people, had more staying power. And we would have gotten, I believe, most of those District Court judges approved without the people threatening to filibuster, carrying out that threat.

Senator Carl Levin:

Because they would be more inconvenienced if anything, than we. They would lose weekends. They would lose seeing their kids' soccer games. They would pay a bigger price because there's more of them that would be affected by the threat than us. We don't have to be there. We who opposed the filibuster, just have to have one person on the floor. We don't have to speak at all. But the guys filibustering got to stay on their feet for 24 hours while they have to go to the bathroom and so forth. So, that was an important factor, too.

Senator Carl Levin:

And the other, I was very much afraid of what it will lead to. If you violate the rules that way to change them, what it does, it could not only lead to some District Court judges getting approved, it could then lead as it did under Trump, to some Supreme Court justices, which a lot of people who are in the progressive community are very unhappy with and understand that, and I am too by the way, with those two judges, it's that not just others, but I want to plead guilty, I think that those two judges were the product of breaking the filibuster rule.

Senator Carl Levin:

Using the so-called nuclear option. And the result was we got a number of judges under the Supreme Court, which never would have been there have we not done that. And finally, the ill will that it creates when you do that, it's a much more partisan place, and lots of reasons. But one of the reasons is that the nuclear option, so-called, was used to blow up the filibuster rule.

Senator Chuck Schumer:

I would simply like to say to my dear friend, Carl, who we will all miss, if you had to put a headline on what's happening today, it's Mr. Integrity retires from the Senate.

Benjamin Eikey:

Senator Chuck Schumer, tribute to Carl Levin on the floor of the US Senate. Carl was asked about what he would miss in leaving the Senate in a C-SPAN interview. And here's what he had to say.

Senator Carl Levin:

There are some things here that I'll miss. I won't miss the excessive partisanship. I won't miss the divisiveness and the unwillingness of some to compromise the ideological rigidity on the part of some. I won't miss that, but I will miss my colleagues. And it's a great job, so I'm not leaving because I'm tired of the job. Believe me, I love the job. I love every minute of it. Even when there's too much bickering going on, I look at the bright side of it. So I've got a fabulous job.

Benjamin Eikey:

As Senator McCain said in a speech honoring Carl upon his retirement, "Carl Levin is the model of serious purpose, principle and personal decency, whose example ought to inspire the service of new and returning senators." I want to offer a few more or less thoughts here on a special episode of Oversight Matters.

Benjamin Eikey:

My experiences with Carl have left me hopeful and reaffirmed in my commitment to public service. I ought to mention one obvious detail that I am sure some who know me best are wondering. What was it really like interviewing such a legendary Democratic senator, since I am a republican with past experiences, including service in Republican legislative offices? Well, the truth of the matter is, I could not have felt more welcome into Levin's home.

Benjamin Eikey:

They did not shy away from their beliefs and their political preferences, and I did not shy for mine. We embraced these differences, and I believe this is part of what made this experience so memorable for me. Politics is of course, divisive, but it is also a chance to learn from those different than you. I got to do an awful lot of listening and learning from Carl, and I'm thankful to have had the opportunity to do so.

Benjamin Eikey:

I hope you all feel a similar way about this podcast. Thank you for listening. Again, my name is Ben Eikey, and Oversight Matters is brought to you by the Levin Center at Wayne Law in Detroit, Michigan. Getting to the Heart of the Matter by Senator Carl Levin is available on Amazon and the Wayne State Press.