

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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David Johnson

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

GMOH# 088

April 28, 2009

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College, the date is April 28, 2009, and I'm at the home of David E. Johnson in Portland, Maine, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. David, could you start just by giving me your full name.

David Johnson: David Eugene Johnson, E-U-G-E-N-E.

AL: And where and when were you born?

DJ: I was born in Hardtner, Kansas, H-A-R-D-T-N-E-R, Kansas, on July 20, 1947, and that little town hardly exists any more, so -

AL: Now, I know you did an interview for the Muskie project back in 2001, and so we collected a lot of your background there.

DJ: Yes.

AL: So I won't go into that today. I guess I'd like to start with your first recollection of Senator Mitchell, or connection to him.

DJ: Well, okay, I became, I first became associated with Senator Muskie in 1971, as I was an employee of his presidential election campaign. And as George was a manager, or part of a troika of managers of that campaign, I knew him by reputation. And it might have been that we met over the course of that period of about - I'm trying to think of the time over which I worked. I worked for the Muskie campaign from December of 1971 until August of 1972, gosh, is this correct? I'm trying to think now. 'Til the convention, off and on, so it must have been for almost a year-and-a-half, or some time over a year.

I began working in December of '71 in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin primary was on April 4, 1972, and I recall that date because one year later my oldest daughter was born, April 4, 1973. But, so beginning in December or perhaps early January or something, I was sent to Wisconsin with a one-way airplane ticket, with the direction to go see if I could find something to do there, and if I could to stay and work, and if I could not to let them know and they would send me somewhere else. And as it happened I went to Wisconsin, I met the person who was running the campaign in Wisconsin, who was Harold Ickes, who subsequently became a business partner of

mine and I was in business with Harold for the last seven or eight years that I was in Washington. So it was interesting how that circle kind of rounded itself.

But in any event, I worked in the Wisconsin primary and then in the Pennsylvania primary, which was in late May, and then the campaign pretty much fell apart. And it was only in the summertime then – so I guess we're not talking about a year, we're talking about maybe eight months of the period that I worked for the campaign – it was only in the summertime, in August of two-thousand-and- , of 1972, that I was reengaged full time by the campaign and went to the Democratic Convention in Miami as part of the Muskie organization that accompanied him there. The thinking was that George McGovern might have been unseated as the nominee by a rules challenge, and so Muskie and Scoop Jackson and George Wallace and all of the other also-rans kind of teamed up together to challenge McGovern, and that happened on the first or second night of the convention and failed. And so then I spent the rest of the week that I spent in Miami, enjoying myself some on the beach and some elsewhere.

But it was over that period, George was one of the top managers of the campaign, I certainly knew him by reputation, and as I said, I may have met him over that, at some time during that period, but I don't recall it, and as best as I know neither does he. So in fact, the first time that I met George, that I recall, was the day that he interviewed me to be his chief of staff. It was the same day that he hired me, it all happened in a very quick series of events.

At the end of 1980 I had, I'd spent 1979 and '80 in the Carter administration. Senator Muskie left the Government Operations Committee where I was an employee in 1978, I left the Senate where I had worked for him for six years, went to the White House to work for President Carter, and spent a year at the White House and then a year at the Department of Health and Human Services. And at the end of 1980, of course, he lost the election campaign and all of us were looking for jobs. And I received a call from a person that I, that was George's chief of staff, his name was Jim Case. Jim had been leg [legislative] director or something like that for Muskie and had not gone to the State Department with Muskie, and in fact stayed and worked for George, and it was his intention and plan to move back to Maine and so he was looking for his successor.

And he called me and asked me if I was interested, and of course I was very interested, because I was looking for a job, but I had not met George. And I had a couple of meetings with Jim where we established the fact that I was interested and we talked a little bit about what the job might be like. He told me that I needed to come to Maine to interview with Senator Mitchell for the job, and I did. I flew to Portland, must have been in December of 1980, not too long after the election. And I was to have been picked up at the airport and taken to Senator Mitchell's house – he'd been in the Senate then for only a few months – I was going to be taken to his house where I was going to have an interview with him, and then we'd see what happened next.

So I got to the – and I paid for my own air transportation, which, because I didn't have a job, or really, or hardly a prospect for a job, but I paid my own way, came to Portland, got to the airport, expecting to meet someone to take me to his house. And no one came and no one came, and

finally in walks George Mitchell, who I knew by having seen a photograph of him, but I'd never, again, never to my knowledge ever met him. And he was wearing a white tennis sweater, and it was in the middle of the winter, and he was on his way to go play tennis. And he literally looked at his watch and said, "Let's go sit in the coffee shop and get this over with." And that was pretty much my first interaction with him, and I was thinking, "Well gosh, here I've come all this way and spent all this money," and it looked like it was going to be kind of a dud, you know?

So we went to the coffee shop that at that time was on the first floor of the airport in Portland. It's all changed now of course, but there was a little coffee shop there, and we went in and sat down. And of course, here's a brand new United States senator, looking quite, attracting quite a lot of attention, simply because of who he was, *and* because he was wearing a white tennis sweater, and people were coming over to him and saying, "Hello," and the waitress was kind of tripping over herself, keeping our coffee cups filled and everything, and so it was quite a, it was a difficult interview from my point of view because it was so hard to stay focused on what was at hand.

And he asked me a couple of questions, and I had prepared quite a lengthy presentation that I was ready to make about why I would make such a good chief of staff for him, and I had just begun into my pitch, and he looked at, literally, looked at his watch again, I'll never forget it, he looked at his watch again and he said, "Do you want the job or not?" And I also recall this part of it pretty well because I said, "Yes, sir," because I was so surprised and elated, and unprepared for things to have turned the way they had. But he had obviously made up his mind based on his quick, and often quite accurate, ability to judge people's character, or however you want to say that, and I guess on that day I was looking pretty good to him.

And secondly, I think that I satisfied a number of important criteria that he had to satisfy in order to fill the position. I had experience in the Senate; I had experience with a member of the Senate from Maine. I had, I guess, a good reputation among the people that he had talked to previously about me, before interviewing me, and he was in need of someone and in need of someone in pretty short order, someone who was available. So I had some Maine experience, I had some Senate experience, and I needed a job, so all those things conspired to work for both him and for me.

So he hired me on the spot and said, what was I going to do next? And I really hadn't made much of a plan because I hadn't thought much past what the interview was going to be like. And here it had taken all of ten minutes and I said, "Well, I'm planning to spend the night with Charlie and Judy Micoleau," friends that, Charlie had been Ed Muskie's chief of staff, that I'd kept in touch with and they were friends who lived here. And he said, "Well okay, I'll give you a lift to their house," he said, "I have time to do that on my way to my next appointment."

So we got in his car and we drove out of the airport and he said, "Well, where do they live?" And I said, "Well gosh, I don't have the slightest idea." So my first act as his new chief of staff was to, we had to stop at a phone booth, and in those days of course there *were* phone booths and in the phone booths there were phone books, none of which exist today, and I looked up the

Micoleaus' address, and he dropped me off at their house, must have been early afternoon. And I sat on the porch and waited for them to come home from work, and I sat on their porch and froze to death for like two or three hours, waiting for them to come, because I had made no plans for any of the things that had transpired.

So it was kind of a funny take-off, but he had obviously decided how he was going to proceed and it was in a way that was quite favorable to me, and it was an extremely important development in my career. I'd already had a career that I was proud of and was, and felt that, with Senator Muskie and with President Carter that I had done much more than I'd ever planned to do in terms of government, and here was another yet even greater opportunity, to work with him.

And so he hired me, but he didn't tell anybody else that he had hired me, as it happened. And so I flew back to Washington, and on the next Monday morning I went to his office and I went in the door and said, "I'm David Johnson," and the young woman who was at the front desk said, "Yes?" And I said, "I'm the new -" well, in those days we called it administrative assistant – and I said, "I'm the new administrative assistant," and she said, "Well, you are not." I said, "Well, yes I am." So I had to introduce myself and to convince these people that in fact I was the new person who was going to be the chief of staff, or the administrative assistant. And then of course Jim came out and kind of, and he, I believe that Jim knew, although looking back on it, I'm not even sure that *he* knew that it had all been decided, because it all happened in such quick order.

So that was my, that was the first time I met George Mitchell, and it was a meeting that turned out to be positive in every way because he hired me, and I ended up then working for him for six years. And I was his chief of staff through his election campaign, which was in 1982, and then I stayed with him until 1984. And in maybe June or July of 1984 I left his office and became an employee of the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association, which is a trade association.

And there was a guy there that I'd known for quite some time, all the way back from my first days in the Senate, who was the head of the government relations part of the what in those days was PMA, it now has a different name, and he was looking for his successor and so he brought me in to kind of groom me into, to make me the person to take his place over time. And two things happened: one was, his immediate superior and the president of PMA were all fired, only after I had arrived a month or two [earlier], so all of the plans about my career developing there were all just completely washed away. They had negotiated a deal with the generic drug companies that the brand name drug companies hated, and so they fired all those guys.

And so that was one thing that happened. And then the second thing that happened was that George, in November of 1984, in November of 1984, right after the election, was chosen to be chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. And at that time, he asked me to come back to work for him and to be the executive director of the DSCC, so I was his chief of staff in his Senate office for about four years, a brief hiatus outside of his organization, and then I came back and worked for him for two more years as executive director of the DSCC. And he was chairman of the DSCC then, in 1985 and 1986, two extremely important years because those

were years that, in November of 1986, thirteen new Democrats were elected and control of the Senate returned to Democrats.

And it was quite an important event for a wide variety of reasons, but it really set, it was among the things that set his course toward becoming majority leader. And the first of those dots on that line was his, what was viewed as remarkable, victory over David Emery in 1982, when he was, the first poll that was taken showed him thirty-six points behind David Emery, and then of course he beat him quite handily in November of 1982, so that was viewed by his new colleagues as quite a remarkable event. It in turn led to his appointment to become chairman of the DSCC, and his tenure there was also very successful, and then that led to Iran-Contra and etcetera.

So in one very long sentence, that's how I first met him and how my career with him progressed. And if you would push the stop button one second, I will get another cup of coffee.

(Pause)

AL: So I'm interested in when you first started as AA, or what we now call chief of staff, in 1980, '81 – was it early '81?

DJ: Well, it was, I've thought about this often, I believe that I was hired in December of 1980, but it was either December of 1980 or quite early in January of 1981. But in, because it was during the period of the recess, so it was after the, it was after Congress had adjourned from the session in 1980, and after the election. And see, George was appointed to the Senate in May of 1980, so June, July, August, September, October, November, so he'd been there about six months or so when, six or seven months, when our paths crossed in the way I've described.

AL: And so you came on board right at a time when he was, as I understand it, coming to Maine every weekend, and campaigning for the upcoming election in '82.

DJ: That's correct.

AL: Did that happen as early as when you started?

DJ: I believe that it's correct to, I can't say how he was acting before I became his administrative assistant, but I believe that it's correct to say that over the period of the first two years that I worked for him, so let's say January – just to talk about it – January of 1981 until election day in November of 1982, I believe he missed coming to Maine only two weekends. In other words, he was here every weekend except for two.

AL: And what challenges did that type of schedule present for you as the AA?

DJ: Well, the main, one of the main things I remember about it is that he, it was impossible to predict exactly when he would be able to leave on Fridays, and sometimes on Thursday. And in those days, quite a lot of privilege was given to elected officials, especially members of the

Senate, that no longer is the case, but they had special parking places at National Airport right by the building, and it was possible, and in fact was the common practice, to make many, many airline reservations for each weekend. So starting Thursday afternoon we'd put, we'd have a reservation for him on every single flight until Saturday morning, because you couldn't predict what the Senate was going to do and on any given weekend, they could work until Saturday. But most often he was able to leave sometime on Friday.

And so part of the challenge of moving him around in the ways that he needed, and expected and wanted to move around, was to manage the process of making all of these arrangements, flight arrangements, and then keeping track of them as they fell off and then moving to the next one. And what would happen, again these things have all changed, but what would happen is that we'd make reservations in the name of many of the staff, of many staff people, and then at the last moment when we knew which flight he was going to be able to take, we would change the name to his name. And again, that was something that you could do, which you no longer can do of course. But managing that process, and kind of keeping track of it in a way that didn't just make everybody crazy, was a challenge.

And the other thing, of course, that that meant was that, for any given weekend, we would start making a schedule in Maine, starting Thursday afternoon and going all the way until, typically until Monday morning when we knew he'd have to get back on a plane and come to Washington and be in Washington maybe for a vote late on Monday. So we would have, we'd start building a schedule every week that was maybe Thursday night, and then Friday and then Saturday and Sunday, and then maybe Monday morning, and we were always having to work hard to telescope the schedule to fit the circumstances as they arose. And it was impossible to predict what was going to happen, because he certainly wasn't in control of the Senate schedule, and even maybe as the majority leader, nobody was really ever much in control of the Senate schedule.

And so it presented the challenge that we soon became accustomed to, but never was very easy, and it took the full time attention of one or two people who were: one, Regina Sullivan, who was his personal assistant, worked very closely with me, who was in charge of managing the travel arrangements; and [two], Charlie Jacobs, who you may have met or interviewed by now, who was a great guy, who was in charge of making the schedule, or one of the people who was principally responsible for making the schedule and setting things up and then calling people and saying, "Well he's not going to come, we'll try to do it next time," you know, etcetera. So there were logistical challenges that related to the unpredictability of the Senate schedule, and its interaction with his strong desire and belief that in order to be successful in 1982, and to serve the, to do his job, that he needed to be here as often as possible.

And he really created a, or was part of, and it wasn't just him at that time, because the mode of campaigning was in a period of transition at that time, but certainly among his colleagues in the northeast and in Maine, he was a leader in the notion that you had to be here as often as possible, and in fact once a week, in order to be doing your job properly.

And in the context of the election campaign, all of which was a part of his official business

responsibilities, it was a very complicated and constantly changing set of circumstances that would cause his schedule to be a combination of official business events and campaign related events. And while those many years ago, the rules were much, much different, the kind of scrutiny that elected officials are subjected to now, simply wasn't the case at that time, and so a wide variety of factors, both some formal and having to do with laws and rules, and some more informal having just to do with the times, it was possible to have a schedule that we worked on that had all these different pieces in it, and we were quite diligent and careful about keeping the events separated and making sure that the campaign ones were paid for by the campaign, and the official business ones were paid for by official business accounts, etcetera.

And so the short answer to your question is that it was a difficult set of circumstances that was driven by his strong desire to be elected to the Senate, and his firm belief that in order to do his job, he needed to be here. And I think that he was among the earliest of the, of his colleagues in the Senate to have that kind of take on what the job was and is about.

Ed Muskie, for example, would come to Maine maybe half a dozen times a year. He'd come in August, and in the winter time he'd come for an official business speech or the Jefferson-Jackson Day speech or whatever it was, Patriots' Day or something like that. But his job was in Washington, and that's the way he saw it, and in fact that's the way it was. But over the course of the period of time that we're talking about, all that began to change and the responsibilities of elected officials began to encompass a much broader set of activities that included frequent interaction with their constituents in a way that really wasn't the case previously.

And it was hard, it was hard to keep it all sorted out, and there were plenty of times that it was a big honking mess. Often he'd get to Boston and couldn't fly to Portland because of weather, and we would hear from him, he was in a car with a bunch of guys he'd met at the airport and they were all driving to Portland together. And I recall one time he came back from a trip and he said, "Have you ever seen a senator's ID card?" And I said, "Well no," I said, "I didn't even know there was such a thing." And he says, "Well there is one, and," he said, "and I want to get one." He said, "Warren Rudman has one -" and Rudman was a senator from New Hampshire at the time - and he said, "He has one," and he said, "I want to get one." And I said, "Well okay, I'll look into it and we'll get you one." And he said, "The reason I want to get one is because, we were in Boston and nobody could get out of Boston because it was all fogged in, and he took out his Senate ID card and he went right to the head of the line and got a car. So," he said, "so I want to get one of those."

Now, it's hard for me to imagine George Mitchell ever doing that, exerting that kind of privilege, but he would certainly have stood next to Warren Rudman if Warren Rudman had gone to the head of the line. But we, so we found out, and so he'd been in the Senate for many months and we didn't even know that there was such a thing; he didn't know it until he saw Warren Rudman's.

The other thing I remember about that, about those circumstances is that, in those days, and again this is, so many things have changed, in those days it was quite often the case that in

almost all of the Senate offices, when Friday afternoon rolled around and the elected official either went home to Bethesda or wherever they lived, or went back to their state, which was what George Mitchell was doing, Friday afternoon was a time when people kind of let their hair down and relaxed a little bit after what was in every case a very intense work week. And that was often, if not always, accompanied by the delivery of a couple of cases of beer from a liquor store there, it was a couple of blocks from the Capitol, Schneider's I think it was, and we pretty much had a standing order with those guys that we would call them, as soon as we knew when he was leaving, we'd call them and they would deliver the beer. And again these are, these times have changed. No one would think of drinking in those offices in that fashion, but the Friday afternoons, that's kind of what happened, it was a time for people to relax and to reflect on the week and to think about what the next week was going to be like, and to be happy that we were at that point in the schedule.

And on several occasions, Senator Mitchell would be walking out the door, and the beer would be coming in the door. And I remember him standing by my desk one time, looking at the beer and looking at me, and looking at his suitcases in his hand and he said, "You know, you have a much better job than I do." And -

AL: So the sense of humor was there.

DJ: Yes, it's quite a dry one, but he was letting me know a number of things. But again, that was a part of the times, it was a, the way that we, that the staff people related to one another. I look now at, or have in the not too recent past, looked at the average tenure of House and Senate staff people, and in the House of Representatives I think it's something like eighteen months or sixteen months or something. In other words, the average length of service as a House staff member is some number under two years. And in the Senate it's not much longer.

Well in the time that we're talking about, and for the two people that we're discussing, mostly George but also Ed Muskie, people came to work for them and spent years and years and years there. Like their whole career was working for them. I mean Gayle Cory, for example, worked her whole career in public life for Ed Muskie and George Mitchell. And so the kinds of relationships and bonds and, it sounds a little, doesn't capture it exactly, but there was a, there was more of a family kind of feel to a working situation than I think exists in many places now, where there's probably a very high degree of professional attainment in staff people, but I believe that it's, that it must be different because people are there for such shorter periods of time.

AL: Uh huh.

DJ: You know, many of us over the course of the Muskie-Mitchell kind of overlap, many of us have worked there for ten, fifteen, twenty years, and those were the kinds of - And we socialized together, not just at the office but outside. And, but your question about what it was like reminds me of what all that was like, it was difficult, it was, it required a great deal of flexibility, both on his part and on the part of the staff that was responsible for kind of making it

happen. However it could happen, it was the staff's responsibility then to make it happen inside that, inside those four corners. And it was hard, and it led to high degrees of anxiety, and often foul-ups or missteps that could not be avoided, simply because we were kind of slamming it together at the last minute.

One thing – I've thought about this often – I sat in a room probably half the size of this room with four other people. I had a desk and a little wall, because I was the chief of staff so I had a little wall, little half-wall, and that had an entrance into Senator Mitchell's office. And then four other people sat on the other side of that wall, and we all smoked. And it's hard really even to imagine, or to recall what that was like, but we all sat in that little teeny space, ten hours a day if not more, and we smoked all the time. And I think maybe Charlie didn't, but I know that I did, Regina did, Gayle Cory did. There was another person who was in there with us, I think maybe Charlie, who was in that inside office maybe, did not smoke. And he used to just hate it, because he would go home, smelling.

But again, it was another kind of, it's like a period, it's like a descriptor of what the period was like, it was common practice. And I recall often sitting at a hearing with Senator Muskie, sitting next to him on the dais, and he would be chairing a hearing and I'd be sitting right next to him smoking a cigarette. And now you can't even imagine, because of television and because of the ways that people's perceptions, about all that kind of thing, have changed. But that's what it was like, and you can kind of start, if you kind of put all of those things together, you start to get a sense of what it felt like, and it was a much different experience I think than people by and large have in those jobs today.

AL: Right. And you mention Gayle Cory. She, of course, is somebody that we can't interview ourselves. Do you have recollections of her that give us an essence of who she was and her role on the staff as well?

DJ: Well, Gayle was, I remember when, let's see, now Gayle went to the Department of State with Muskie, and so at the end of the Carter administration, I was hired by George before Reagan was inaugurated, and so Muskie was still secretary of state and so then he left that office in January of 1980 and, no, January of 1981. And then Gayle was without a job and I recall quite vividly George calling me in and saying, "I want you to call Gayle Cory, and I want you to find something here for her to do, and I want her to be on the staff."

And I knew Gayle, because we had worked together as employees of Senator Muskie, but she was very, very inside, I mean she was very close to Senator Muskie, and I was just a kid, I think I was twenty-three or twenty-four when I started working for him, and I was like the lowest person on the totem pole by quite a long shot. But, so I knew Gayle but I didn't know her well. And I remember calling her and asking her to come in to interview, and in fact telling her that we had a job for her, and that I wasn't quite sure what it was but it was going to involve helping Senator Mitchell make his plans about traveling in Maine and the kind of people that he ought to be seeing and when he should be seeing them, etcetera. Because she was, so much of the knowledge of the state and of the people in the state that were important to Senator Muskie was

in Gayle, and resided in Gayle.

So she came in to see me and kind of sized me up and she said, "Well," she said, "you'll be," I believe she said, "you'll be the fifth AA that I've taken to raise, and you look to me like you need some raising." And so she really took me under her wing in a way that was generous and, but at the same time, doing what she was hired to do, to provide the kind of glue that held the Maine part of the operation together. And so among the people that I worked with on a day-to-day basis, I mean Gayle was the closest, among the closest to George. His trust of her judgment and political instincts and understanding of how much she really carried of what had made the Muskie operation go, I mean he really understood that and valued it and took, in the best sense of the word, took advantage of it and used what she brought to the party, which was a lot. She was-

End of Side A

Side B

AL: I'm going to pause and flip it right here. We are now on Side B.

DJ: She was wise, she had a great sense of humor, she was very, very, she was kind of the den mother for the whole office, really, because I think Gayle probably was, she's close to George's age, so she was fifteen years older than I was. And so anybody who had a personal problem or a professional problem or a problem inside the office or a problem with somebody in Maine or however that went, Gayle was really the person that they'd come to, to see, and to help work it through.

And we worked together very, very closely. And I've worked in offices where there is a lot of tension and kind of infighting, if you want to use that word, jockeying for position insofar as the principal is concerned, that kind of thing. There was absolutely none of that around George, and part of that was his own, or most of it was his own way of dealing with people.

He, we had a very good working relationship. It took a while to develop because he is a very, very detail oriented person who can manage, and effectively manage, a wide variety of complex matters at the same time. And it took us a while for us to become comfortable with one another, sorting out what he was going to do and what I was going to do, because he began thinking that it was going to be necessary for him to do everything, and there are, in my experience, there are members of the Senate who really do act as their own chiefs of staff, and they really do run the staff.

And I think that that's kind of the way that he started out, and he quickly learned that it was going to, that it wasn't going to be possible for him to do all of the things that he had to do, *and* all of the things that I could do. And once we made, once we were able to kind of sort that out, we were, we had a very effective and complementary working arrangement that I'm happy to say continues until this day.

And the way I said it to him once, I said, "You have a hundred things to do every day, and ten of

them only you can do, you have to do them, *you* have to be involved in them.” I said, “The other ninety I can do, I can do it in your name.” And I said, “So you let me do those ninety and you do your ten, and we’ll stay in touch and if it looks like that’s not working, then we can, maybe I’ll only do eighty-nine and you’ll do eleven, but, on any given day.” I said, “That’s really the way that I believe that we can work together most effectively,” and over time that was how our relationship grew.

And the other reason I think that – so we had a good working relationship, and he had a very good relationship with the other members of our staff, because he liked to work directly with the substantive, with the staff person that had the substantive responsibility that he was engaged in, in that moment. So for example, the person who handled the environmental matters on our staff was a woman named Charlene Sturbitts, and when it came time to talk or work or to do things with that, then Charlene would, Charlene and I would go into his office. I wouldn’t get something from her and take it to him and then get his reaction and take it back, he worked directly with her. And I was there because most often there were things that I would need to follow up on, or that Charlene and I would need to do together, maybe to go down to the press secretary to turn something into a press release or however that would go.

But I think that one of the main reasons that there was such a collegial environment around him was because he worked directly with each person on the staff, depending on their expertise or what he needed from them. And what he expected me to do was to make it possible for that to happen, to have them organized and ready to meet with him when he needed to do so, to anticipate what might be coming next and to have everybody lined up in however that would go. But that was a traffic cop job, and as it came to the substance, that was his, he managed that himself with the staff person. And what that did, of course, was it then gave everyone the opportunity to work directly with him, which they valued and learned from, and it gave him the opportunity to have direct interaction with them both in terms of taking from them what he needed and giving them direction as to what he wanted to do and wanted them to do.

So it was a, so unlike many other places where I’ve worked, or in government offices that I’ve worked in, especially in the Carter administration, the year I spent at the White House in the Carter administration was an extremely unhappy one because there was so much time and energy expended on the jockeying for position and attention and all that kind of stuff, it was such a waste of time. Really very, very little of that occurred around George Mitchell, simply because he was not, he did not induce it, and he didn’t really allow it, or he didn’t encourage it.

There are some people who encourage creative tension, whatever you want to call it, and I’ve seen, I saw later in his career, as his responsibilities increased and became more complex, I saw more of that in him as it grew necessary for him to balance and to keep so many balls in the air, saw more of that around him than in those early days. But when he first came to the Senate it was really, it was, he was learning along with the rest of us, he was wide open to interaction with every single person, whether it was the office manager who was taking care of the computers or whatever it was, silly things – they were IBM Selectrics with a correct key, and that was the top of the technology we had at that time – you know, whether it that person or the top legislative

assistant, he was, he had a relationship with each one of them. And it served him well, and I think he knew that, I think he, he was a mature enough person to know that that worked for him, and that he could therefore, in the best sense of the word, get more from people by treating them with respect.

So, I'm not even sure what you asked.

AL: We were just, we were getting a sense of, well you, I mean really talking about how things were structured in terms of the -

DJ: Mmm. Yes, uh huh. I hope it's helpful.

AL: Yeah, and -

DJ: Oh, we were talking about Gayle.

AL: Yes, Gayle.

DJ: Yeah, yeah, and so I'll just finish up with Gayle. In a sense it's kind of, she not only took the AA to raise, she took George to raise a little bit also; he learned a lot from her. And she was a very, very warm and engaging person who you could trust with your feelings and with confidential information, and that you knew both at the beginning and over the development of a relationship with her that you could trust her. And to have that, and to have someone close to you like that as a sounding board or a confidante or however you want to say it was an extremely important, she filled an extremely important role in the office, for him and for me and for other people on the staff.

AL: Were there any particular issues or incidents or, that happened during that period of '80 to '84 when you were AA that stand out in your mind, that we haven't touched upon?

DJ: Well, the election itself was very exciting. We had only, we could only go up, because he was so far down when he started. I remember in those days the, we had fax machines, and that was quite fancy to be able to read the newspaper, to read a clipping from a Maine newspaper the same morning that it was printed. And of course we had people on the staff here who would clip the articles of importance to us and fax them to us every morning, and so when we got to work, that would be waiting for us, our kind of morning report from what was happening in Maine, and we all read it with a great deal of interest, of course.

And I remember Charlie Jacobs saying very early on, he said, "It won't be long until we're waking up and rushing to work just to read that, because it will tell us what's happening." And so the election, and that's how it went, and the election itself was a very exciting experience that was incrementally. You could feel the growth of the campaign and the structure of the support, which was what it was all about, that started to come to George as he worked his way toward the election in November of 1982 – so that whole period, which was focused on the election, so the

whole time between his appointment and Election Day.

And many people, of course, were surprised at his appointment. I saw Joe Brennan just the other day, Joe, I like Joe and we traveled to Washington together just the other day and had a fun time together just talking about old times, etcetera. And he was telling me about-, and he was reminding me of all the people who wanted that appointment and how they acted toward him, and about how he, and why he decided to pick George and how it went afterwards and all the criticism that he felt after having made that choice. Because there were so many others who, on their face, would have been a more natural defender of that seat – Ken Curtis. Bill Hathaway thought that he should have gotten the appointment of course, and sort of never ever let anybody forget that, and there were others who might have been more logical choices.

But to answer your question, I think that there were many individual, there were many moments, and I can, and I'm certain I can think of some, but my principal feeling was the seamless kind of ascent to, from thirty-six points behind to winning by I think it was sixty-five to whatever the other number is, thirty-four or whatever, to thirty-five. An astounding victory, given that he, the change from there to there. And it was a, there were ups and downs and there were moments that were scary, but in general I think the main feeling I have – and of course some of it is romanticized by the passage of time – but the main feeling I have about it, and I think it's correct, is that there was a steady path towards the election victory that, in ways that I didn't really appreciate, and in some ways have only more recently come to appreciate, that George had planned and had foreseen and had a notion that drove his actions in a way that was well conceived and extremely well-executed; it didn't happen by accident.

We talked about this just the other day: I'm the new chairman of the board of the Mitchell Institute, and I'm proud of it, and that's one of the reasons I moved to Maine, as a matter of fact. And we had, not long ago had embarked on a very ambitious fund-raising program, some of which has had to be put on hold because of his new position in the government, as a full-time government employee of course he has many very strict rules that he has to follow about the kinds of solicitations he can make and the like. But I said to him, when I became the chairman I said, "I don't know if you remember this or not, but there was a point in 1982 and we were talking about the criticism which would lie against you – George Mitchell – as a big, as a tax-and-spend Democrat," and that's where Emery was coming at him from and that's the kind of, that was the most vicious charge that could be made against him. And he reached into his pocket and he pulled out a index card – and he has very, very small handwriting, I don't know if you've ever seen anything that he's written, but it's very small and it's very, it's him, a handwriting expert could derive a lot by looking at it. And on this chart, on this piece of paper he had two columns, and he had a column for every spending increase that he had voted for, and a column for every spending decrease that he had voted for, and he had very, very, calculated, it was within a few dollars, he had calculated with extreme care over the period of months and months and months, through hundreds of votes, exactly where he stood on that issue, that he had voted to cut more than he had voted to increase.

And we laughed about it because then he turned that into a, one of his principal, there was a

debate that – it's another thing that really stands out in my mind that I'll come back to it – but it was a debate with David Emery toward the end of the campaign, and he pulled that card out, because Emery said, "You're just a tax-and-spend Democrat," and he pulled it out, and chapter and verse and vote and dates and numbers, and it was the way that he approached the whole exercise of that election. And it sounds, he is quite a, he's quite capable of dealing with those small little parts, but his real skill is taking them and making them into something much bigger and something much more important, which is what in fact he had done with all those little numbers, some of which were down into the decimal points.

And I was really, I remember that well, and we had just talked, and we just talked about it the other day, because what I said to him was, I said, "Do you remember that moment?" And he said, "Oh yes," he said, "I remember very well." He said, "You were the only person I showed that card to before the debate." And I said, "Well do you have a card like that now about the fund-raising program? Because if you do I want you to show it to me now." I said, "If you know where this money's coming from, I want to know, or if you already imagined how it's going to be, I want you to tell that to me, because I need to know that so I can do what you've asked me to do." And he said, "Well, no," he said, "these are not, these times are not like those."

But that stands, that was a thing that I recall. Another thing that I, that your question makes me think of, is that we had a – in fact we talked about this just the other day, as a matter of fact – we had a rule, or an agreement that no letter would go out of the office over his signature that, unless I had read the letter or he had read the letter. And so there was no other clearance, it had to go, that was the bottleneck, and it was a huge bottleneck and it was a terrible, it was a constant battle to answer the mail.

But in any event, what would happen, and it happened often, is that we would work late together and we would be in the office, we'd be in the office together at night probably 'til ten or ten thirty or sometimes eleven o'clock at night, and we'd be the only ones in the office. And as it happened, we lived quite close to one another and he'd give me a ride home. I would walk to work and he would give me a ride home late at night. And what I would do at night is sit and read the mail, and he would come out to my desk and he would ruffle through the letters until he found a couple that he liked, and he would take those and go into his office and call information and he would get the telephone number of the person who wrote the letter, and he'd call them on the phone. It was about the only fun that he had, I think.

AL: Yeah.

DJ: He loved -

AL: So that was something he really enjoyed doing.

DJ: Oh, yeah. He would come out of his office and he'd say, "We can send that guy a letter and he'll get the letter and he can tell it's a form letter," and he said, "but if I call him," he said, "every person he sees for the next week he'll tell them I called him on the phone." And so, he

said that was a way to multiply the interactions.

And it really was, I used to think it was a, it was such a hard job, he had such a hard job getting elected, it was a very, very difficult set of circumstances. For a wide variety of reasons, mostly because he had been appointed to fill Ed Muskie's seat and it was a hard, big shoes to fill. And he was so far behind, and it was very, very difficult work, and, but that was some of the fun. That was like, it seemed to me that that was one of the few things that he really enjoyed doing. And so he would sit and call people on the phone, and I could hear him talking, because I'd be sitting outside in my little office reading the mail and I could hear him talking to people on the phone and he'd say, "Yes, it's George Mitchell, no, it really is, it's really me," trying to convince them that it was really him that was calling.

But that's how he won that election, which is like one little piece at a time. And it was a difficult undertaking that he approached with the kind of thinking that I've already described to you, the note card with the, just absolute down to the decimal points, that was the level at which he was, that was a level at which he operated, but then he took that and turned it into something much, much bigger, and I think that that really is the – I've often thought about what, about his skills and about what, and how he has risen to the heights that he has attained, and I believe that the principal, that his principal skill is his ability to change and to adapt, and to take a set of circumstances and to kind of bend them to his, bend them to a way that he can manipulate – again, in the best sense of these words – manipulate them and operate them towards some large goal. Whether it was his own election, or whether it was the work that he did at the DSCC or what he accomplished on the Iran-Contra Committee, or what he accomplished as majority leader, or what he continues to do, the elements that he has to work with are the, are small little pieces, and he's able to assemble them into something big and meaningful, and can accomplish huge things by – but he is an extremely detail-oriented person who can, as I said before, can manage a wide variety of disparate small elements and pull them together in a whole in ways that other people I think cannot, or would find impossible. And I really think that that's where his great strength lies.

And it's been a great privilege of mine to have had such a long relationship with him, and to be able to continue to work with him. I was surprised and honored to be asked to be the chairman of the Mitchell Institute board of directors; I'm the first person outside his family who's had that job. He told me that he was thinking of adopting me so as not to break the chain, but – So we have been able to maintain a, over the course of the years that I wasn't working directly with him, we've been able to maintain a fairly close and good working relationship, and I'm very proud of it.

AL: I've heard that people say you have a great sense of Senator Mitchell's vision, a great sense of who he is and – that's been said. And I wonder if he has ever, there's ever been an opportunity where he expressed to you what he sees in you.

DJ: Oh. Huh.

AL: That's sort of a hard question maybe, or maybe it's by example.

DJ: Yeah.

AL: Obviously [he] has a lot of confidence and trust in you, to ask you to be chair.

DJ: Our phone is so funny.

AL: So I'm kind of asking, how does he express himself?

[Telephone interruption]

DJ: Well, I think that he trusts me, and I think that he believes that I care for him. And I think that he believes that that motivates me in a way that is, works for both of us. I get so much out of my relationship with him, and I believe that over time it's worked the other way as well.

I guess the story that I didn't tell you but I will, after I worked, I told you that a hundred, that he did ten and I did ninety thing, after I had worked for him for about four or five months – I recall it so very well – we were, he drove me home, as I told you often would happen, and we sat in front of my house on Capitol Hill and just a few blocks from where he lived, and I didn't get out of the car and he said, "Well, are you going to get out?" And I said, "Well, I have something I have to say to you." And he said, "Well, what's that?" And I can recall it so well because my heart was just in my throat, I said, "You've asked – every time you ask me to do something, before I can do it you've asked me if I've done it." And I said, "It happens every day, all day long." And I said, "I know that it's your way of letting me know how important these things are, and I know it's a way that you have of reassuring yourself that things are happening that you believe need to happen, but if you don't get off my back," and I believe I used exactly those words, I said, "it just isn't going to work. You have to let me do my job."

And it was just like utter silence, he didn't, he really didn't have a single thing to say to me. And I got, and I remember getting out of the car and going into the house and saying to my first wife, I said, "Well," I said, "I'm not sure what it's going to be like at work tomorrow because I said this and it's either going to be good or not good." And it really is what I was saying to you a minute ago, he changed the way he treated me, and he was able to let go of the, of his need to constantly check to make sure that things were going the way that he wanted them to go, and from that point on our relationship changed in a way that worked better for both of us. And being an adult, being much older now than I was then, I know how difficult it is to change, and I believe that, as I said before, I believe it was one of his great strengths is to be able to change and adapt and to look at a situation and to know how he needs to come at it in a way that is going to bring the kinds of solutions that he's looking for, or that are wanted.

And so I guess to answer your question was that he decided to take a chance that, on me, that if he let me do my job that I would, and that he could trust me to do it, and over time that's how our relationship developed and it worked out very, very well. But up until that point, it was an

extremely difficult situation. I don't know how it felt on his end, but it was extremely difficult for me. And after that, he was, he treated me in a way that let me do my job and trusted me to do so.

AL: We're getting close to the end of the second side. I think this might be a good place to stop today, and I think probably we will get together again. Thank you.

DJ: Great. I'm so sorry that it took a long time to get it going.

End of Interview