

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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John Hilley
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

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Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview with John Hilley for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College in Maine. We are in Mr. Hilley's Great Falls, Virginia, home, today is Monday, May 11, 2009, and I am Brien Williams. I'd like to start out by asking you, John, if you would just give us the date and place of your birth?

John Hilley: Okay, October 22, 1947, Tampa, Florida.

BW: And the name of your parents?

JH: Dorothy and William Hilley.

BW: And did you spend a great deal of time in Florida after your birth?

JH: No, I was an air force brat and so we were constantly on the move, and so I saw a lot of the world even before I was shipped off to school, so in and out of Florida but actually on the road a whole lot, very many interesting places, California, France, elsewhere.

BW: And your father was career military, obviously.

JH: Career military, exactly. He was a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force, and he's deceased, and my mother is still living in Tampa, Florida.

BW: And would you call your family a highly politicized one, or - ?

JH: Pretty much. It's funny, my grandmother had the saying that, "When the Republicans are in office, the little guy eats dirt." And that's going way, way, way back, that's the Depression era view of things, and it's also the time when of course the South used to be strictly Democratic, before the age of Lyndon Johnson and all the things that have happened. So yes, I'd say very much politically aware, a great value placed on education in our family, fortunately, and I feel very fortunate to have had such a great upbringing and so many opportunities.

BW: So you then went to school where?

JH: Well, let's see. I left home in eleventh grade to go to Phillips Academy in Andover, which was another very fortunate occurrence in my life because it was such a terrific

opportunity. And then from there to Princeton for four years, and then out teaching school for a few years, and then back to Princeton for my Ph.D. in economics, and then teaching at Lehigh University, followed by coming to Washington in 1983 because of my desire to get closer to the politics, which I had life-long interest in. Actually, my desire to leave was sparked by getting tenure and I realized I didn't want to do this for another thirty or thirty-five years, and so I came to Washington with my wife Rosemary and our two young sons, Ryan and Brendan, and I've been here ever since. So we've been here twenty-six years now.

And just very quickly, my first job was at the Congressional Budget Office, followed by six years on the Senate Budget Committee, my first boss being Lawton Chiles of Florida. When he retired I was fortunate enough to become staff director of the committee under Senator Jim Sasser, who's another wonderful human being, and that's when I got to know George Mitchell, because at that time, throughout the '80s and early '90s, budget matters were at the fore, and nothing's changed, I think, today. And so through my staff directorship of the Budget Committee and all the issues that were at the fore, I got to know Senator Mitchell, particularly out at the Andrews Summit, and then I was fortunate enough to be asked to become his chief of staff starting, well, that was 1990, the Andrews Summit, but starting in January of 1991.

It's a funny thing because at the time I was, as I said, staff director of the Budget Committee, and was on a congressional trip to Russia at the time, when the *New York Times* reported that Martha Pope, who had been the chief of staff, was becoming elevated to the sergeant-at-arms job, which is terrific, she's a wonderfully competent and good person. And so at that time I didn't know what was going on, I'd been talking to Martha about being head of the Democratic Policy Committee and not chief of staff, so when I got back I had no idea what was going on. But his plan had been to have me be chief of staff, which I was very, very happy to take, with Senator Sasser's blessing, so that's how we got to know each other.

BW: That's a great bit of a lot of history there.

JH: There's some history there.

BW: Right, right. Let's go back, and just a few questions I had.

JH: Hmm-hmm.

BW: What was it like working at CBO?

JH: I call it a halfway house, which is a halfway house between academia, which is where I'd been previously, and the committees. And CBO is a great place because it's nonpartisan, and my boss was Alice Rivlin, I think I'm the last person she ever hired before we got our new director, Rudy [Rudolph G.] Penner and I spent a year-and-a-half there largely doing international economics, and was free to get around and do some reporting about the committees and such, as well as my normal work in the Fiscal Analysis Division.

I then had the opportunity to become the staff economist on the Budget Committee in January of 1985, a position which I sought and happily accepted, working for Lawton Chiles and the staff director, Rick Brandon, and that's where I was working my way up, until Lawton Chiles decided to retire and Jim Sasser came along and I was fortunate enough to be selected as his staff director.

BW: When you came to Washington, did you have a job lined up at CBO?

JH: I did, I had a job lined up at CBO, and actually it was a sabbatical year that I had earned from being at Lehigh, and then after a few months I was convinced that I wanted to stay in Washington and so – it was an unpaid sabbatical, so I wouldn't have any guilt – and so I decided to resign my tenured position at Lehigh.

BW: I have one question about CBO: who sets the agenda for their work?

JH: It's largely driven by Congress. They are a creature of the Congress, by charter they're nonpartisan, but they have certain regular documents that they publish of which our Fiscal Analysis Division, twice a year, had to produce an economic outlook for the economy and its impact on the budget. So there's recurring periodicals that come out, but a large part of their work, it's really two parts, requested work by members of Congress, and then on the other hand, really critical but a little bit tedious work is, every bill that is being considered must be costed out for its budgetary impact. And there's a large staff that does that very, very important job so that everyone is supposed to know what they're spending or not spending.

BW: So give me a little bit of the flavor of the Senate Budget Committee.

JH: A great place to work. Lawton Chiles, terrific senator, and our job there – now that *is* partisan, so there's the Democratic staff and the Republican staff, with a small nonpartisan staff mainly concerned with generating the number base that other people work off of. But we were fortunate, not only having Lawton Chiles, but his Republican colleague, the chairman, was Pete Domenici, who was a guy I admired a lot. And I was also blessed, particularly when I became staff director, to have a fantastic guy opposite me on the Republican side named Bill Hoagland, who was Pete Domenici's – I'm sure, as part of the Dole Project you may have talked to him – and Bill is a prince of a guy.

And so my job as the staff economist was to try to inform the committee about economic trends, to have sort of economic-related questions and such for witnesses. I also wrote a weekly little page about issues of economic interest that was circulated inside the committee and other interested staff members. It was largely an economist role but with more practical application.

BW: Those little updates, were they historical in nature, or contemporary?

JH: It was more current events about what's going on and what an economist looks at these issues as.

BW: Talk for a moment about Senator Sasser, because he comes up in a number of ways.

JH: Hmm-hmm.

BW: First of all, your complimentary comment, and then of course he was likely to have been majority leader.

JH: He could have been, it was very, very close between him and Senator Daschle. Senator Sasser, who continues to be a friend, is just a great guy. His real strength is that he is politically incredibly astute, just has a gift for not only the political issues writ large, but in his relationship with colleagues. How we got some of our budgets out of committee I'll never know, other than his personal relation with his members. So that was a very strong point.

And we had a good partnership because I knew the technical end quite well, and with his politics we had a really, two really good years together and he was a very good friend of George Mitchell. I can give you the list of who I consider to be his group of people that he liked and liked to be around and turned to, of which Jim Sasser was one, which was very helpful, because when Senator Mitchell asked me to be his chief of staff, there was never an issue with Senator Sasser, and he actually saw it constructively as a way to have a contact in the leader's office that he was close to and knew, and he knew he could trust, in addition to Senator Mitchell.

So, Jim Sasser was a great guy. And on the leadership race, which of course I was not involved in, in any regard, because it's really member to member, he felt he was going to win, but of course that was a very difficult year, 1994, for all sorts of reasons which we could go into or not, and so he ended up losing his seat to Bill Frist, down in Tennessee, and so that was unfortunate.

BW: Now George Mitchell was not a member of the Budget Committee.

JH: Correct.

BW: But he was on Finance.

JH: Correct.

BW: So what were your contacts with him during the time that you were at Budget, other than through Sasser?

JH: It was largely through Sasser. When often we would come in and talk to him, or he and other leadership would need a briefing, I was able to accompany Senator Sasser and had a good chance to [interact with members]. I mean the budget's very arcane and very large and very complex, and so given the responsibilities senators have, there's no way that they even should be responsible for understanding all the nitty-gritty, so it was an opportunity for me to get to know Senator Mitchell through Senator Sasser, and particularly at the Andrews Summit where Senator

Mitchell was intimately involved in that. That was in the 1990 Budget Agreement with Dick Darman and George Bush's people; Nick Brady and John Sununu were the three leading people there.

And so it was through that, and I can't confirm this but I think the reason he wanted me to be the chief of staff is because he understood that the budget's never ending, and every issue coming out of any committee virtually, I mean there could be a couple exceptions, there's always a budgetary issue. And also, this was the age of trying to fill the deficit hole and it was the primary focus, really, of domestic policy from 1982, when the budget was first blown open, or '81, and 1997, when we were finally able to balance the budget again. So there was a sixteen-year period where the budget was, the issues always came and went of course, but there was always an overarching budgetary aspect to everything, as well as being the battlefield where the two sides could engage the most and fight over things, taxes and spending and things like that.

BW: It's easy to associate Senator Mitchell with environmental issues.

JH: Absolutely.

BW: How strong was he as an 'economist,' quote/unquote?

JH: Unbelievable. Being trained as a lawyer, it always amazed me. First of all, after you get to know him you're not amazed by anything, because he's so remarkably intelligent and really brilliant. And what he had obviously was a clear analytic mind and a very reasoned way of approaching everything, but he was also incredibly numerate, so that quantitative issues were easy for him. So there was never this issue of, 'I don't understand,' or, 'Do that again,' but he was very easy to deal with because he thoroughly understood all the issues, including the technical, the numerate, everything, the complexity, so I was very fortunate to have a boss who was smarter than I am.

BW: But he did rely on you obviously for some input.

JH: He did, he did, as all good ones do.

BW: I'm just looking at my notes here for a second.

JH: Please.

BW: When you came on board and you were working with the leader's staff, I mean you were chief of staff in the leader's office.

JH: That's correct.

BW: He was already a couple years into that role -

JH: That's correct, that's correct.

BW: - and did it strike you that he was comfortably situated as leader by that point?

JH: Oh, absolutely correct, that's right. He had been an elected leader I believe two years earlier, in 1988. And it's interesting, just as an aside, there's a Chiles connection there because, I believe it was in 1985 or '86, Lawton Chiles actually launched the first public leadership challenge to Robert Byrd, which showed that the caucus was not totally thrilled with the situation and that there was going to be change coming along at some point. Chiles did not prevail in that leadership contest, but in some ways it set the stage, I think, for Senator Byrd to move out of leadership and onto the Appropriations Committee in 1988. And of course the race was between Bennett Johnston, Daniel Inouye, and George Mitchell, and Mitchell – again, staff weren't involved in any of that – but he prevailed, and thankfully, because he's was such a fabulous force and a great leader.

BW: That was going to be my next question. Was his selection good news as far as you and the people you knew were concerned?

JH: Oh, absolutely, if you've just ever, I'm sure you have, watched him on the floor or on the news shows, or had the opportunity to be with him in person, this is a man of huge intellect and just an ability to analyze issues, to speak clearly, to be able to express things in a very commonsensical and very convincing way, and so there could not have been a better leader.

In fact, I'm very biased about this, I've not been around that long but of all the leaders, he towers over the others, in my opinion. Because it's a fortunate day, given what – this is just my opinion of course – but given what the caucus, the Democratic caucus was looking for in a leader, often it's not the strongest, smartest guy, it's often a facilitator and someone who can work with them all, but is not the smartest guy in the building. And so we were really fortunate that this confluence of events came together where we had not only the individual with all the qualities of being admired by his colleagues and being trusted by them, and listening to them and knowing that he's going to consult with them, and everything's going to be aboveboard, so the whole relationship with members was excellent. But here was this guy who is just brilliant, and I can only think of a couple people in the Senate that even come close to his intellectual abilities. We were very, very fortunate to have that combination, which is pretty rare.

BW: What accounts for his having beaten Inouye and Johnston, do you imagine?

JH: I really don't know. I think people like Martha Pope, who were with him for a longer time, would be better able to answer that. I really don't know. It's just the observation, knowing them all, that here was just a rare instance where the right person came along at the right time.

BW: It is kind of amazing, isn't it?

JH: Hmm-hmm.

BW: Because he was at the end of his first term as an elected senator.

JH: Well of course a big thing that propelled him upward was, he was the head of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee in 1986, which is the point we regained the majority in the Senate.

BW: Talk a little bit about the relationship between the leader's office and – was it in Russell where his -?

JH: Yes. Well that's an important point, because again, from my position, and I had my own limited sphere of helping him, which was really the legislative political agenda of the Senate and its relationship to the House, the White House, and at that level of being *the* leader, but there's a lot more to the job than that. And one of the amazing things, and I'm sure everyone's going to tell you [this] about George Mitchell, is his dedication to the people of Maine and just the incredible amount of hard work he would put in, after crushing weeks of work. The workweek's very, very hard and there's no rest for the leader. Friday afternoon, he'd be on that plane to Maine and work the whole weekend and come back ready to go on Monday again.

But the organization of the leader was - Mary McAleney headed up the Russell office, the Maine-related stuff, and since I know nothing about Maine I was again fortunate that this wonderful, smart, dedicated, knows everything about Maine, easy to work with, just delightful person, Mary McAleney, was there to run all that. And we would talk all the time, be free to, but we understood, we'd alert each other, we'd tell each other when we needed each other's help, but that was her sphere and gladly, because I would have been totally incompetent to try to interject myself into that. And so she really, among others, and of course Mitchell was involved in everything.

So there was the Maine aspect, and then there was my role, and then there was another wing of the leadership called the Democratic Policy Committee, and that was under Tom Daschle, who was his most dedicated and very able lieutenant who would organize events, get the message out, aid in communications, do studies, and sort of rouse the members together to get a coherent message and things like that, as difficult as that might be. So Senator Daschle ran the Democratic Policy Committee, and he had a capable staff working for him.

And then a group that I worked with but really had a large amount of autonomy themselves was the floor staff. A great person you want to talk to is a guy named Marty Paone, who was the head of the floor staff. These are the parliamentary, they're partisan, they worked for Mitchell, but they're the ones that know the Rules of Procedure that he can turn to when things get rough-and-tumble or we need a [floor] strategy. So whenever we were saying, "Good Lord, what do we do now?" Marty and the others would be very, very much involved in that. And in fact, oftentimes I'd be off doing something else, and his interaction with those folks was day-to-day and often minute-to-minute, depending on what was on the floor. So that was another one of his groups of very important and semi-autonomous people, certainly semi-autonomous from me, that

I worked with but which really were indispensable in their own sphere of knowledge.

And then there's of course the whip operation, and Wendell Ford was the whip, and Wendell's a good guy. He was not a Mitchell confidant, per se, but he was a very loyal, very able whip, and would run the vote counts, would try to help us get votes lined up and keep that difficult task of herding cats. Whose book was that? That was Trent Lott's.

BW: Trent Lott's.

JH: Yeah, Trent Lott's book [*Herding Cats* (2005)]. So there was the whip staff which was also a part of it. And then there was the whole running-the-Senate-as-an-organization part, which was basically under Martha Pope, the sergeant-at-arms, and Joe Stewart. All that sort flowed down through the whole administration of all the gate-keeping, the floor, the large administrative structure, and that was Martha. So there's five or six wings under the Mitchell rubric of the leadership.

BW: What about parliamentarian?

JH: Parliamentarian was, is a supposedly nonpartisan situation, and they're in a very difficult situation, because a lot of pressure and a lot of people wanting them to decide one thing one way or the other. But the parliamentarian is the nonpartisan appointment of the leader, however, and so Alan Frumin was the parliamentarian, and Alan did a good job in the circumstances. Bob Dove was a parliamentarian during Senator Dole's time as leader, and I'm not fit to judge how things go, but the floor staff I'm speaking of under Mitchell is sort of *his* team that is the intermediary to the nonpartisan parliamentary staff, so that's the relationship.

BW: But does a leader typically rely much on the parliamentarian?

JH: Well the parliamentarian as an office is critical, because they will make the call. On so many things that come along, it's not black or white, and it's sometimes not even gray, and so on very many tough issues we would be down in the parliamentarian's office – depending on the issue, if it was a budget issue, even including me, and other issues, and people like Marty and Lula Davis, who was also one of our key people on the floor staff – we'd be down saying, "Look at, this is the issue, this is precedent, this is the way you should call it," and then you can bet your boots that an hour later the Republican staff would be in there making *their* best argument. And so on issue after issue, there were calls that had to be made by the parliamentarian, and so it was absolutely essential that you made your case. And it's a very powerful, important thing, and that's why someone like a Dove in that position was so helpful to Senator Dole.

But in all of Senator Mitchell's dealings, this is just the mark of the man, is that he would never cut corners. There is just an imbued sense of integrity to everything he did, so there was, "Make your best argument, do the best you can, no hidden anything behind the curtain, and let's just do the best we can."

And just in regard to that, interestingly, in Senator Byrd's time there were a lot of surprises launched on the other side. "This vote will happen at midnight," or, "Now let's get the sergeant-at-arms and round up all the senators," or, "We're filling the tree with amendments so it can't be amended." A lot of that. When Senator Mitchell came in, he and Senator Dole pledged to each other that there would be no surprises, that they could disagree without being disagreeable, and that they could honor and respect the views of the other side and deal with each other as professionals in an open but politically adversarial way, which is the way the system works.

That was always a huge benefit, and I want to also give praise to Sheila Burke, his chief of staff who was my counterpart, who was as smart as she could be, and incredibly professional, very strong, very directed, but again, a consummate professional. Among all of us, there was never a harsh word spoken. Many disagreements, and many times they or we had the upper hand and we drove it home and did the best we could. But there was never a sense that you were being treated unfairly and that someone was going around – and that's a great credit to Senator Dole who I have a mountain of respect for, as well as Sheila.

So we were really fortunate, I was, that not only did I work for just an astoundingly good individual in George Mitchell, but that it was a good time of real issues where there were important differences at play and the outcomes were significant, but which it was decided really on the merits and on your political will and your political abilities, as opposed to anything being snuck over on anyone. And that was very good.

BW: Just a clarification, when you said that things were, sort of sneaky things were being done during Byrd's time -

JH: Well no, I wouldn't say sneaky, I would say 'surprises' is the thing. In other words, the point is simply that everything of course was according to the Robert's Rules or the operative document in the Senate, but there was not the level of consultation and openness. And when we were going to do something, and I can go into some of the major legislative battles we had but, we'd get our ducks in line, we'd understand what we were going to do, and before we'd walk on the floor we'd give Senator Dole a heads up and say, "Here's what we intend to do, we just want to let you know."

BW: But in the age of surprises –

JH: Hmm-hmm.

BW: - it was, both Republicans and Democrats were playing that game, is that correct?

JH: I can only look at it from the feeling I knew about the caucus and the kind of leadership that they were grateful for under George Mitchell.

BW: Anything else about, I was so interested in your mentioning Chiles in terms of the lead up to Byrd's moving over to Appropriations. Anything else on that?

(Outside interruption - taping paused.)

BW: I wanted to ask you about the transition from Martha Pope to yourself, did she give you a lot of guidelines and whatnot?

JH: Not in a big way, but Martha was unbelievably supportive. I knew she was going to sergeant-at-arms, but when I got back from Russia we talked on the phone and I said, "Do you know what's going on?" And she said, "Do you know what's going on?" And the speculation was maybe David Johnson, his first AA, might come back to be chief of staff. And again, I had been talking to Martha about the position working under her on the Democratic Policy Committee. And then Mitchell said he wanted me to be chief of staff and her to be sergeant-at-arms, which was grand with me.

I remember the meeting where she pulled everyone together, the entire senior staff, and just was incredibly supportive and delineated what she'd be doing, and now, that everyone should support me, and that's the way the relationship always was. Given the range of her responsibilities, I had nothing to do with what she was doing in the Sergeant-At-Arms Office, not a thing. And she, rightly, continued her close personal relationship with Senator Mitchell, not only, I think, in the specific tasks under her purview, but also just by the fact that here was a trusted and smart and very able and loyal advisor, and that was very, very good.

That's an important thing about George Mitchell. Not only did he have really good people, but we all got along. There was never a gatekeeper aspect to my job: a) because it would have been inappropriate; b) he's not that kind of person. Here's a brilliant man who can handle twenty things at once, and who seeks advice from far and wide, and the communication among the staff was excellent, and the relationships. So we'd always know what the other was doing, in a very trustful way, and by the nature of the man he sort of instilled that in his staff.

So it was a good thing that he could draw on people like Martha or Mary McAleney, and believe me, given the burdens of everybody's job you quickly learned, if you didn't know already, that you do not need to be a part of every meeting or every issue, he's got good, trusted people, and of course he's above and beyond the best. So everyone did their job, communicated, and just tried the best we could to serve, so that was the nature of the business.

BW: So you never felt that, a little wary of Martha because she had a back route.

JH: Not in the least. Martha is just a really good person, and, no, in no way did we try to in anyway, or wouldn't consider, doing the other person's business for them, or in any way any of us being a gatekeeper about any issue. It's the nature of us, I hope, and George Mitchell was such that life's too short and you're not serving properly if that's the attitude you have. So there was never an issue like that.

BW: So there was a clear-cut structure to things.

JH: Oh absolutely.

BW: And roles were delineated.

JH: Yes, exactly, she ran the building and all that went with that, and I basically was his chief of staff for the legislative issues, and political legislative issues, not electoral politics. I never delved into any of that, the races or anything like that. He'd have the DSCC to talk to and the consultants and I'd sit in on those and I'd help on those kinds of things but it wasn't my area of expertise. Mine was, and believe me it was a full time job, trying to keep the trains running and help him as leader, legislative leader, basically was my role.

BW: I was going to ask you about the DNC too, did you have -

JH: Oh sure, yes. Part of the leader's job is not only on the road to Maine, it's on the road for the fund-raising and the appearances for senators in their home states, always, and just an excruciating schedule. But he had the DNC, more in his role, the DSCC, because he's concerned more about the election of senators, and the DNC really sort of peaks in the presidential years. So our boon companion always was the DSCC, Steve Ricchetti was there at the time when I was first there. I'm forgetting who the other one was; I think Don Foley was another. We had good, close relationships with them, and then we had our cadre of advisors, consultants, etc., who would come in with the polling and all that. And we were all a part of that, too.

BW: Who was chair of the DSCC at that time, do you recall?

JH: The senator?

BW: Hmm-hmm. I know, but I don't have my notes in front of me.

JH: I would have to look.

BW: How large a staff did you have? I don't mean an exact figure, but -

JH: I'm going to say the Mitchell staff – Maine, DPC, and leadership staff – I'm going to say in the range of two hundred.

BW: That's a big company.

JH: It's a big company, yes, it is. But again, that's one of the things I wanted to be clear about is the semi-autonomous nature and the need for that for the different missions that each had, so it's like a large enterprise with its divisions.

BW: So how many, how large a staff did you have in the leader's office?

JH: I'm going to say about fifty. We had a lot of legislative aides and such like that. And a lot of people would do double duty, in other words, a person like Bobby Rozen who, have you talked to Bobby? He's really worth talking to; it's R-O-Z-E-N, who was with Mitchell before I came. He had finance, tax, campaign finance reform, a lot of issues, but on tax issues he was his go-to guy on the Finance Committee, he would do the Maine stuff and he would do the national stuff. So a lot of those people cut both ways.

BW: And where were you all housed?

JH: All over the place. A lot in Russell, we had quite a few people housed in the Capitol directly, and that's mainly it.

BW: You mentioned Wendell Ford. And am I right that at some point Alan Cranston became the whip?

JH: No-no, Cranston was the whip before Wendell Ford.

BW: I see, so you never worked with Cranston in that role.

JH: Never worked with Cranston, mine was with Wendell Ford. He was the whip when I was there.

BW: Right. What about other, I'm going to use the word 'buddies,' that Senator Mitchell had among his colleagues.

JH: Sure.

BW: Who were they?

JH: Well first a generic comment, which was, he had the absolute trust and admiration of all his colleagues. I can't think of a single one who was ever openly antagonistic or I had any sense just didn't think the world of George Mitchell, which is an unbelievable feat, because there *are* egos in the Senate, believe it or not.

But it's something that Mitchell, I felt, was always very good at, he was very thoughtful in everything he did, but he would make a point of being very close to the people he needed to be close to, such as Lloyd Bentsen on Finance, who was just a really strong and capable guy in his own right, just amazingly so. And Sam Nunn, same thing, who, on a political spectrum, Nunn and Mitchell, the nature of the states and everything else, they had their differences on some of those things, which were totally understandable, but there was always a sense of respect, admiration and friendship that ran throughout all of Mitchell's dealings.

So he would really know how to stay close to the key chairmen, but as part of being that way with everyone, but just a real sense of where the power was, which are with a few key

committees, and the need for that cooperative spirit. Because if you have, which happens often, not in the Mitchell time, if you have problems between a powerful chairman of a committee and a leader, it's very, very bad. It's very bad.

But in terms of people he was buddies with, I would put at the top of the list Paul Sarbanes, without a doubt, Joe Biden, Jim Sasser, Don Riegle, Bentsen, Nunn – I'm trying to think some more of these – Kennedy. The thing that runs throughout a lot of those is, well Sarbanes always liked to come in at nine o'clock at night and talk, and Sarbanes is, in his own right, probably one of the smartest senators that's ever served. He's just unbelievably smart, but much harder to get to know – it took me a few years – and to befriend. Sarbanes was someone he could have a quiet time with, eating his cucumber sandwiches, Mitchell's cucumber sandwiches at nine o'clock for dinner, and Sarbanes would come in and they'd go into the room and visit and talk.

But the thing about people like Kennedy and Biden is, again it goes back to what I was saying about Bentsen and Nunn is, these were guys, both of them, who were incredibly able as committee chairs and as floor managers. When you're in the job he had and I had, there's nothing you like better than a chairman and a staff that you know they're going to be out there and they can manage their bill and you watch it and you help them and you do that, but there's nothing worse than having to manage every freakin' bill from the leader's office.

Biden could manage those crime bills like nobody's business, and Bentsen of course was amazingly good; same with Nunn, and Kennedy of course, just a fabulous legislator. Those were the kind of people that we would see most is the ones that were the strength of the Senate, to be honest with you, is who we would rely on. And of course Sasser was the Budget Committee, and that ran through everything, and we had a great relationship there.

And then of course a lot of these guys, now, were friends in their own right. In other words, a nice circle of friends with Sasser, Riegle, Dodd, and Sarbanes, these wonderful liberals that used to go out there and loved to, you know, dog-and-pony off of each other and beat up the other side. And so [those are] the ones that I would cite. I might come up with some more in a minute, but those were the key ones who I'd say we knew and loved.

BW: If Senator Mitchell was having a really bad day, was there one senator that he might be most likely to go to and share his grief?

JH: I, no, I don't think so. The amazing thing about Senator Mitchell, and I believe he was telling me this about some of the advice he was giving to Senator Daschle who succeeded him, but he never once lost his temper, raised his voice, did anything untoward toward anybody. He was always strictly professional, no matter how exhausted he or we were, or just how tuckered and susceptible to that. It just never happened.

He had, has I'm sure still, an iron discipline and ability to just completely stay contained and professional and upbeat, and never, ever, ever – and I don't think there is a dark side – but never, none of that ever was evident in any way at all. And that's a pleasure because nobody likes a

screamer, I don't care how low or high you are on the totem pole, it's a bad way to live. And back to your question, I didn't see, there were no down moments. There was an even keel and a real sense of purpose throughout, and just a guy who was in command of himself and his job.

BW: You mentioned cucumber sandwiches.

JH: Yes, yeah.

BW: And you were, the question occurred to me a few minutes ago when you were saying what high energy Senator Mitchell had -

JH: Hmm-hmm.

BW: What about diet, anything else?

JH: Well, he's trim and fit all his life, nonsmoker, nondrinker, never drank, obviously no cigarettes or any of that; just wonderfully disciplined guy. In terms of the discipline, here's a guy that you didn't have to ask to do anything. I've had bosses where you have to, you know, "You really need to do this." "This is important, you have to do this and you really should do this," that kind of stuff. Never ever. He knew what he wanted to do, he commanded his own scheduling, his own calendar.

Every day there would be a stack of paperwork this high that would need to either be signed or edited or looked through, just the normal hundreds of things that come in every day. Without batting an eye, carefully go through everything, giving it the attention to detail and thought that it needed. But a worker, just disciplined beyond belief at his work ethic and his acceptance and welcoming of all that goes with that.

Now, there are some things down the line we'll get to that weren't so welcome that make it very hard to be a leader, but in his personal habits which we're addressing now, just an amazing equanimity and ability to function really at peak performance.

BW: What about a fatigue factor.

JH: Un-unh, amazingly, never. The days and the hours are just, they're absolutely killer, and we always used to joke that on Friday afternoon, who could beat him out of the parking lot, because about three o'clock we'd put him in the limo to go to catch the plane to Maine, and the joke was, "Let's don't run over him in the parking lot as we're heading for the exits," because you're up 'til midnight on Thursday night, you're in on Friday, and we'd go home to recuperate for the weekend, and here's this guy going off to work so, just an amazing human being.

BW: Now, while you were there, he was conducting a romance, too, or not? Was that -?

JH: No, only at the very end. He had met Heather, and her presence was not evident to me.

And I have a credo which I go by, which is I have absolutely no interest in anyone's personal life. People should really adopt that policy. I never would ask or care – I care about him as an individual, but I'm blessed with no curiosity about what should be private. And so only when he started bringing her to like, I remember an event at the National Press Club is perhaps where I met her and some of the farewell things, she was there. So that was not part of my world.

End of Disc One
Disc Two

BW: How did you and he, what kind of a work schedule did you and he have? I mean did you have a meeting at the beginning of the day regularly, or how did that -?

JH: I had access at any time, any moment. If there was anything I needed to talk to him about, and likewise, there was really no need to schedule anything. Now, I was free to attend any meetings I wanted except, I'd know that when he and Sarbanes went back and ate their cucumber sandwiches, not only did I have my own work to do, but they sure as hell didn't want me in there. It's just an obvious part of functioning.

But I had access on any issue at any time, I'd grab him coming in and out of the door, I'd go into his office. He would do the same for me if he needed to. And the job near the Senate, the job of running the Senate has its own cadence. In other words, there's a bill that's coming along, there's an amendment that's up, so there's sort of a cadence to it, but of course there's an overarching, "How do we get ready for this? We've got to talk to the money committees about that." So there's multiple levels, but there's always an institutional cadence to the thing that demanded, actually, that we're in constant contact with one another.

It's not like the White House, where the chief of staff comes in and says, "Here's your security briefing," or, "Here's this briefing." Of course his schedule was always open to everybody, everybody knew every meeting he was in, and so, and then of course I would facilitate the right person being in all the right meetings, because he needed the expert, and he always needed a hand-off man when he says he's going to do something for a constituent, there's got to be someone there that makes sure that what he wants happens. So that's a natural part of a highly trained, well honed professional staff. And I go back and reemphasize the good feelings, the trust, and bad people get selected out pretty quickly and there were none in Mitchell's office.

BW: Were there regular staff meetings?

JH: That I conducted? Oh sure, we'd have a weekly meeting with the Maine staff or the legislative staff. Most of the meetings though were issue-oriented. In other words, here comes health care, five times a day, or it's a trade bill, or it's a tax bill. So most of the meetings were very substance-oriented, and likewise for him. In other words, it would be a meeting with senators about a bill, or about an amendment, or something the White House needs to do. So the cadence is determined really more or less by the substance, because there's this huge institutional train called the Senate that keeps chugging along, and bills keep getting introduced and

committees reporting and such like that.

BW: Did Senator – Senator Mitchell had a hideaway.

JH: Oh, he did, yes.

BW: And did he use it much?

JH: Very, very rarely. In fact, I became pretty ill in 1994, from taking the wrong medication, and I was using his hideaway for a midday nap, to be honest with you. I was totally enervated for about six months before I got it all out of my system. So he was a great guy and understood that I'd come in, I'd work, and then I'd have to get a nap during the middle of the day to be able to function the rest of the day. So it was larger than this, the hideaway that he'd never use.

BW: Is there one specific hideaway that is reserved for the majority leader?

JH: I don't know that, but it was awfully nice. And honestly, in the year, in the six months I needed it for my health, I was the only one ever up there, and it was just great, no phone calls would ever come up there or anything.

BW: This may be the time to move on to some of the issues that you spent time with, and I'd be curious to know which ones come to the top of your list.

JH: Sure. Well, actually one of the most interesting episodes came along before I was his chief of staff, which was in 1990. The big Andrews [Air Force Base Budget Summit] and the budget bill, the bipartisan bill passed with President H. W. Bush, this actually goes back to 1989, I have to get it correct. The Republicans were trying to pass capital gains tax cut, and it was one of the priorities of George Bush, and they actually had gotten it out of the House and had rolled [Dan] Rostenkowski and a significant capital gains cut had passed the House. And even though it required sixty votes in the Senate, capital gains tax cuts are very popular amongst senators, not only the business elements but the timber, mining, other interests, so it cuts a lot of ways.

So we were really sucking wind to try to defeat it at sixty votes. And one of the things that I'm very proud I came up with, was a maneuver to basically strip the reconciliation bill of what's called extraneous provisions, of which, for a lot of arcane reasons, capital gains was one. But we figured out that if we just took on capital gains directly, it would be close. In other words, it would be down to begging that last vote or whatever you had to do to get that last vote to hold our guys in line, even though we had a substantial majority; I think we had fifty-seven at that point. But there were likely sixty votes for this, just because of the nature of the issue.

And so what I suggested was, "Don't take on capital gains directly, let's strip the entire bill of all extraneous provisions," which was like hundreds of provisions. And I'll never forget the meeting we had with Lloyd Bentsen, who as chairman, and a powerful chairman, he'd put all sorts of wonderful provisions that he was the proponent of in this thing. And so he comes in

here, and I'll never forget it, Mitchell says, "You know, Lloyd, the only way we're going to defeat this is" – and Mitchell wasn't against the capital gains tax cut, but he wanted it tied to an increase in the regular rate at the top end of the bracket, so it was a quid pro quo, or a balance was what he was after. He said, "You know, Lloyd, I know this is a lot to ask, but the only way we're going to beat this is to strip the reconciliation bill of all the provisions, and I know you have more to lose than everybody." And Lloyd Bentsen didn't bat an eye, he says, "Well if that's what you want, Mr. Leader, that's what we'll do."

And it was a great episode, one of my favorites of all time in the Senate, was Mitchell went out and gave this marvelous speech about the need for virtue and that all our bills had gotten encumbered with these extraneous provisions, and this being a budget bill, the whole point of the Congressional Budget Act was to keep things lean and it was for deficit reduction and not for all this extraneous stuff, so he gives a marvelous speech. And then Dole and Domenici, to their credit, knowing they had gotten caught, in the sense that we weren't proposing anything about capital gains that we weren't proposing for all our own stuff that was in there, and Mitchell was able to turn it into one of virtue, that the Senate shouldn't be one with all these extraneous provisions and that this is about doing the right thing on the budget and therefore both sides, they saw that the momentum was there, and you had to be on the side of virtue.

And we stripped them all out and that thing passed with nearly ninety votes. It was just absolutely amazing. But the thing about the relationship with the chairman was that Lloyd Bentsen did not bat an eye when Mitchell asked him to strip the bill of all his stuff. And that's that relationship and trust and respect they had for each other. Bentsen was really a top, top-notch senator.

And then on another legislative issue, this was in 1991, the Iraq One War. And you may recall that our desire at that time, we just had the war wrong, our desire at that time was to delay six months and let negotiation and U.N. oversight and everything deal with Iraq on those terms, and with a graduated set of constraints ultimately leading, if for six months he had not responded appropriately to international and other pressures, that the way would be open for war.

And in that one, the only way we were even half alive on that was because Sam Nunn was on our side. He was the Democrats' voice of national defense, another really smart and capable human being. And so again, that relationship with Nunn is what allowed us to marshal our support for a resolution that ultimately failed, because then [president H.W.] Bush went to war, but had sense enough to get out. So that was Iraq One, but again, the relationship with Nunn and his sense of always knowing your senators very well, knowing the issue, understanding that people do things for all sorts of reasons, whether it be home state interest or ideology or relationship or whatever, he knew this coming and going on all these guys and on the issues. That's what also made him such an effective leader. But that relationship with Nunn was very, very important.

Now, another issue I wanted to talk to you about, let me just look here in my notes, was, oh yes, our life got substantially more difficult with the election of President Clinton. Because it's the nature of the business, one of the hardest jobs in the world – I almost said worst – but one of the

hardest jobs in the world is being the leader in the Senate for a president of your own party. Because they send it up and you're supposed to get it done, and it's not that easy at all. In fact, I'm very impressed so far with how well Obama's doing. I thought the Republicans made a huge mistake on the stimulus bill of opposing it, which I think the public has amply rewarded them for. But it is hard to hold your troops together, you're already seeing it like on the carbon tax, they're having to spin that off to, Obama is.

And unfortunately Clinton just handed us an anchor right away, because the very first substantive bill to come up in 1993 was the stimulus package, and it was a horribly ill-conceived bill to start with, of which we'd had not sufficient input on our side. And the theory was, and this was theory, that President Clinton and his staff at that early point decided to stimulate the economy with a quick bill, and then come behind with his deficit reduction package later, but they hadn't thought through the nature of the bill they were doing.

(Outside interruption - taping paused.)

JH: We were talking about the stimulus bill, and so here comes this bill, but what they did is they, wanting the stimulus quickly, they hadn't devised their own program so they threw the bill into the Appropriations Committee, which did what appropriators do, which is ladle it out to their various interests. And we got to the floor, we got slaughtered. The Republicans came down there and gave some beautiful speeches about, "So, I see this money is going for midnight basketball," or, "This is going for a community swimming pool," and list after list after list. And the bill failed miserably. We had to pull it down, we had absolutely no votes for it, they had won the argument, and it actually brought to the surface the very ill feelings between the Dole camp and President Clinton, or the Republican camp led by Senator Dole, and President Clinton.

And of course they wanted to make their mark that, "We might be the minority but we're not here to be pushed around," and so they were looking for something to step on. And we said, "Here, step on this, this is perfect for you, go right ahead, have a good time." So we start off with this meltdown, and so that made evident the partisan divide in the Senate.

And then comes the grand deficit reduction package, and of course it was a large package, on fiscal grounds it was the right thing to be doing to reduce the deficit, and it was actually a very brave act that he took, with political consequences. That came up there, and there wasn't a single Republican to be found. The atmosphere had gotten to the point where even the Chafees and the Cohens and the liberal Republicans who used to exist in the Senate, had been sort of corralled back into the caucuses and in the House or Senate there wasn't a single Republican vote. So we passed that thing on a fifty-to-fifty tie with Al Gore providing the tie breaking vote.

I cannot tell you how difficult that was, to pass that legislation, because we had fifty-seven guys, Boren and a few of the others. We had our list of six, six of our guys said, "We're gone, we're not raising taxes, what are you talking about?" And so we're down to a tie, we're down to having one vote left before passing it, and that was that epic struggle to get Bob Kerrey to vote for it, which he finally did thanks to Tom Daschle and Harry Reid, the two guys who got that

vote for us, and George Mitchell.

If you wanted a bucket of cold water on you about the joys of doing the heavy lifting for an administration, who was taking a constructive but politically perilous path, that was it. That was very, very difficult, and I think it caught all our attention about, the truth is, President Clinton came in with a bunch of neophytes. These guys were showing up at my office, and I won't use names, but saying, "Now tell us about this federal budget," and, "How does this work? How does that work?" And so they were really a bunch of neophytes.

George Stephanopoulos was with him, but George wasn't a legislative guy, he was a press media kind of, very smart and very capable, but that wasn't his thing. And so we were getting thrown this stuff by a bunch of neophytes, and of course now Clinton, being smart, learned over time and ultimately became a successful president before failing in his last three years again, but that was very, very tough.

And then the other legislative episode that I'm leading up to is of course Hillary health care. And if you wanted another piece of lumber to the head, to tell you about the difficulty of being the leader with a Democratic president, it was to have this delivered onto your steps. As you know the history, this had been cooked up by a team of five hundred in secret, all five hundred excluding members of Congress, to be cooked up down there at the Old Executive Office Building and then delivered in high fashion to us. And we're going, "Whoa, this looks pretty tough."

And again it was '94, coming into an election, an election at which Gingrich knew he had a shot at the House because of the House banking scandal, and then this was like manna from heaven because here was the most difficult policy issue of the last thirty years being taken up by a neophyte Hillary Clinton, which a Kennedy had been working on for twenty years and had made marginal progress; a guy who understood all the issues.

So here's possibly the toughest, not just politically, but substantive issue, one of the toughest in America coming along, and to jump into that whole cloth with, "Here guys, here's the solution," we were dead out of the blocks. The Republicans – now, to Mitchell's great credit, what he tried to do was, after it became apparent that we were melting down and this was completely unworkable and we would never have the votes for this thing, he convened a group of moderate Democrats and moderate Republicans in his office to try to work this thing out. Again the Chafees on their side, the Breauxs on our side, sort of the middle-of-the-roaders, Bob Kerrey, but – it was reported at the time – but the truth is, even though we went through that, we had run out of time, and also Senator Dole, being very smart and powerful, had realized, "There's just no way that we're going to let anything through here in an election year on health care, not when we've got the upper hand on something that looks pretty ugly."

And so in my personal opinion, and this is just my opinion, you can ask others about this, but I think probably the precipitating event in his desire to retire, which surprised us all, how late it came, was just realizing that two to six more years of this, for a guy who was still young, who

had done it for a number of years already – I mean he had been in leadership six years at that point, which isn't long by, say, a Byrd standard, and Daschle, I think, did ten years – but being in opposition is a lot easier than being the guy that has to carry the water.

So I think the Clinton bills were hard. Now Senator Mitchell, thanks to him and Joe Biden, did have a major success in '94, which was the Crime Bill. And that was the year I was sick, and so I was not participating in that one very much at all, but they were able to push through a very good omnibus crime bill, with the assault weapons ban and things like that. So that was a major victory during that period. But if you look at it, Mitchell served masterfully in Clinton's first two years, because to get that budget through, which turned out to be hugely constructive, was just an amazing accomplishment, as was the crime bill. And health care never had a chance anyway, try as we might.

BW: Did Mitchell attempt to steer the neophytes in the right direction, was there anything -?

JH: Yes, I mean they would communicate, but it was sort of - On the health care - Well, the stimulus was just a mistake. And I try to be careful in saying that it revealed the partisanship, it didn't invent the partisanship, it stoked it and it pulled their liberals back, their moderates back into the Republican caucus. []

BW: How did Mitchell communicate -?

JH: Oh, with the White House.

BW: With the White House.

JH: We would communicate, but on health care we just got handed this thing, okay. On the stimulus was just a mistake that hurt our abilities to do the deficit reduction, but I'm not sure we'd have gotten one or two Republicans anyway on the deficit reduction, but it was a great job by Mitchell to get that through. And then health care was, "My wife's going to do health care," and then they went off in secret and then we were handed this thing. And that was just no good.

But I will say this, he always had a very good relationship with President Clinton. They would communicate, Clinton greatly, greatly respected him, as everyone did, but as you can see, in almost every presidency the inclination up on the Hill, particularly by the leaders who are your best, is to close ranks, to be supportive, even if you're counseling a little bit otherwise on some of these things. And so Mitchell was always that. And from Clinton's perspective, and having been in the White House, he could not have had a better leader than George Mitchell, because he would go out and take the spear, he would go out and push the cause, as is his ability, being very disciplined. The ranks were always closed, et cetera, like that.

It was just that in those two years, there was one construct of the budget, but very constructive, incredibly difficult, but ultimately successful, and then in '94 the health care was out of our control, but always a great ability to deal with things. In fact, my first meeting with Clinton in

the Oval Office was with Mitchell on the 'gays in the military' issue, where we went down and came up with a compromise that, for better or for worse, was the compromise. But he relied on Mitchell a great, great deal; without Mitchell I'm not sure we could have passed the budget, basically.

BW: I'm a little confused. You're describing open channels of communication between the two men, but would it also be true that there was much coordination of effort, health care aside?

JH: Health care aside, it was better. Now, the first leg person in the White House was Howard Paster, and Howard only lasted less than a year, for reasons you can discover. And then Pat [Griffin] came in, who was a really, really good guy, and he was quite communicative with us. So things improved after the first year, without a doubt, with Pat.

In Howard's defense, the first year is always the hardest. You saw them traipse in the nominations, some several times, so that was a problem. By the nature of anything, it's toughest at the beginning, and so that may be a lot of why things in the first year weren't as well coordinated as they could have been.

And of course Clinton had run on, "It's the economy, stupid." I don't think any of them understood that the stimulus bill was a bad idea, I think that was just a mistake on their part, that we didn't have the votes and it hadn't been well thought out, if you're coming two months later with a major deficit reduction package. And now you notice with Obama, he's got the stimulus but a deficit reduction package is going to be years away, if ever. He's running for the ring right now, and the deficit be damned, and he's going to try to deal with it later. And so he's not stepping on his own toes like the other ones, and it'll be quite a feat if he can get the health care through. But I'm getting ahead of things now.

So the coordination and really the skill of the Clinton administration improved over time. And from my viewpoint, Clinton didn't come into his own until about three or four years in, to be honest with you.

BW: People have written about the Republican hatred for Bill Clinton.

JH: Hmm-hmm.

BW: As you look at it, from the beginning of his administration, did he earn that, or did he come in with that already alive and well among some members of the Republican -?

JH: Oh, I don't think that senators really, I mean they hated being in the minority, they hated losing the election, they hated getting their guy thrown out, but certainly at the leadership levels of Dole and Domenici and some of the people I dealt with, I didn't really get that part of it. I think that was more the, I wouldn't even put it as our elected leaders as much as it's the red meat groups that are out in the media. I think that's where that came from.

BW: And maybe a bit of the House, too.

JH: Oh well, the House is altogether a different institution, because the problem with the House is that unlike the Senate, where the rules force some degree of cooperation, there's none of that in the House. I describe it as tribal, to be honest with you, where one's in charge and the other sucks wind, basically. And the problem with the House is, it's winner take all, that's the problem with the House. And that's why these guys don't get along, they don't talk to each other, they hate each other, it's awful. But, that's why we have two bodies.

BW: This is a little detour here; as chief of staff did you have much business with the House?

JH: Oh, absolutely, yes. And we were incredibly lucky to have Tom Foley as the speaker of the House. I mean here's another really smart, unbelievable amiable guy, and I will say this, that of course this was pre the '94 Republican victory and the ascendance of Newt and sort of that group, and so we were still in the end of an era when there was more comity. But we had great relationships with Foley and Gephardt. And so my major in-house thing was coordinating with them and their staffs about legislation and about the running of the, basically that was it. And a little bit of politics, but yeah, that was a big part of my job was coordinating with them. And like I say, Foley was a real good guy to work with, as was Gephardt.

BW: Have we gone over your big issues?

JH: Yeah, on my, yes, so I think I had about five of those. So there was the stripping of the reconciliation with Bentsen, the Iraq War One with Nunn, the budget I talked about at Andrews and Sasser, and then the Clinton era, the two big bills, and then I mentioned crime as well, so I think those are the things.

Now to finish up the Clinton era, if I could, is when Mitchell decided to retire, he was transitioning to the private sector, and as you know he's done very, very well there, as you would expect. He wanted something in the public service area as a transitory thing. And I remember him telling me, he says, "I'm going to take this Ireland thing, I think I can get this done in a few months." And so three years later, he did it.

Which brings me to one of the other amazing things about him, is at all our meetings when we'd have the senators come in, whatever the issue was, or whether it was a weekly leadership meeting with the key leadership people, Mitchell's way was he would start the meeting with just a very brief statement of why we're here and what we're talking about. But then, he was a really, really good listener, and he would wait to interject himself in any strong way. So everyone would get their say, people would talk it back and forth for quite a while, and he would often withhold, until the time was just right, to have his input felt.

And that was really a good way to do it, because everyone, the worst thing you can be accused of in the Senate is, "I didn't get my input," that's the easiest refuge of anybody who disagrees with you. So everyone got their input, it was discussed, and then, but he would in a very smart way

try to steer it and therefore drive a consensus rather than impose in any other way, which is another thing that made him such a very, very effective leader. Really a gift for that.

And just as a funny little anecdote, particularly among lobbyists and staff, and senators too, he had this way of saying, “Okay,” the minute the meeting was over. And so he’d go, “Okay,” and everybody would get up and leave, and it was good thing to know how to end a meeting like that, which I’ve always appreciated. But he had this way with his members, I just cannot emphasize enough the trust and admiration that was there relative to George Mitchell.

BW: In a situation like you describe, there are sort of two things that might be happening. One would be, as everyone speaks, he then develops the consensus that will bring everyone along. The other is, he lets them speak, but then he comes in with his own point of view. Which of those strategies was working most of the time?

JH: The latter. Like I was saying, he was the smartest senator, he was the most capable senator, and he also happened to be the leader, which is a very good thing. And so he understood the issue better than the others, he understood what was possible better than others, and so he knew generally better than everybody else where it needed to end up. But he did it in a way that was consensus building.

Now, he sometimes gets the rap for not reaching out enough for opinions – which could be understandable if it were true – because of his capabilities. But in my opinion, what people confused was his discipline and his need never to sort of broadcast. In other words – I don’t know if you’ve talked to Diane Dewhirst [Mitchell’s press secretary], but one of the great things about him was his discipline about the message and what he was going to say. So he never said anything that he didn’t mean to say, and he never got carried away talking, like a lot of others can. And that also meant that he was very disciplined in dealing with the press, to the point it would exasperate them. He had this one phrase that would really get them, about, “I don’t think there’s any constitutional requirement that I answer,” or something, that just really – “Rrrr” – got them.

He would be very disciplined in his message and what he’d say, and he wouldn’t, “I don’t answer hypothetical questions,” down like that. So I think, often, his ability to not show his cards and stay disciplined was sometimes mistaken for not being inclusive enough. But that is absolutely wrong, because all the key people who needed to be heard, or wanted to be heard, would be heard. And listening is very difficult for then doing what they all say, and so that comes back to what I was saying before, which was, very inclusive, listening, making sure he understands where everybody’s coming from, but then very much leading it in the most constructive way, is where you end up generally, with him.

BW: I have a couple of follow up questions to the legislative issues that you covered. Where was the Andrews Air Force Base episode in terms of the budget bill?

JH: Okay, that was in 1990, before I came on. That was a major budget bill. What happened

was, first President Bush, to his credit, was looking for a bipartisan solution to the budget, and so we got together up on the Capitol and we – and this was Mitchell driving this strategy, this is very, very important – is that Mitchell was the discipline behind the whole Democratic strategy, including, most of our problems were getting the House to go along with what we wanted. But basically, we decided we were not going to get down to the nitty-gritty of agreement until they put taxes on the table, because we saw that you can't do this amount of cutting off the spending side alone. And so we basically played stall-ball until May when, as you'll recall, George Bush broke his "no new taxes" pledge, or 'enhanced revenues' as they called it, and that was a critical breakthrough. And it was a lot of inside work on our part to have the House guys, our House colleagues, particularly Leon Panetta and Foley. They said, "Well come on, let's deal a little." We said, "Absolutely not, they have to come off that pledge or else we'll never get there."

That happened in May – and by the way, another person you should think about talking to is Wyche Fowler, who was also close to him, Mitchell always liked him, and Fowler was the guy Mitchell deputized to be in the meetings day to day, and they were just excruciatingly long and Mitchell couldn't possibly sit in on all of them, but he deputized Wyche Fowler to do that because we could trust him. And of course Jim Sasser was already in there as chairman of the Budget Committee, so that was the team that was working with George Mitchell.

And so came May, and then we were getting nowhere, even after that we were getting nowhere, and that's when we decided to go to Andrews and try to get it done at Andrews. And what happened then is we basically, at Andrews, then plus following meetings over on the House side, came very close to an agreement, but that's where Newt, anticipating the emergence of the no taxes Republican, took the entire Republican caucus went for a walk, basically, under his leadership. And so we had to recraft the bill in November, and then Bush finally signed it, but it was a major, major bill.

Mitchell was indispensable in holding the discipline in the early part to where we got taxes on the table, Andrews, he was directly involved in negotiations, and then when it fell apart and the Republican caucus took a walk and we had to recraft the bill more to get more Democratic votes, Mitchell was involved in the nitty-nitty-nitty-gritty of all that too. So he played a major role in the 1990 [negotiations]. And I observed that all as staff director of the Budget Committee, I was not working for him at the time.

BW: And Sasser had a major -

JH: Oh absolutely, he was there in the excruciating part day after day, yeah. And that Sasser seat, and this was what really helped us, Mitchell and Sasser and Fowler, and all of us, had figured out the right strategy which is, "We're not sticking our necks out." And so in having Sasser and Fowler in the room, and we'd confer with Mitchell every day, we had a strategy. And Leon Panetta, he's a great guy, was a fabulous chief of staff in the White House, was just very eager to get it done, for all the right reasons, but ultimately our strategy paid off.

BW: Would Byrd have been part of that as Appropriations?

JH: Yes, he was, he's an amazingly strong guy. And he's now really getting on, but at that time, yes, he was out there, and he could give some stem-winders like you wouldn't believe, to these guys. In fact one time, I'll never forget it, we were at the officers club out at Andrews where we were all having a huge confab, and the administration team was Darman, and Nick Brady, and Sununu was there, chief of staff, to sort of be the enforcer, because they were afraid, Darman was the brains behind the whole thing, and Brady was sort of just present, Sununu was there to keep the discipline.

Well, so Sununu's in there, and I think he had his feet on the table. Byrd gave him a dressing down like you could not believe, the chief of staff of the White House and, "You have not respected the Senate," just total stem-winder. And then a couple of the others he gave that were wonderfully factually based, he knew his numbers; he has a great facility at memorization. He gave some speeches defending the Appropriations Committee like you've just never heard, "You grind and grind us down every year" – and he'd get his fist out and he'd grind it down.

He could give some compelling speeches, and he was very, very strong. And in fact, that's why after that was over Darman thought, 'I've got to make my peace with Byrd' and so finally a lot of the add-backs were in the Appropriations because he knew he had to get Byrd's vote. So yes, Byrd was there and was very strong, and Bentsen was there, very powerful as well. We had a good team.

BW: It must have been a fascinating experience to be holed up under those circumstances.

JH: It was. We all were eating too much, so we had to get out of there after a week. The other thing that was going on on both sides, everybody was leaking everything. One day Phil Gramm, who was uniformly, I'd say, not admired by our side, he put cutting Social Security on the table – that was front page the next day in the *Washington Post*. It's hardball, there's many layers always going on, and there's the policy that you're trying to get the right outcome, while basically winning politically, to put it as politely as I can.

BW: And it lasted only about a week?

JH: Out there [at Andrews Air Force Base]. The whole thing was a year, but we were out there a week. Because the leaking was so bad, and my good friend who followed me as the staff director of the Budget Committee was a former press guy, and he was doing a lot of the leaking, under orders from everybody. And they were doing their best to screw us up too. And so after one really good one where Larry Stein, he got the lead in the headline of the *Post*, Pete Domenici comes in the next day and Pete's a good guy, and he goes, "Now listen, we've got the press people out of this." And he was talking about Larry, and Larry's staff director of the Budget Committee, so he was trying to get him thrown out of the meetings because he knew he was doing all the leaking. But everybody - It's a lot of pretend, but for a very serious purpose.

BW: Now when the Iraq bill came up, the invasion had already occurred into Kuwait?

JH: No.

BW: This was before that, okay.

JH: Before that. We were trying to forestall it for six months and give negotiation time to work, and then that didn't work.

BW: When did you first learn that Senator Mitchell was going to retire?

JH: It was probably a couple days before everybody else.

BW: And what was that conversation like?

JH: He said, "John, I'm not going to run for reelection, I want to get out soon enough so I can give a Democrat a chance to win." He said, "The time has come for me." No real explanation, no. And I just accepted it at face value, because let me tell you, having been through it all, I don't know why all of them haven't quit. If you're doing it right and you're of the stature and ability he is, and the strains of the job, I'd never question for a minute his having done his best and time to get out.

BW: You must have had then a bit of a counselor's role with your staff.

JH: It was very tough, because we had the big meeting up in the Capitol at the room that, I forget, not the Mansfield, the other one, but anyway, we got the whole staff together, a hundred-something people, and he announced. And it was funny because right before the meeting he goes, "Now look, I'm only going to speak about thirty seconds and I'm going to leave and you take over." And he says, "This is what I'm going to do and I need to do, and you've all been great and I appreciate it." And he said, "We're going to do everything we can to make sure everybody lands on their feet." And so my job was to pick it up and say, with Mary McAleney too, and then it was time to find jobs for a hundred people, and good people. But it was a shocker, because the Senate lost its best person. And then he was off to work on Ireland for a few years.

BW: And you segued over to Daschle.

JH: I did. It was a funny thing, because I was very good friends with Jim Sasser, and not as close but a good friend of Tom Daschle, who I'm still friends with to this day, and they had both asked me to stay on with them, which I felt very good about. If it had been Sasser, I sort of thank my lucky stars it wasn't – no, but I'm kidding – I would have been his chief of staff and obligated to stay for quite a lengthy period, which I said I would. We knew pretty early that Sasser was going to lose, and Daschle invited me to stay, asked me to stay, same thing, at least for a year in the transition, which I was more than happy to do because you don't want somebody to come in and have a bad [start].

Now Pete Rouse, who is his chief of staff, he became chief of staff and I became counselor or something, some such title as that. But my role was really a transitional role, to help him and his staff in the ways of getting into the job. And he was a great boss, he's a great guy. In fact, he's obviously someone you should talk to about George Mitchell. He was really one of his most capable and able lieutenants, is what I'd call him, and then grew into the job in his own right and just did a great job in his own right. But he was a great guy to work for, also.

BW: Did Christopher Dodd approach you?

JH: No. Now, of course it was Sasser, Daschle, and then when Sasser lost, Dodd jumped in. But I was clearly trying to help Daschle at that point. So Dodd didn't approach me, and I would have obviously, I can't emphasize enough the nonexistent to incredibly minor role played by staff in the leadership races, so no. But I was firmly for Daschle.

BW: And did Daschle during that year you were with him, was there a lot of Mitchell legacy in that period?

JH: No, well, in the sense that he knew Mitchell very well, had been a part of everything, and so it seems to me a lot of the skills he got was from being a part of the operation. This wasn't a guy who came in off the street, this is a guy who'd been in leadership for six or seven years and was very capable in his own right, and had run the DPC and had been very close to Mitchell. So that was very fortunate.

One of the funny things was, I know one of the things he ran on was to be more inclusive than George Mitchell, which as I've said, I don't know how you'd do that very well. But when he came in he did very constructively, given the tone of senators or the temperament of senators, is he appointed a larger leadership group. So rather than just the whip, the deputy whips and that, he brought in a few more senators as part of the weekly meeting and the consultative group. So there was a more of a reaching out. And Daschle, to his great credit, he'd consult all the time. Every leader has to be inclusive like that to be successful, I think.

BW: He ran a campaign for himself.

JH: Oh, for sure.

BW: But that was probably done mostly one-on-one.

JH: Oh, absolutely, they always are. Yeah. That's something that you'll have to ask them about.

BW: So you can only imagine that maybe he was saying, "This will be, in some sense, is a continuation of the Mitchell approach."

JH: I don't think he saw it that way at all, I don't. I think they're very different people with different strengths and both very, very capable. It's like all of us that are different. But no, I think he was more networking, I'd say in some sense, the larger leadership group. But both [were] terrific in their own way but very different skills.

BW: And what was it like for you going over to the minority?

JH: Yeah, it was funny. I remember when we lost in '94, Mitchell goes - He didn't anticipate us losing. Well, none of us knew it would be so bad, but in retrospect, between Hillary health care, the tax increase and the House Banking scandal and a few other things, you can see why we lost. But I remember Mitchell goes, "Yeah, well I guess I made the right decision to leave," because we went from majority to minority.

BW: Did you have regular contact with Mitchell after he left the Senate?

JH: Sparingly because after the year, I then went to the White House for a couple years, and he would call occasionally and he's such a good guy, he hates to ask for anything. And so he'd call up occasionally and you could feel the pain in his voice of having to ask, but he'd want a meeting with somebody about something to do with one of the many private sector things he was involved in, and of course I'd jump all over myself to try to help him. But it was sparingly. And then as he got busy with Ireland and - who Martha [Pope] was really, she did the whole Ireland thing with him, that's why she's another terrific contact point - and then he went on to basically run Disney. And I haven't seen him probably for a couple of years.

BW: I didn't read your Brookings publication [*The Challenge of Legislation: Bipartisanship in a Partisan World*]

JH: You can have a copy if you like.

BW: Well I would, actually.

JH: Okay, sure.

BW: But I was wondering, I read the abstract that's on the Brookings page. Did you make a lot of reference to Mitchell and Mitchell's era in that -?

JH: No, no.

BW: - or were you mainly looking forward?

JH: It was mainly about the 1997 agreement. I will say this though, I learned so much from Mitchell, and I think any of us who worked for him, if we're honest, know that we did; just the professionalism, the temperament, the control, the discipline, and his sense of goodness about people. And you couldn't help but admire him, honest to goodness. And one of the things he

really taught me was, he was very strategic but also he recognized that life is played one step at a time, and particularly in the Senate. So he was very good at lining things up and making sure you executed on every thing after the other or else you never get to the thing out there. But he was exceptionally good at that, at that one really well laid step at a time is one of the things that, a grandiose strategizing is fine, but it's all about execution at the end of the day, and that's something he could do very, very well.

The other thing about him personality-wise that I always found interesting is, people at events where he would speak, he was always very, very funny, but it was always an almost practiced humor. In other words, he knew the joke he wanted to say, he knew who he could kid, and a joke he would make about Kennedy or somebody like that and they would be taken in the right humor. But his was a very methodical humor. And in fact, in sort of real life, he was very practical in almost a literal way, and so sometimes some of the funny things we would say, like Diane or myself or something, he wouldn't get it. So that was something I found very interesting about him is a wonderful guy, but not an innate humor to him that just bubbles out, because he was so focused that it was almost literal, the level of 'I'm kidding' sometimes escaped him.

But counterbalance that against the fact that in public or dealing with his colleagues, he was a frickin' riot; some of his humor and the speeches he would have us all laughing. But he had a repertoire of stories and jokes and funny things he could say that was really good, but he was also good at turning a phrase in a humorous way too. You could see there was a powerful intellect behind the humor and it wasn't a bubble up, where did that come from, kind of humor.

BW: Where does having a judge's temperament come into all of this?

JH: Very much. You could see it. In terms of the discipline of working through that stack of papers every day, the careful consideration, whenever he'd give a speech, like the response to the State of the Union, the care that he would take in every word, every – not just the substance – but the delivery and the care he would put through to everything. He'd authored a couple books, and that makes you a very careful person, being able to write. So there was this care, and also just a sense of fairness about everything he did. It is such a godsend that, when you think about it, I don't know if he could have ever gotten elected outright.

In other words, when Muskie became secretary of state and he got the appointment, he was down thirty-something points in Maine and just barely pulled it out. And so the kind of brilliant leader that you wish for comes along through happenstance. And I'm not sure if he could have ever, in the normal political circus, if we would have had a George Mitchell. So it's just one of those wonderful accidents of history.

But, now an unfortunate accident of history, and I just have to say this, is that he wasn't president of the United States. He would have been by far and away, hands down without a doubt just the most capable president that we've ever seen. It's another one of those accidents of history that the Iraq War One being so successful that no one estimated, and none of the powers in the Senate, whether it was Mitchell or Bentsen or any of the others who were considering a

race, saw the opening that Bush would be so weak he could actually lose in '92. And no one at the time of the war and the quick victory there could anticipate not only the depth of the recession that we would go into, but how badly the Bush administration would handle it, and that this opening would occur to Bill Clinton. But if I could rewrite history, it would be to have George Mitchell as president, without a doubt.

BW: Did he ever express aspirations in that line?

JH: Yes, well, he was a senator who was thinking about it. And now this could be rumor and you'd have to check this, and I hope you will. But it was my sense that if Clinton had faltered in New Hampshire, that he and Lloyd Bentsen might have gotten in together.

BW: As a team.

JH: As a team, with Bentsen at the top, because he had run for VP in '88 and he would have been sort of the natural guy. But I do remember Mitchell – not that this is actually solid proof that he considered it – but he once said that, "If I could win the primary I know I could win the general [election]," which is, no doubt about it. But it's another accident of history that there are so many that want it and so few are capable. And here was a guy who was manifestly qualified to be a great president. His temperament, his intellect, his capacity for work, everything would have been perfect.

BW: This is, doesn't follow what you just said in tone or anything, but when you were mentioning sense of humor, I was wondering, Bob Dole was so well known for humor.

JH: Oh, yes.

BW: But his humor, as everyone explains to me, wasn't rote.

JH: No, no. Exactly, yes.

BW: It was situational for the moment. How did the two of them interplay along those lines?

JH: It's funny, you could see Dole's humor, it was irrepressible, because it was situational, contextual, and it's the kind of humor – you don't see it in me here – but that I have, it's either given or it's not given. So you'd see it in Dole in our meetings, but not Mitchell so much. He was always good, a ready laugh, a big smile, a guy you could always get along with, but the *humor* humor was of a different style completely than Dole's. But of course they always got along, you could always see there was respect there, and it goes back to what I said at the beginning: these were two guys who were very powerful and smart, who understood that they'd each do better at their job if they were forthright with each other.

BW: Do you recall any Dole remarks at Senator Mitchell's expense?

JH: Not ever at his expense, no. But Dole's humor was always, there was always an edge to it but it wasn't a cruel edge, it was never meant to, it was a different side of things. But no, to us he was always great. Now, you would know this better than I do, but the stories are legend about being able to whip his boys into shape and just put the fear of the Lord in them, and he was very good at that. But that side of him we were not privileged to have, thank goodness.

BW: In researching both the Dole project and Mitchell project, I can see looming in the far distance the Russell Longs and the [James Oliver] Eastlands and sort of these major figures, and then this newer generation still WWII and whatnot, and several people have described some of the really outstanding members of the Senate as titans.

JH: Hmm-hmm.

BW: And I would imagine you would include Mitchell.

JH: Absolutely, Mitchell and Dole, yeah. It's harder now, to be honest with you. I think throughout the '80s and into the '90s, it's now out of control. Bill Frist is probably the best example of an out-of-control partisanship that is not grounded in substance really, to be honest with you. I mean a catastrophe of leader in my opinion. And we've had and we continue to have weak leaders to this day, to be honest with you.

But they were the tail end of an era when there was more balance and more mixture in the caucus. What has happened now of course is, there's no moderates left on either side, is that the perfection of the campaigning. [*redaction*]

And Harry Reid has a tough job these days, because there's no moderates on the Republican side to work with, and even on his side in the remaining belt of Republicanism running from Appalachia down through the deep South, we have a few still there, Arkansas, et cetera, like that, who are difficult for their own legitimate reasons, to vote. And so if anyone thinks sixty's a magic number to do anything, they're not paying attention at all. So he's got a very, very tough job.

But Dole and Mitchell, Dole had six or seven of our guys that could pull his way depending on the issue, and we had six or seven of his, and that made for a very interesting dynamism in the Senate, it was a very interesting period. And honestly, I saw it turning in the Reagan era, largely because the media and the political types have come to play a much larger role and Obama has taken it to the nth degree but in a more constructive way, but nevertheless, those guys, they're great, they know what they're doing, the political guys. But Reagan, when he came in – and this is sad to say about the Democrats, but the mid-'80s we didn't have a lot of ideas other than run against his deficits and we didn't know what else. And the partisan rancor started to break then. But it's the perfection of the partisanship has really hurt, I think, it's turning more and more like the House.

(Outside interruption - pause in taping.)

BW: I was struck by something you just said. Reid has a little bit of a chance with Snowe and Collins from Maine. And what do you make of that?

JH: Well yes, that's right. And as you saw on the stimulus bill, well you had Specter, but even Snowe and Collins, they are – well you should talk to Mary McAleney about this, because she knows Maine politics like I don't, but the last conversation with her, she says they'll be impossible to pry out, which is tough, so -

BW: What does that mean?

JH: In other words, that should be a Democratic state, but it's got two Republican senators.

BW: Who aren't going to go away.

JH: They're not going to go away. And so, yeah, they're available in some things, but they're not reliable votes. I mean, who is? So we've got a couple of theirs to work with, and they have five or six of ours to work with, and so it's hard.

BW: I'm going to pause here just for a sec.

(Pause)

JH: Go ahead, you go ahead and finish if you want.

BW: No, what were you going to say?

JH: Well I was just saying, it's funny when you think about the history of the presidency, and Rosemary and I laugh about this a lot, but first of all, it wasn't even close to happening but it would have been great if George Mitchell could have president, as I've said. And then you have Clinton winning, who did many good things, and I was privileged to work for him, I had him for his two best years, '96 and '97. We won the election and did some good things with Trent Lott, who's a guy I really like a lot also in that year, and then we balanced the budget, working with Lott and Gingrich, which is what my book's about, in '97. And then of course the Monica thing broke and basically he threw away the last two years of his presidency.

And I'm going to probably take this out, which is my privilege, but, it's a funny thing, because I always felt that there's many things I admire about Bill Clinton but one of them that I don't, is his inability to contain his personal self for the good of the country, which led to George W.'s election in a fundamental way, and that I often think how different the world would have been if Gore would have been president instead of George Bush. We've basically, not only threw away eight years, but we dug a nice hole in those eight years.

And then you start thinking, "Well, we would never have had Barack Obama if George Bush

hadn't been president." So I tease Pete Rouse, who's still a good friend of mine, who's one of Obama's senior advisors, I kid him about that, but it's funny how the wheel turns. And it's really too bad that Gore wasn't president, because he was entirely capable of doing it, a very bright guy, very careful thinker. People focus on the personal characteristics and such, but here was a very intelligent guy, hard working, understood the system coming and going, had some personal drawbacks but nevertheless would have been an excellent president. You and I would have been an excellent president compared to George W. Bush. But then of course without Bush, I doubt if Obama could have possibly been president at this time, because they'd have probably been fed up with Democrats after sixteen years. So anyway, that'll be the end of it all, I had my speculation for the day.

BW: Great, well thank you so much for this interview.

JH: Oh, you're welcome, okay.

End of Interview