

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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David Durenberger
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

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Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College with former Senator David Durenberger. Senator Durenberger is in Washington today, and we're conducting this interview in the offices of Combest & Sell, a lobbying organization in Washington, and today is Wednesday, October 28, 2009, and I am Brien Williams. I thought we'd start by my asking you a little bit about how two Republicans came to the Senate in 1978 from a state that was so much under the realm of Humphrey and Mondale Democrats.

David Durenberger: Probably because Humphrey was dead and Mondale was vice president in what turned out to be kind of a disastrous presidency. The first sign of that was 1976, when a group of more moderate Republicans in what looked like Democratic states got elected – I think of John Danforth, [John Chafee], and some others – and then in our year it was Republicans that turned Democrats out of office. And so we had conservative Democrats from the South, and we had Republicans from the north and south, there were twenty in our class of new senators, of which I was the [first to take office]. I think it was half and half Republican/Democrat. But that's a big turnover in one election, when you think that only a third of the Senate is up at one time. That was followed in 1980 by I think it was sixteen Republican senators and no Democratic senators. [I] was a part of a movement to use Republicans and conservatives to send a message to the Democratic Party.

BW: And coming in as a moderate Republican, how did you feel with the Reagan revolution in 1980, were you comfortable with that?

DD: Well, that obviously depends on how you define it, but in principle I was quite comfortable with it. I had gone to the convention in 1976 as a Ford person rather than a Reagan person. I thought Reagan was a little bit too far to the right, by my standards, whatever that meant. But then I went into politics – I mean I wasn't seeking office at the time. I ended up running for governor in 1977, and just switched out of the governor's race to the Senate in April of '78 when Mrs. Humphrey, who'd accepted the appointment, decided she didn't want to run for reelection in November. So that's the only reason I got there. Boschwitz was already running ahead of "Wendy" [Wendell Richard] Anderson, the former governor, [who was up for election to the Mondale seat to which he had been appointed]. Nobody could believe that you'd get two senators in one year.

[I knew Reagan as governor of California when I served as chief of staff to Governor Harold

LeVander (R-MN) from 1967-1970.] I expected Reagan to be more conservative, in a traditional sense, than he was because – and it’s what it turned out to be – he dealt basically with economic issues, and he talked about cutting programs and things like that. But when push came to shove, there was plenty of room to decide which programs could work and which ones didn’t work. So the knock on him from Democrats, including Democrats that I respected, is he allowed us to create a deficit in order to try to kill off more of government. And while you can probably find a lot in his speeches and things like that, that would make the argument not that he did this on purpose, but that he was going to kill off government. I never really had the feeling that that was his mission, was to get rid of government.

He was a [] principled [person with a tested belief system], he was pretty simplistic in his approach and the way he articulated things. Because we had a Republican Senate, and if you’ve done the Dole thing [(i.e. conducted oral history interviews for the Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics)] you can appreciate those six years and the challenges of [] Baker [and] Dole; the challenges of being leader in that period of time were pretty tough. But I think I saw it as a time of opportunity, and the question was with whom do you see that opportunity. We were able to seize it not only with what you call moderate Republicans, but with moderate Democrats as well.

BW: I’m curious, you said that Baker and Dole had a hard time. In what way?

DD: [p/o] [Both] were really cut out for the job. [p/o] Both of them had the ability, for different reasons, to manage these hair-thin margins that they had in the Senate, because you’ve got to let some people go on certain issues, and then [] remind [them] they’re going to get pulled back in on others. There was [] only one that I can recall, Larry Pressler, who was totally unpredictable. Dole could never know where the heck Larry was coming from, or why, and there was never a rationale that worked for him.

But all the rest of us appreciated the value of: number one, being in the majority; number two, being part of a movement, I mean a time of change. In the end, that was going to have to carry us to the polls, not a particular vote or something like that. Bob just knew how to do that. He also knew how to work with the administration, and you know more about that maybe than I do, because of the research, but that’s the way you manage those things. Bob and Howard were both masters at getting that last vote when they absolutely needed it. [] When I got to the things with George, [p/o] I could always just look Dole in the eye and see whether or not, if he blinked, [] I could go ahead and do it, and if he didn’t I knew, hey, I’d better pull back.

(Pause in taping)

BW: All right, you mentioned that in 1980 it was a very good year for Republicans, but that was also the year that George Mitchell arrived on the scene. And I wanted to know what your first awareness was of him, or impressions?

DD: My first impression was, a really smart politician. He’d been the party chair, he got to be a federal district judge, probably because he was party chair, [but] he was not Ed Muskie –

I'm just talking about impressions – this was not Ed Muskie. I really loved Muskie because he loved intergovernmental relations, he started the Intergovernmental Relations Subcommittee, that's one of the reasons I went to Washington, knowing I wanted to be a governor []. I succeeded [Muskie] (when he got to be secretary of state) as the ranking Republican [on the subcommittee] and then became the chairman of the committee in 1981. So, George was not Ed Muskie.

BW: In what ways?

DD: Well, the nice thing about going to the Senate in 1978 is, there were still – well, I call them the statesmen – around, [p/o] like old Jennings Randolph from West Virginia and John Stennis from Mississippi, Strom Thurmond, [Russell Long], and these guys, they'd been around. Scoop Jackson was still there. I mean these are class acts, people you look up to, because they not only understood what it meant to their state to have them represent them, they also had kind of a world view.

And Ed certainly had a world view. He [considered] there were things that were important, like intergovernmental relations, that nobody else would think [] would be important. And because he had a record of actually getting things done, you'd respect that. So that's why I went into politics, not to be a politician or a senator [p/o]: to change the role of government. George came on as a politician, that's what I thought we were getting, the Maine Democratic chairman who got himself to be a federal judge, dada-dada-dada-a []. Ed now has a reputation as not being a very good politician, of having blown the candidacy for president and things like that. I never saw much of a political side of Ed Muskie. And so you asked my impression, and that's what I had to start with.

BW: Now you and he shared committee assignments, you and George Mitchell. Talk about him as a colleague on the committees.

DD: I think that's where I got to know him best, because we sat on the Finance Committee together, [with] jurisdiction over fifty, sixty percent of the policy stuff that goes on, including all the money to pay for it. And then on Environment and Public Works, where you draw on Minnesota [], and Maine, and places like that. You begin to understand some of the uniquenesses of places like Washington, where Jackson came from, and Oregon and Minnesota and Maine. Once you sit on a committee and you start dealing with the specifics of legislation, you start to get a feel for where somebody's coming from, where are their principal beliefs, where are their political beliefs and that sort of thing.

So that's where I learned that George Mitchell had a deeper side to him. In other words, he had a philosophy of government. He had a philosophy that related to the people that served there, which was his political side. I mean, what's a politician? Why do people say what they do and act the way they do? And things like that. But he could express that in a depth that also reflected his understanding of the specifics of Clean Air, Clean Water – we were dealing with acid rain issues, and things that we both had in common. We were dealing with the issues that

involved energy supplies, and what do we do about the windfall profits that were coming to all these oil companies that Russell Long and Bob Dole and the rest of these guys were out there to protect.

We had common interests when it came to the big policy issues of the time. We would undoubtedly differ on tax issues – I can't recall specifics – but he had a more traditional Democratic view on taxes than I would have had. But on the other issues that were important at the time, other economic related issues, energy, environment, those kinds of things, I saw a much more sensible senator in George Mitchell.

BW: And what was he like – again, a kind of personality question – as a colleague, sitting there in the committee rooms?

DD: The approach that he used, that we all used [on] a lot of these issues, was your views and your approach, and how serious you take this issue versus some other issue, is reflected in who you hire to be on your staff. And so the quality of the people that he hired - [He and] I always hired people that were smarter than I, and I did that because I love to learn. I knew I had to learn this job, and if you get somebody working for you that knows more about something than you do and is really smarter about it, then it's going to make a whale of a difference. [] It also means less time on your part to learn things, [p/o] [staff] build relationships with other people [who reflect your beliefs, they ask questions of you]: who do I have to talk to; who do I make common cause with; who do I take this bill to because I've got this great idea [].

So it really starts with that, when you're analyzing how do productive people develop a product that takes some Democrats and takes some Republicans in order to pass. If you say only Democrat, only Republican, the leader can help – whether it's the chair of the committee or the leader – can help you get through and there's not a lot of work on your part. But if you're trying to develop legislation, as we sure as heck did in the 1980s, you've got to find Democrats and Republicans that think like you do, where you can find the national interest and the constituent interest coincide.

BW: And what were your observations on George Mitchell's staff?

DD: Well, they were as classy as Ed Muskie's, they came from similar backgrounds. And I still run into some of them occasionally of course, in the health care area, Chris Williams [works now at AHRQ and is] married to John Rother, works at ACPR [*sic*: AARP] []. So I think that was the translation for me, just watching how he actually operated bill to bill to bill. There were people on both of those committees that were one-issue people, who didn't spend a lot of time sitting in committee hearings. [Our staff spent time] listening to witnesses, contributing a witness of their own from Maine or Minnesota or whatever it is, because [we] actually wanted to develop a better understanding on their less involved counterparts on the committee. George would do that, I would do that, and okay, that's why we're here, to take on some of these kinds of issues. [p/o] It was the substance in George that attracted me to him.

BW: And did you see him positioning himself for the leadership?

DD: No, no, I didn't really see that. And I guess it wouldn't surprise me that I didn't, sometimes these things surprise you. I recall the day that he got elected, and I ran around the corner of the – the office was very close to us in the Russell Building [p/o] – and went in and grabbed him and gave him a big hug, and I said, "This is the greatest thing, this is the greatest news I've had in a long time." So no, I didn't. I recall being surprised by it. [p/o]

BW: And what were your reasons for being so happy with his election?

DD: Well, because Bob Byrd had been a really tough [leader]. We all admire Bob Byrd, [p/o] but he was almost like not human in many respects. And so who the Democrats would pick to be their majority leader became very, very important. I had been chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee in '85-'86, which was a really bad year for us and we lost the election and things like that. [p/o] We had done an investigation in the Intelligence Committee on Iran-Contra, probably ninety-five percent of what we know today we got done in two weeks, and I won't go into some of the other details, but Byrd was tough.

Byrd conned Dole into this whole Iran-Contra committee. I advised against it. I said, "You are not going to do this one in public and get away with it, it just isn't going to work. The important thing is that Reagan learned a lesson, that future presidents learn a lesson, anybody can learn a lesson out of this sort of thing. You could read our report [about] what went wrong and why, [] and everybody can learn a hell of a lesson and you can use that in the future. So what's the point of this?" And Dole says, "Well I can't not do this." And I said, "Well look at the impact it's going to have on your president. It's bad enough now." I mean Reagan was sinking, I said, "It's bad enough now. After they get through with this..." But they went ahead with it anyway. So it was sheer opportunism [on the part of the Democratic majority].

I chose not to be on the committee, even though I was asked, and I just watched what I knew would happen, happen. The best summary of what should have happened, or didn't happen or a lot of things like that, is that book that Bill Cohen and George wrote [*Men of Zeal* (1988)]. And in a sense, that is responsive to your question about why did I really like the idea of George being the leader and was I surprised by it and things like that, because he's a pretty honest guy, like Bill, both of them. [p/o]

When you're in a body like the Senate, which is full of political people with constituent interests, and you're living in a time when polls [increasingly] become more important, finding people that actually see the substance of their job as being [in the] national interest rather than just their own or partisan interest [], it makes all the other stuff that doesn't go right seem worthwhile. [p/o] But that isn't always the way either Democrats or Republicans make their decisions. The decisions that Republicans made to put Trent Lott in was not a good decision, but it shows you where the Republican Party was going. The decision they made to put Bill Frist in was a [] mistake, because Bill was just not cut out for that sort of thing. Mitch McConnell is more in the model of a: hire a damn good politician and he'll get the job done for you. I think in a sense

that's what the Democrats were doing, but they knew what they got when they did it [p/o]. You could see his name associated with some very important legislation. So he was not just there to do the political thing, he was there because they respected him as a legislator as well.

[George Mitchell] was a good legislator, and he was a tough legislator, or I don't think they'd have put him in that job. But it also reflects the times [] when we abandoned the notion of the Senate as a place you do public policy, as opposed to politics.

(Pause in taping)

BW: So let's talk a little bit about George Mitchell as majority leader, what words would you use to describe him in that role?

DD: He played his cards close to his vest, except with the people he could trust; he had a lot of challenges, like every majority leader has, in how do you maintain the majority, how do you deal with Republican presidents, how do you keep your mouth shut when [the world wants to know] everything that you know [p/o]. And that's I guess what I mean by playing your cards close to your vest. He did everything that anybody could expect of a majority leader whose job was to maintain the majority for those of his political affiliation, to make sure that you had a responsible response to Republican presidential initiatives, that you played the politician when you needed to take George Bush down over his no-tax statement and things like that.

I think it's because he was paired with Dole that you could see the best come out of both of these guys, when they served across from each other, that you got the political leader, you got the 'I'm here to cooperate in the national interest leader', you got the, 'how do you keep everybody happy inside your caucus,' and I can't tell you exactly how he did that latter one. I can tell you how Dole did it, but I can't tell you how George did it because I wasn't party to it. The best example that I have, and the best example that exists in the Senate between '78 and now, that I can think of, was the Clean Air Act of 1990, because that was pure George Mitchell.

He believed in getting it done, he knew that he had a lot of liberals that wanted to do a heck of a lot more, all the environmentalists wanted more, all [] that sort of thing. But he was dealing with a Republican president, and fairly strong both moderates and conservatives on the Republican side. But he [also] had a willing president. So, basically what he did was report a bill out of the Environment and Public Works Committee, and then take the bill and [seven of us from EPW] into his conference room where we spent, it seems like a couple of weeks. While he had the bill on the floor, we were in the conference room. I think there were three of us Republicans and four Democrats, plus the appropriate Cabinet officers were always there; Boyden Gray, the president's counsel, was always there; the secretary of energy was always there; the right people, EPA, [] were always in the room.

Bob Dole had the much more conservative Republicans, [like] Malcolm Wallop and Al Simpson, all the [Republicans from] the gas and oil producing states [in his] office []. And Al Simpson was their delegate, and we'd start [] working [the language] between the Democrats [and] the

Republicans. I think Frank Lautenberg may have been the ranking Democrat at the time, and Joe Lieberman [as] the subcommittee [chair, plus] two other senators, and then George. But we worked it in the room, [p/o] Simpson would come over [from Dole's office] and we'd tell Simpson what we're doing. He'd go back, and then he'd show up a little bit later and say, 'they can't do this – they can't do that.' So it was a masterful way in which to prepare the Senate to go to conference with the House.

When we went to the floor of the Senate on any amendments, [a majority of the committee] hung together []. We'd lose the right and we'd lose some of the left, but we always had a majority. George would not take anything to the floor until we knew we had the majority. We knew what amendments were likely to come up, we knew how we were going to deal with them, and that was all because he did this shuttling back and forth between his conference room, the Dole [group], and [] the floor.

The reason [George] had to do that was that when you get to the House, there were 144 people, as I recall, on the House conference committee, representing every committee that had a jurisdiction. John Dingell was the chair, and [with] John Dingell, there were certain things [that were important like] automobile emissions and things like that. Then certain things that somebody else, Henry Waxman or Ron Wyden [] would [like help to weaken their leader John]. So the challenge was: how do we force these guys to whittle that down from 144 to a more manageable group? And then: how do we deal with them issue by issue by issue by issue? Because there were only seven of us, against 144 people, plus John Dingell and Henry Waxman and this big power structure.

[Usually] the House [] takes the Senate to the cleaners [in conference] because they all focus on one little area in their committee jurisdictions and subcommittees []. They all come loaded and they've got all the groups lined up and all the rest of that sort of thing. So what ended up being the final product [in this case was quite different. It] was really the Senate [version]. People today who are still there [] like Ron Wyden, [] now over in the Senate, will [remind] me of how we took them to the cleaners. Not on absolutely everything, but as the seven members of the Senate, we came so well prepared, backed up by a Senate vote, that we were able to do to the House what they usually did to us.

Right now with this health care thing [*i.e. the Obama administration's health care reform legislation*], we ought to be doing something very similar to it, as opposed to what we're doing today. But it takes a certain kind of a leader to pull that one off. It takes somebody who can sit in the meeting for a while and then know when to leave, and when to use the leadership, when not to use the leadership. I have no idea how George [did] Ireland. I have no idea how George is going to do Palestinians and Israelis and things like that, but I can learn from that experience why George is going to be good at these fairly controversial kinds of issues. Because he has a talent for seeing where, after you've spent a lot of time together, you see where [things are] most likely to come out, the challenge being: how do we get from here to there? That's all about your relationships with the people.

BW: And you were part of this inner sanctum because of your position on the committee, or did Dole appoint you to that, or how?

DD: [] I was a fairly ranking [member] on the Environment Committee, and I was on the subcommittee that was involved, and I'd probably written a fair amount of the legislation. I had a staff guy who was better, in fact, than anybody else on the staff on these issues, and so it was in everybody's interest to have me on there. [p/o] Simpson was on the committee but he was not in the group of three, so Chafee had to have been our leader, and I don't know who the third one was. But anyway, the challenge for the conservative Republicans was that they still had moderate Republicans on that committee. Now they've gotten rid of most of them.

BW: My guess would be that there were other times when George Mitchell needed moderate Republican cooperation, and so did he come to you regularly, or sometimes, to sort of find you out, field you out, and then ask for your support on things?

DD: The only time that I can recall having a specific discussion with him in a really tough situation like that was on the Voting Rights Act.

(Outside interruption)

BW: Okay, we can continue.

DD: [] The one that I remember best was the Voting Rights Act. Because we had election day registration in Minnesota and a few issues like that. The guys from the South just hated anything that was going to allow more African Americans to sign up [] when they got their automobile license. They just didn't seem to want to convenience anybody to make the election – and they're still like that – make the election process as difficult as you can make it.

Regardless of whether I believe one way or the other about it, and I do have apprehensions about same-day registration, or election day registration, but it was my state, this is the constituency I represented, and so I took that issue in to Dole, and of course the Republicans didn't want it, because the right didn't want it. George knew where I came from on that issue, and so his job was to let me know that my support would be welcomed, and was there anything that he could do, vis-à-vis Bob Dole, to be helpful. And I said, "All you can do is, if I vote with you, you have to let me know if I've gotten myself in any particular hot water with my leader that I might not be aware of," because Bob just doesn't communicate those things as well as he might have.

So in the end, I supported him. [] The Senate [] really worked, at least in that period of time – when you've lived with each other as long as you've lived with each other, when you've taken a lot of votes on substantive issues, and then a lot of votes on b.s. kind of issues – the Jesse Helms political amendments and things like that – you know where people are going to be coming from. And you also know how to treat them, which issues might get them in trouble, what can you do as a, if your Democrat needs a moderate Republican vote, what can you do, or what will you have to do, what should you be prepared to do to moderate or modify your own committee's

position, or your party's position on that issue, in order to accommodate those kinds of people. So the same thing, talent that you have to have in your own caucus, you have to have vis-à-vis the people on the other side.

BW: What kind of a reputation did George Mitchell have in the Republican Caucus as leader?

DD: I think it varied with the individuals. Those of us who had worked with George [probably] respected him [] more than those who had not, because those who had not saw him just as a tough, articulate senator, who could get up and make you [squirm]. I mean he gave good political speeches on legislative debates. A lot of these [] people, and particularly as the more conservative came from the South and came over from the House, they [] saw him as a good politician that we ought to figure out how to put down in some way. So not everybody shared the opinion that I had, or Bob Dole or I'm sure others would have had, of George Mitchell. But that's [] the way it always ends up being. [] One of the tragedies of not having a middle left, at least not in the Republican Party, [is that] you just don't have [] opportunities present themselves any more where you can actually see opportunity in somebody on the other side [p/o]. George was good at his politics, on the politics on a bill, and he was almost like a take-no-prisoners in his floor statements sometimes, and a lot of Republicans, more conservative Republicans, didn't like that.

BW: Someone told me that he could be very charming, but then when he left the room you realized your head was rolling on the floor. That true?

DD: I never had that experience with him, I didn't have that experience with him. But I think it gets to the point that I was trying to make.

BW: Any real weaknesses that you picked up on?

DD: When I think of George Mitchell I don't think of a person with any weakness. No, I just don't. Every experience I ever had with him, even when we differed on issues and things like that, was a positive, I mean it was just, both in a personal sense and in a political sense, like that. I don't – no, I just – I have nothing but respect, nothing but respect for George.

And I went through this ethics problem in that period in which ethics [changes were a] way [to take] down our opponents. George was the majority leader during that period of time. [Some] people have theorized that this was a Democratic effort to get rid of a Republican. I knew that it was more of a Republican effort to get rid of Republicans as well, certain kinds of Republicans, and that it wasn't by accident that people like me, not just in the ethics side, but in other things, were not getting the kind of support that they needed from their party.

But my sense of the role that George played, and I know this from conversations with Hal Heflin, who was the Democratic chairman of the Ethics Committee, was that the fairest treatment I got came from the Democratic side, it did not come from the Republican side. And that is in part Heflin, because we were friends and came in together and things like that, but it's also part

the majority leader.

BW: Did he take any specific role in that chapter in your history?

DD: Well if he did, I wasn't [] aware of it, because those are the issues you leave to the Ethics Committee. Whatever the Ethics Committee needs, wants, whatever it is, you play it. The challenge that all of us had [] at that period of time, was Warren Rudman. [] Warren Rudman was Warren Rudman, and Warren Rudman did his thing on lots of people. And there was no way even somebody as good as George Mitchell could take on Warren Rudman, or could change the way he was going to approach things. So when I say that I have confidence to this day that this was not an effort by Democrats in the Senate to do me in, or to do in John McCain or any of the rest of these people, I really believe that. I think this is something that started in the House, basically started with the Republicans [p/o].

I always believed that the day that I [asked] all the senators to vote in support of the committee in their condemnation of my action, had to have been a tough day for George Mitchell, because I don't think it was something that he relished doing.

BW: It surprises me, let me ask this question, where did you put Rudman on the sort of political spectrum, moderate to conservative?

DD: On the issues, he would be more moderate, particularly on the Civil Rights issues. We did a lot of work together on Civil Rights issues, all of us who were in the moderate category. We all know what he did with David Souter, and conned George Bush and everybody else into believing he was going to be a conservative. Warren was just whatever that traditional New Englander is, who always has the right answers before you even can think of the question, that's what Warren was. Warren was judge, jury, defense, plaintiff [p/o]. He did that in a lot of cases on a lot of issues. So I wouldn't even know how to put him in the same league as George Mitchell, because I don't think you'd put Warren Rudman in a position, you'd put him as a commission chairman, you know, blah-blah-blah, to make sure that you got all the facts. But you wouldn't put him between two warring parties to try to say, "How do we get to peace?"

BW: Another big battle was the health care, and would you talk about your impressions of how that played out and what your role was?

DD: Well, [] most of these issues are going to be around Medicare and long-term care, which was one of George's particular concerns, in which he did a lot of leadership in the '80s and the '90s. We worked together on almost all the health care issues, and I was either the chair of the Health Care Subcommittee in Finance, or I was the ranking member when they were in charge. I think the two years that the Democrats were in the majority [1987-1988], George was the committee chair and I was ranking member or something like that. But I remember working with George for a couple of years on the subcommittee, and then worked with Baucus for six years before that, and Rockefeller a few years after that.

In that particular period of time, we did a lot of work on – in 1987 as I recall – on long-term care legislation, we started to lay the groundwork for what’s now the Agency for Health Care Research and Quality, we did the Medicare modernization, the Medicare Catastrophic Act in 1988, and then we did the bipartisan commission, Pepper Commission in ‘89-‘90. I don’t remember where George was on the Medicaid issues or on Title V, maternal child health, but on the innovative things, I mean we were trying to change payment policy, where you’re trying to inject quality [and] value as a judgment in the payment system. [We were of one mind.]

I always found George a stronger supporter than a lot of other people, and certainly more so than Jay Rockefeller and Max [Baucus], who didn’t really pay a lot of attention to these issues. For me at least, he was the strong guy on the Democratic side, the guy that I always liked to work with. And when he got to be the leader and couldn’t come to the meetings any more, it became somewhat more of a challenge, [] but you could always count on him from his leadership position to be sensitive to what you were doing.

And I think in that respect he and Dole got along pretty well, too. [We represent] people that are kind of [] ahead of its time, but [we’re] trying to do national legislation that’s going to affect people in three-fourths of the country that just don’t agree with you, they don’t have the kind of medical practices, or the kind of hospital leadership, or the kind of insurance companies in the rest of the country that they have in New England or they have in the upper Midwest or in the Pacific Northwest.

So it was hard slugging and hard sledding, and losing the Medicare Catastrophic Act was really tough, but that was a bipartisan thing, John McCain actually led [the repeal]. The one thing all of us had looked forward to was bringing the Medicare program up to date, and we did it, and we had some long-term care and then we had drugs in it and we had all kinds of stuff, and we lost it because [we income-tested the tax on Social Security income of those whose AGI was over \$180.00 a year to pay for it].

Lloyd Bentsen, was chairman of the committee [and] played a stronger role [] than George did. But George was in the middle of everything. (*Substantial omission*).

BW: So you were a member of the Mainstream Group for the Clinton health plan. Talk about that.

DD: That committee came out of a fairly consistent effort on the part of Dole to have some kind of a place in which Republicans [p/o] as he knew them in the ’80s, where they could meet, so he had Chafee as the chairman of a committee in 1991-92. We were then faced with the Democrats having come out of the Pepper Commission, or the Rockefeller Commission, with an employer mandate [on] an eight to seven vote []. We were pretty much in agreement, except for Pete Stark and a couple of people like that on long-term care financing change. But [the] employer mandate, the pay-or-play, that came out of that [] divided Republicans and Democrats. It also was the beginning of [a partisan divide] in the Finance Committee, [where] universal coverage is more important to Democrats than [] payment reform [was]. To us payment reform

was more important than universal coverage.

So [the Chafee Republican health task force became] this bipartisan group, the Mainstream, the twenty-two of us. We were roughly equally divided at most times. We added people [], mainly Democrats as it got near the end. [] The big problem for us was that we had been at this for our lives in the Senate, and regardless of who the president was, we wanted to get something done. And the Clintons just weren't cooperating, and on our Republican side the guys that had come over from the House, [] Newt Gingrich [in the House and the Gingrich] gang that had come over from the House, were committed to Bill Clinton getting nothing done in '93-'94, including health care.

So it was tough, fun []. The meetings in Chafee's hideaway and doing all that [negotiating] kept us together, expanded the group, brought in some folks that hadn't been involved before. It was a great education process. You can see [] some of these guys, Kent Conrad, for example, it's playing out now. It's something they learned in '93-'94. But in the end, I sat with Dole and Sheila Burke in a plane coming back from Normandy, in June, trying to explain to them how I thought we could get from here to there, and Dole wouldn't tell me, but Dole wanted to be president of the United States. You can't be president of the United States without being a party's nominee, you can't be the party's nominee if Phil Gramm and a whole bunch of these other guys that want to run against you are saying, "No health care, no Clinton health care."

So it wasn't [just] Harry and Louise, and it wasn't [just] the rest of these things everybody's talking about, it was [] Bob Dole's desire to be president, and the Clintons' unwillingness to change. [p/o] There was another way to go, there was plenty of room, we'd done all the research, we had some of the best talents that had been around, staff talents and so forth, there was plenty of room to come to if either side wanted to come there, but they didn't.

BW: Either side.

DD: Yup.

BW: And George Mitchell was sort of put in the middle.

DD: Yes, George was put in the middle. But then there was also John Breaux, because John Breaux wanted us to believe that he knew Hillary Clinton better than anybody else and he could shuffle back and forth. I don't know how George dealt with that one, but there was a Breaux factor in all of that. But George had to be the Democratic leader, and he had to try to get the job done, but he knew all of us well enough to know how you weren't going to get the job done the way it was going.

And Moynihan was tough enough to deal with on the Finance Committee, he didn't understand the subject well, he thought there were other things that should be the priority – welfare reform or trade assistance or something like that – take the easier stuff first before you get to the really complicated stuff. Just like we're going through now. So that was a challenge for George to

deal with.

And then on the HELP Committee, it's Kennedy and that sort of thing, although that's much less of a factor, I think, in all of this. But I think his major problem, [] was a little group in the White House that had cut all their deals ahead of time, before they ever brought this thing out, and they couldn't unravel enough of the deals in order to come to where we were, even though we were offering it to them in so many different ways. In the end, even if they had, would the Republicans have killed it? I don't know. We'll never know.

BW: Do you think Dole would have bought in to any plan at all?

DD: Dole's instinct would have been to get it off the Republican agenda, because by two-to-one margins, Republicans lose on this issue, at least they did in the '90s. Today it's gotten a little bit more confusing. So yes, I mean that's why we had the discussion in an airplane coming back from Normandy, because he knows, if you could get something done, get it off the agenda, it takes a big thing away from the Democrats in the future. So, he was able to look out a few years, not just one election, even though he had his own in mind in '96, he never really trusted Gingrich and that whole crowd. He could smell Phil Gramm coming up behind him, and lots of other people coming up behind him on the conservative side; they made no bones about the fact that some of them would become candidates for president.

But the Dole I know would want to get this damn bill passed, get it out of here. Who cares who gets credit for it, because after a year everybody forgets that one, you know? It's just that we don't have to debate this coverage issue any more, we don't have to debate any of the rest of these issues any more for our candidates, because we can go debate something that we can win on, rather than something we always lose on.

BW: Did the Democrats ever woo you, trying to get you to change party?

DD: Never, never, nope. And never would have been successful. Democrats in Minnesota, by the tens of thousands, would always say, "Why don't you become a Democrat, you're just like us, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah?" I said, "No, I'm not like you," and then I would explain the difference. And I still am a, even though I hate the party that's in charge today, I'm still a conservative, and I still have a belief system, and that may or may not be the reason why they didn't. But no, there was no [one], at the leadership level [].

BW: And what do you see as the future of your form of Republicanism?

DD: The future lies in the Democratic Party, because the conservative Democrats are the ones that [are] going to make the difference in the future of that party. And as the Democratic Party moves – this was a thing under Clinton which he never could take advantage of – if the Democrats move to just left of the center, the Republicans can't win, being so far right of center. The only way they can win now is if the Democrats, as you can see it being played out today, are perceived as being all government, all money, all spending, all taxes, all the tradition liberal

ways of doing things, and that's what they play against. So if the more practical – or progressive they now call themselves – Democrats would become a stronger portion of the Democratic Party, Republicans will be forced back to where they have traditionally been, when they talk about Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt and all the rest of that sort of stuff, even Richard Nixon. So that's what it takes.

BW: So your response to people in-state – ‘why don't you become a Democrat?’ – revolve around which core values, conservative values?

DD: They all involve government and what is government for, like in the health care issue. You use government to set the rules by which insurance companies compete, for example, you ought to have national rules, you don't need state rules in the sorting out of responsibilities between federal and state government. It's my federalism or intergovernmental side which says: you don't run everything out of Washington but you figure out what are the national purposes that use the national government. I did that way back in 1982 or '83 or something like that, I did ten national purposes, and I just laid them out and said, after you go through these as purposes for a national government, you got all kinds of stuff left to the states, most of which is related to place. All the public safety, all the parks and rec, all the transportation, housing, there's all kinds of issues that are place-related which are much more practically dealt with. But if you load on top of that everything in education, everything in health care, everything in welfare, you destroy it. Or at least get a difference between Maine and Minnesota on the one hand, and Texas and Mississippi on the other hand.

BW: I've been asking everyone at the end of these interviews, as history looks back on George Mitchell, how do you think he should be remembered?

DD: I would say that George should be remembered as one of the senators that people will use as an example of what the United States Senate was, or should be, as opposed to what it is today. People ask me all the time as a former member, “Who are the people you look up to?” And so I always mention George, I mention Pat Moynihan, I mention Ted Kennedy – so those are the people from whom I learned the most. Not necessarily people that I legislated the most with, but from whom I learned the most as members of the Senate. And the same thing would be true on our side of the aisle of a Bob Dole, [and a Howard Baker], and the guys that were somewhat more like me when it came to their - Arlen Specter [and Bill Cohen, and Danforth, Chafee, Heinz, and Rudman]. The people that had some sense of the world and how it works, and combine that with some relational skills so you can actually get things done when you have to get things done, and whether that's on the floor of the Senate or it's in some other setting. So he really does need to be remembered as what a senator should be, and Senate leader, and particularly with the political skills that he had.

BW: Any final thoughts?

DD: No, that's it.

BW: Good, thank you very much.

DD: You're welcome.

End of Interview