

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Mary C. "M.C." Toker
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

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Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview with Mary Catherine Toker for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College in Maine. We are in Mrs. Toker's Washington office, where she serves as vice president of government relations for General Mills. Today is Monday, February 23, 2009, and I'm Brien Williams. Would you please start out by giving me your full name and spelling, and the date and place of your birth, and your parents' names?

Mary Toker: My name is Mary Catherine Toker, it's spelled M-A-R-Y, C-A-T-H-E-R-I-N-E, Toker, T as in Tom-O-K-E-R. I was born on August 13, 1959, in Miami, Florida.

BW: And your parents' names?

MT: My parents' names were, my father is now deceased, his name was Dr. Donald L. Toker, and my mother, who is still thankfully living, is Mary Brennan Toker.

BW: Good. Give me a little bit of your own personal background, where you grew up and where you went to school and so forth.

MT: My father was a physician in the U.S. Public Health Service, so we had an opportunity to live all over the world. So, while I was born in Miami, I left before I was probably two, so we lived in London, we lived in Hong Kong, we lived in Japan, in between we lived in Boston, and then came back to the Washington [D.C.] area when I was in high school. So I went to high school in Washington, and then I went to college at Mount St. Mary's College in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

BW: And what did you study there?

MT: International studies, so it kind of combined history, political science, economics, and French.

BW: You must have been a real good resource in that class, in the seminars and whatnot.

MT: I don't know about that, but I wanted to keep learning about it.

BW: Sure, sure. So then your first steps out of college were?

MT: I started graduate school, and then I also had an internship in the international securities affairs area at the Department of Defense. It wasn't a military related position at all, it was more policy, it was kind of the State Department wing of the Defense Department. So they worked on projects with some of the, you know, with just various relationships that the U.S. managed around the world. And then I went up to Maine, which is where my mother is from, she's from Portland, Maine, to work on some political campaigns. And Senator Mitchell had been appointed to the Senate in, I think in 1980, so this would have been about two-and-a-half years later, and so he was going to be running for the seat that fall, in November of '82. And we had a big, good, strong Democratic ticket that year, right at the very top, and so we had a very coordinated campaign, you know, governor, Senate, House, et cetera, and all worked closely together and coordinated a nice victory for all that November.

And so he went back to Washington, I was still up in Maine and got involved in some other political initiatives, ranging from the Governors Conference that took place there that year, the presidential campaign the following year, beginning in late '83, we had all the presidential candidates coming through, and ultimately [I] ended up working on the Mondale presidential campaign and did coordination with other parts of New England.

And then after that decided that I wanted to come back to Washington, so I came back down here around Christmas time and started looking around and interviewing and the like, and started working in the Senator's office in February of that year [1985], a few months later.

BW: I'm curious, what was the primary motivation for going into the political track, when you went from here up to Maine?

MT: Well, one piece of it was family related. My uncle was running for governor at the time, so my mother had said to us, when I had finished up my course work for graduate school and my internship, she said "Well, why don't you go up there for a few weeks to help in the primary." So that was, you know, for a couple of weeks in the primary, and then I just got completely hooked and said, "I think I'm going to stay for a while, there's so much to be done." And so that was kind of the precipitating – and I'd been involved in some of his prior campaigns, so I had done it, you know, as a teenager, but it was, felt different when you're doing it when you're still young but you've, you know, now you've finished college, you feel like you're starting to kind of make your way a little bit more.

BW: Now, from what you said earlier, your uncle was successful.

MT: Yes.

BW: And identify him?

MT: Joseph Brennan, Governor Joseph Brennan, so he was a two-term governor, he was reelected that year, he won every county, I mean every, you know, the story is, it was a very

strong campaign by all and it was a good united campaign.

BW: So that was his initial campaign for governor, or had he been governor prior to 198[2]?

MT: He was already governor; he'd already served one term.

BW: So he was the governor at the time he appointed George Mitchell.

MT: He appointed the Senator, exactly, when Senator Muskie went over to the State Department after Cy Vance stepped down, yes, exactly, so.

BW: Do you have any thoughts about the relationship between your uncle and the Senator?

MT: Excellent relationship, excellent. I think that Joseph always felt very proud of Senator Mitchell and his extraordinary career. To this day he's still very proud of him, and they're still very good friends. And we're all proud of him.

BW: Did he go on and run for the Senate?

MT: He did, and he was not successful.

BW: What happened there?

MT: It was against Susan Collins, and it was an open seat, and it was close but I think it just wasn't to be.

BW: So your role then when you came down to the Senator's office was what?

MT: I think my first position was as a legislative correspondent, I think was the official title, and tended to work on issues that related – at that time there was something called Star Wars, which was something that President Reagan, then-President Reagan was suggesting as part of a strategic defense initiative, it would have been a big financial investment, so there were those types of issues. There were a lot of issues in Central America at the time, so Honduras, El Salvador, you know, the question of aid to the Contras. There were a lot of issues and discussions around South Africa and apartheid.

I mean those were some of the issues that I happened to be working on, and those happened to be issues that were really of great interest to a lot of constituents up in Maine, especially within the base of the people with whom we, you know, tended to work. They weren't looking to see more resources going towards very expensive defense initiatives that may have been untried, or untested. And then in terms of Central America and South Africa, obviously there were just a lot of like both human rights and, just human rights issues that really, in terms of the base of our constituents, that they really cared a lot about.

BW: As the son of a very politically active Californian who was constantly writing members of Congress, and I kept telling him he was just getting form letters back.

MT: Hmm-hmm.

BW: Talk a little bit about how the legislative correspondence operation worked.

MT: Worked at that time?

BW: Right.

MT: Well, and this may not have applied to your father, because if he was writing them in earlier days, you know, he may have been getting handwritten notes from the member of Congress, or the senator, so, you know, I don't want to, I can only speak to how it worked in our office.

There certainly were issues that were, you know, they were either perennial issues, or there was enough of a critical mass of interest in those issues that you could develop a point of view. So if an issue popped up, you had to do the research on it and understand, well, you know: what's the U.S. role in it, what's the U.S. Congress's role in it, what are the developments, what are the policy options? And you know, so if a person wrote on South Africa and apartheid, they were going to more or less, if it was in the same time frame, get the same letter from the Senator, because those were the facts as they were on the ground at the time.

There were, we were very careful, he, like probably all of them today, had a signing machine that was used for things, but we had a system set up, because Maine was such a small state, the fact is, is there was a really good likelihood that the Senator knew this person, you know, it was a little over a million people, so there was, you could say, at least a fifty-fifty chance, and as he was there longer, probably even greater chance that he would know the person. So one of the things we were always very careful about, and fortunately I had had enough political experience, I knew a lot of the names as well, of people, because I'd started, as I said, when I was fourteen working in the trenches in politics, so I knew if, you know, Joe X sent a letter, I thought, 'I know Joe X is really involved and interested and knows the Senator,' so we were very careful about making sure that he saw any letter that the Senator knew. But there was also another person that we sent everything to, and she literally reviewed every single letter, because she knew a lot of these people as well.

BW: And how did you achieve a degree of confidence that you could speak for the Senator on this wide range of issues that you just described?

MT: You know, you do a couple of things. One is, either you knew because you had been up in the state when he was speaking on the issue and you were very familiar with the issue, so that was one way. Other ways, if it were a new or an emerging issue, or just an unknown issue, something came up that someone's writing about but it may not be anything we've ever uttered a

statement about, you know, you would generally work with the legislative assistant that you worked with a lot and see if they knew anything about it, you know, see if there's been any Senate hearings on it. You know, you could identify fairly early on if it was an issue that would have gone through any of the committees on which he served, you know, would this have gone through Finance, would this go through Environment, and, you know, you just kind of worked that way.

There were always going to be those outliers, in which case you went to the senior staff person and, you know, they almost always had some response for us. But those were ones that could be tricky at times, but a lot of them you could know because you're following, you know, the news of the day. People would often write in response to what they were hearing. I can't imagine what it's like today, because this was all before cable television and tabl-, I mean, well tabloids were out, but I don't know -

BW: This is just a really small point, but how did you handle out-of-state correspondence, any differently?

MT: You know, we tended to respond to everything, although if you got a lot of things from out of state, I mean, you know, kind of protocol could be that you'd write back and say, "I forwarded this to your senator," you know, that was protocol. Depending on the issue, you know, depending on the issue. If it was something that you had, you know, if you knew your position on, you might just say, "Well, let it go." I mean you kind of used your judgment on that, because you don't want to get in the habit of having to answer, you know, all these letters from California. On the other hand, it's not like he doesn't know some people in California. So it was a, you know, you just balanced it.

BW: I lost a question there, what was I going to ask you? So then you moved into another role in his office?

MT: Yes, he was elected after the '86 elections, so in November of 1986. He had served as the chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, and that role is to go out and recruit and raise money for Senate candidates. So, as you know, a third of the Senate's up every year, and that year there were some open seats, there were some competitive seats, and some of the big names out there today, Tom Daschle and Kent Conrad were just like two of the people that happened to have been running for some open seats that particular year.

And he did an outstanding job, he traveled all over the country, you know, raising money. That's one of the reasons why he would be in, you know, California or in Florida, raising lots of money, where big pockets of Democrats are, and recruited really good candidates. And so the result is that prior to the election the Republicans were in control, following the election, the Democrats regained control of the Senate. So his colleagues were rightfully appreciative of what he did, I mean he really put everything into it, and as we've seen, anything he puts himself into like that, he really achieves and accomplishes a lot. And so they did not at that time say, "We're going to make you majority leader," because as the Senate works, there's just, it tends to be a

place where, you know, seniority tends to rule.

So they came up with a position called, and I hope I can remember it, I think it was called like deputy president pro tem, which was a leadership position that provided for an official office in the Capitol. It wasn't a hideaway, which a lot of them have so that they're close to the floor for Senate debate, but an official office for serving in a greater leadership role with the leadership of the Senate. And so when that position opened up, I was asked if I wanted to be the staff person for that. And there were, actually there were two of us, Rich went over, Rich and I went over to that office -

BW: Rich?

MT: I'm going to remember his name.

BW: Arenberg?

MT: Yes, thank you, thank you, okay. I couldn't remember his last name for some reason.

BW: So you went over to that -

MT: So we went over to that office, yeah.

BW: And what roles did you play there, what was your -?

MT: You know, it was everything from if there were votes on the floor, you know, counting kind of different things, you know, understanding where others were going on a vote. It turned out we [also] got very involved in some of the Iran-Contra [investigation]. It would not typically have been the role of the deputy president pro tem, per se, but it kind of coincided in terms of timing to his appointment to that. So you know, it just turned out, because in terms of capacity for the office of handling, you know, all of the input that was coming through during that. I know it ran through the summer, I don't have the precise dates of that. I'd have to go and look those up.

BW: I can find it, right. I wanted to backtrack here just a little bit. Before you left the Senator's office, describe about how many, what its size was and sort of what the ambiance - well, I mean not precise numbers, but I mean.

MT: Sure. I would, I could easily be wrong on this, but, you know, maybe it was somewhere in the range of somewhere between twenty and twenty-five, I could be off, but - And by then he had at least one person officially assigned to some of his committees. You would get, we had for example someone that was a Foreign Service officer that came in to help us on certain issues for a year, was kind of rotating in and out. We had someone who had been at EPA but came in on assignment. So what I don't recall is whether or not that person was considered officially on our staff, or if they were part of the Environment and Public Works staff and they were assigned to

our office. In terms of – but I'd say that's approximately. You know, it was clear they were assigned to our office and they, you know, they would attend our leg staff meetings, for example, when we met on Monday mornings to kind of talk about what was going to go on that week.

I think that it had a great esprit de corps to it. You know, there were certainly a number of us that had known and worked together prior to serving in the Senate. So, you know, I had known Mary McAleney, and I had known Gayle Cory, and I had known, there was a woman named Sandy [Brown?] who was on the leg [legislative] staff and I'm trying to remember her last name now, but I had known her up in Maine, and I had known Bob Carolla. So, you know, in some cases we'd already known one another, but I think there was a nice esprit de corps.

BW: And tell me about the Monday morning meetings, who ran them and -?

MT: It was basically to get together to talk about the week ahead, you know: what do we see coming up? Who did run them? They generally would be, it might be someone different, different days, depending on who was in town. But it might have been Martha Pope, or it might have been Rich Arenberg, it could have been – oh, there was another woman that was there when I first got there, Charlene [Sturbitts], I don't know if you've interviewed her. I don't remember her last name, but she was his legislative director when I first arrived. So usually it was someone in that capacity that would kind of run the meeting. It ran maybe, you know, thirty, forty minutes, you know, but if something was going on in terms of committee or in terms of floor that week, it was just a good way to communicate. You know, offices may not do that now, because now with email and other instant communication, it may be a different process.

BW: And was the Senator ever part of those meetings?

MT: Occasionally, but usually, you know, he went to Maine almost every weekend, or was out of town almost every weekend, you know, especially when he had the DSCC assignment. But, you know, and so frequently senators, and he wouldn't have been alone in this, were not around on Monday mornings, they would frequently come in on Monday afternoons, with the votes starting later in the day. But you know, there were times, there were times that he was there.

BW: So as a member of the staff, when would you have opportunities to interact with the Senator?

MT: I had a number of them, because the other position that I neglected to mention in all of this, and now that I'm thinking about it, was, and it was in more my LC role, was, one of the things the Senator really wanted to make sure we did was, if anybody from Maine ever came to the office, he wanted to see them. So what they would frequently do is – how did this work? And partially, this was partially with the press office, because we would also get photos of them and send them up to their local newspapers, as well as sending it to the family.

So depending on the time of year, you know, if it were spring and you had a lot of people coming

in, I would be getting up – and again, because I had the political background in Maine, I often knew the people. The position came up almost as, there was a time that Willy Brown, who was the speaker of the California senate, at the time was on the list. We always got a list every day of the Senator's calendar, and I happened to see that at two o'clock he was meeting with Willy Brown, and so the press person was in the office and I said, "Oh," you know, "are you going to do a photo with Willy Brown?", because he is the speaker of the House. And the person didn't know that, whoever was there at the time, and maybe they were a more junior press person, but they didn't know that. And so they said, "Gosh, who is it?" And I said "Well, he's the speaker of the [California] House, he's very politically active" – he still is to this day. And I said that he's someone you might, that he might want to do a photo with. And so we raised it with the chief of staff and he said, "Oh yeah, definitely, I'm glad you pointed that out."

So a couple of those things would pop up, and I just tended to – and so just by, because of that they said, "You know, from now on, will you look at the calendar every day?" You know, the top political people would look at it too, but sometimes it was just worth having that, and especially with some of the Maine people because I'd been involved in politics up there and, you know, the Senator would feel terrible, just like we all would, if people that he knew happened to stop by their office, and they were just stopping by to pick up tickets to maybe get a tour of the White House or something, whatever reason they would stop by, and you know, he was smart, and he said, "I really want to see those people. Even if I'm in a hearing room, I want to see them." Because, you know, he didn't want to appear to sound like, "Well I was too busy to see you." I mean he was really smart and really kept focused on constituents, that was really important to him.

BW: But that could have been a logistics nightmare, wouldn't it, I mean with all of the things preoccupying his time? How would you, would he come out of a hearing and -?

MT: Hmm-hmm, sure.

BW: To his office, to meet these folks?

MT: Well, no, what we would often do is go over to the hearing. So if he was over at a hearing for the Finance Committee – they were doing tax reform at the time – we would go over there and go into the anteroom on the other side of the hearing where the senators all come and go, and we'd get a chance to chat about what he was working on. I mean if he was speaking or questioning a witness, we would wait. But then he would come out and then we would talk about, you know, the witness, whatever they were working on, and it was just great for, a great opportunity for these constituents or this person that he knew, to ask any question about what he was working on, or what they were interested in.

BW: So many of the Senate offices are so cramped –

MT: Hmm-hmm.

BW: - the quarters are so cramped.

MT: Yes.

BW: And everyone can hear everyone else's telephone conversation.

MT: Yes, yes.

BW: How did you adjust, how did you as an individual adjust to that, and live with it?

MT: It'd be hard to go back now. But you know, I had come off of campaign staff, and so you were just surrounded by people. And this was, you know, this was pre cell phones and all of that, so everybody was on a land line, and you were just used to being surrounded by people. So you got used to it, I suppose, but it's just how it was. But I couldn't go back, I mean I've had my own quarters for over twenty years now so; it's a lot more productive.

BW: So then what prompted you to leave, and was that from the pro – president pro tem office, is that when you left?

MT: It was from that position, yes. I just decided I was ready to do something a little bit different. You know, there was a great staff in place there and I thought, well, I've experienced, you know, when we're in the minority, I've experienced when we're in the majority, I've had some interesting experiences in extension of some of the things I've worked on, I've had a chance to work in this leadership role, I've had exposure to issues that, you know, I would have never had otherwise, I really learned the process. But I really wanted to go and really broaden my experiences from there.

BW: So I'm curious, what steps did you take and how did you -?

MT: Well, you know, I was young, I was still in my twenties, so I did what a lot of people do at that time, you know, I looked in the newspaper, I, I mean I didn't, I mean, just backtracking, I didn't know anybody to call. I mean, I had met lots of different people, but I didn't call anybody that I'd ever met to look for a job, per se, I didn't think that was the right thing to do. So it was a combination of looking in the newspaper and then just, you know, sending my resume out and just exploring what was possible.

At that time I was looking both in Washington and New York, I was interested in moving to New York, I had a brother that was in law school there and I had lots of friends that lived there at the time, so I said, "That would be another place that I'd be interested in working," and in fact had an offer for a job up in New York, ultimately decided not to take it, but at that same time interviewed for a job that I had apparently applied to. It was a blind ad, it didn't say what the organization was, and I got a call from them, they asked me to come in, I had multiple interviews.

The type of position it was for wasn't really spot-on to what I really wanted to do, but, so we kind of talked about it, and it's interesting because the man that I met there, through these interviews, said, "I think you'd be much better suited for more of a legislative role." This was more of a political role there, and that wasn't really what I wanted to go into but I had applied just, you know, you learn about things. And he said, "Well, you know, as a matter of fact my old job at General Mills hasn't been filled. I will, I'm going to see my, you know, former colleague somewhere and I'll mention to him, I'll see if he's still interviewing people, I'll just mention to him that I've met you and had a number of interactions." And he had said to me, "If we have any legislative positions over here" – it was at the National Restaurants Association – you know, he said, "I'd hire you in a minute for that because I think you'd be well suited, but less so for this political stuff." And I said, "That's great," you know, you can't do any better than that, when somebody that you've interviewed with says, "I'll talk to someone else."

And so then maybe a week – I wasn't thinking much about it, because, you know, people sometimes say that but you just don't know. And so I was still doing my thing, and I was still enjoying my work up there, and then out of the blue one day I got a call from this man that ran the Washington office for General Mills, and he called me and he said, "Mark Gorman told me about you and said I should meet you, I'm interviewing people, I'm in the midst of it, I'm down to some of my final candidates, but he said I really should meet you." So I said, "Okay," and so then I went through a whole series of interviews with them and all sorts of [meetings], because General Mills does that, and ultimately got offered the job. So it was a really happy occasion, so I wrote a letter to the Senator, and in fact I recently found it – I was going through some old papers – but I wrote him a letter and, you know, officially resigning and giving him my notice, and telling him what a privilege it had been to work on his staff and watch his star ascend. So that was great.

BW: Did he respond to that letter?

MT: You know, he did. I think it was verbal, it was, you know, "Congratulations, great job, you're going to do a great job," kind of thing.

BW: And he was still deputy pro tem, president pro tem.

MT: He still, yes, so this would have been, you know, February of '08 -

BW: Of '88.

MT: Eighty-eight, sorry, of '88, and in November, after the November elections in 1988 is when the Democrats caucus to elect their majority leader and that's when he was elected majority leader, which was a fun day.

BW: Did you have any regrets then, because you might have gone into the majority leader's office?

MT: No, I actually didn't. I had a lot of people ask me that, and I had people, actually one of our subdivisions, we were in, General Mills owned restaurants at the time and they said, "You aren't going to go back, are you?" And I said, "No." I mean I was very happy for all of them, but I wasn't seeking to do that, I was seeking to continue to go out further. But I thought it was wonderful, I thought they made a great choice.

BW: In looking at your more recent career, in preparation for this interview, I notice how deeply you're involved in food and farm and a whole variety of issues. Were those issues that were new to you when you came to General Mills?

MT: Completely. Completely. Completely new. But that's okay, you know, you can learn issues, you know, if you study them and you understand the process, and you understand the policy process and how it fits into the context of politics and regional politics, and how the Senate operates, and even relative to the House, you can learn the issues. No, I didn't work on any of those issues.

BW: Now, when you were working for the Senator you were seeing a lot of lobbyists come and go, undoubtedly -

MT: Hmm-hmm,

BW: - in his office. Did you often think, 'Boy, that's a line of work I'd really like to be in?'

MT: No, no. I think the whole concept of lobbyists has just gotten so overblown in recent years. I mean, they've been around forever. I mean the idea that you can't have entities or organizations or individuals go and talk to people up on Capitol Hill about issues that matter to them; I mean that's kind of anti-democratic. I haven't met a lot of members of Congress that have backgrounds in the diverse areas of our economy or our country that can really understand, I mean, you know, I don't know how people would make those decisions otherwise, without the input from the stakeholders. I mean it's stakeholder input, as far as I can tell.

BW: That leads to another question. In areas where Senator Mitchell was not on very familiar ground, I mean things that were not part of his committees or his own personal experience or whatnot, where would he seek advice? Lobbyists, I guess, but then would he go to colleagues?

MT: Probably, yeah, I would say he would. I'd say he'd read up on it. He was very thoughtful, he was really good at making decisions and drawing conclusions, but he got the facts first. I think he was, he had a really disciplined mind for that, could understand, you know, the various complexities and nuances and factors. So if you're dealing with a complicated situation, I think he would check obviously with his colleagues as well, but he would probably read as much kind of objective background as he could get.

BW: Did - would you, from your position, be able to say whether there were certain senators that he often would confer with about matters?

MT: You know, I think there were some that he was, you know, that he was close to. I seem to recall that he had a really nice relationship with Paul Sarbanes; I think that was just two intellectuals that really got along well. He was actually quite close to Dave Durenberger, a Republican from Minnesota, you know, their service on the Finance Committee, and they did a lot of work in the health care area. I mean in fact, the day that the Senator was elected majority leader, I remember after the vote and my friends calling me about it, and so I went up there to his office and I was going into one of the inner offices there and Senator Durenberger had just heard the news so he came running down the hall, without a jacket on, which you rarely would see in the Senate, to come over to give the Senator a hug, because he was so excited. So I think they worked together on issues. I'm sure there were lots of others that he, you know, became friendly with and colleagues with, you know, that they met on travels and the like. I think obviously he became very close friends with Senator Daschle, but it may have been that Senator Mitchell was as much a mentor to Senator Daschle as he kind of rose in the ranks of leadership.

BW: Yeah, any other thoughts on that particular relationship? Why it was Daschle rather than someone else, or what were the points of commonality maybe between the two of them?

MT: Small states, they came from small states, I think that can often help. I mean, you know, there are some conspicuous examples of people that had that role that weren't from small states, like Senator Johnson, for example, L.B.J., but I think people that come from the smaller states really learn to work their colleagues quite effectively. They aren't viewed as as much of a threat by, you know, if you're from California you already are the fifth largest economy in the world and people may think, 'Boy, you've already got so many marbles,' that I think, I think representing a smaller state is at least one of them. Humility would be another thing I think they both had in common, a low key, thoughtful, smart, being collaborators. And I think, again, when you're from a smaller state, you really have to learn how to collaborate well because you don't have, you don't have eighteen House members to help you out, you may only have one or two House members, so your delegation is pretty small so you realize you've got to work the region, or you've got to work other commonalities of caucuses. So I think those are some things that they had in common.

BW: How did a lobbyist make an appointment to see the Senator, to see the Senator's staff? How did that work, and who would they see normally?

MT: You know, I assume, like anyone that wanted to meet with him, they went through his scheduler; they made appointments through his scheduler.

BW: And would everyone want to see the Senator, but not everyone would get to see the Senator?

MT: Presumably, yes.

BW: And that would be a decision made by the AA, I suppose?

MT: And the Senator sometimes, I would presume, you know.

BW: And how did you handle it from a morale standpoint, if someone was coming in really wanting to see the Senator and ending up -

MT: And then they saw me or something. You know, you just say, "He's" – and you know, it was true, "He was busy, he wanted to be here but wasn't able to be here, but he asked me to, you know, either assure you of this, or assure you of that," or you take copious notes of what they're interested in and, you know, "We'll let you know."

BW: And then where did that information go after they left?

MT: Generally either, you know, you developed either a response to them, or you worked with the legislative assistant, or if it was, if it had some other nuances to it you would go to like a Gayle Cory. I don't know if her name has popped up at all, but she would be a good person to consult with.

BW: How many legislative assistants did he have, and what were the areas?

MT: Oh wow, you're really testing my cobwebs here today.

BW: Sorry.

MT: Well, there was someone that did finance, there was someone that did environment, there was someone that did, he probably had some of the foreign affairs in a mix, because obviously they don't do just one. The person that did finance tended to only do finance, though. And then Anita [Jensen] did judiciary and other things, as well as speech writing. I don't know, were there five or six? Maybe there were eight. I'm probably missing something here, I've got cobwebs, but hopefully others that you're speaking to will be, that spent more time up there would be better at that.

BW: How do you recall the balance the Senator had between Senate business, the DC – the DSCC, Maine interests, and then being [deputy] president pro tem?

MT: Maine always came first, I would say, for certain. You know, that was kind of the great, you know, centralizing force. You kind of always understood; that comes first. His policy and legislative work in the Senate I think was second, because he would want to see how his work in that area serves the interests of Maine, his state. And then I think from there he had his work in the DSCC and, you know, political kind of stuff, I would say. I'd say it kind of went in that order.

BW: And was there much that he did as [deputy] president pro tem?

MT: It kept him in the room and at the table for a lot of the big strategic, you know, policy decisions, so it was a nice position to be in because it got him at the table.

BW: Were you surprised when he announced he was resigning from the Senate?

MT: A little bit, I was surprised, yes. I was.

BW: Did you call some of your former colleagues and say, “What’s going on?”

MT: Oh sure, you know, we all kind of called and compared notes and the like, and yes, it was surprising.

BW: And was there a sort of consensus of why he was doing that?

MT: I ultimately concluded, and I think it was, he was just ready to do other things. You know, it’s not, it’s not as glamorous a job as people on the outside think it is. It’s a great job, he did a great job at it, but it’s also, it’s a trying job. I mean, getting this group together every day, trying to get consensus, or at least sixty votes, it’s tough. And I think he was just, I think he probably was ready to do something else with his life. That was kind of what we were thinking. I don’t have any more than that.

BW: Did you have contacts with him after you left?

MT: You know, I did, I did. I’m involved with a group called the American Ireland Fund, and after he so effectively helped negotiate that Good Friday Agreement, I happened to be over in Ireland with this group, and we were in Dublin and we were there for an event with, we had a group of speakers coming, including Frank McCourt, who was, had just written *Angela’s Ashes*, and I don’t know whether he had yet officially won the Pulitzer but he was in the mix and had gotten a lot of attention. So he was one of the speakers, but one of the other speakers was [Ambassador Jean Kennedy-Smith], the U.S. ambassador to Ireland at the time, and I was there with one of my close friends that had worked for Mrs. Kennedy-Smith when she ran Very Special Arts, she had been her speech writer. And so it just was kind of a combination of all these coincidences, that she happened to be there and the like.

And so we were all at either U.C. Dublin or Trinity College and, in the buildings, and it just so happened that Senator Mitchell happened to be there making a speech that day as well, just by coincidence. And so because, you know, there were people in the group that I was involved with that knew him as well, and he realized that there were a group of people that were involved in Irish politics in the United States, we all ended up together that afternoon and he said, “Wow, MC, what are you doing here?” And I said, “I know, I’m surprised to see you too.” And so we kind of caught up and did a photo and those kinds of things.

So I ran into him in Ireland, and I’ve run into him, you know, in Washington in some other things. I haven’t seen him in a number of years, though, I haven’t seen him in a number of years,

because I think he basically spends more of his time in New York. There was a flashpoint a few years ago when he had bought a house in Washington, and it was actually about three blocks from me, and then I guess at the last minute they decided not to move to Washington after all. So, I probably would have seen him more frequently, but - But I've seen him on the news, in his recent appointment, and he looks good.

BW: Right, right. I'm going to pause here again for a moment.

(Pause in taping.)

BW: Okay, let me ask you this: in terms of your career with General Mills, what lessons did you learn from the years you were with George Mitchell? You must have brought things with you from there.

MT: Some things that I learned from him. I think that Senator Mitchell was always prepared for everything. He'd always read his brief, he didn't walk into a room not knowing what his objectives were, not having, you know, read up and understood and assessed. So I think that was something I really learned and have taken with me, and it's served me well.

I think that he worked effectively with people, he knew how to find common cause, knowing that, again, since he came from a small state – but in some ways it doesn't matter because there's still two for every state, except for Minnesota at the moment – knowing how to find, you know, common cause with others to try to get enough support for your ideas, or your shared ideas, being open to making it better. So I saw him do that on environmental issues, I saw him do it on tax issues, I saw his judicious mind when it came to the Iran-Contra hearings, and obviously subsequently we've seen that. So I think he combined, you know, intellect, good judgment, leadership, the ability, if need be, to let others take credit for something. That's something that's really important as a majority leader, that if somebody needs to be able to take credit for something, he would not be looking to seek the limelight on it, he was smart enough to know that everybody wins if you get this piece of legislation across the finish line, or whatever the objective might be. So I learned a lot about, you know, getting things done that way, and I think it's served me well.

BW: Were there any things on the opposite side of the coin that you thought, 'Oh, I don't think that works very well?'

MT: No, I can't think of anything. I really can't. I mean I felt like it was an office where there was great integrity, great credibility, everybody was focused on what they needed to get done. I never had an experience where I felt like what we were doing was inconsistent with my own personal point of view; I didn't feel like I was compromising anything. So no, no, I think they, I think it was a good organization to work with.

BW: And how important was your service with Senator Mitchell in terms of your subsequent career?

MT: Exactly what do you mean? You mean him particularly, or the experience of having worked in the Senate and having worked in politics and the like? The latter. I think it is important. I think in order to do a job and to be an advocate for an entity, whether it's General Mills or any of the forty or fifty thousand organizations and entities that rightfully should have a voice to be able to petition their government and be part of the public policy process, and to be a stakeholder, I think it's very helpful to have had background up there, because it is a shot of reality of how things get done. I mean, the Congress or the Senate, things don't get done there the way they get done in any other organization in the world. And if people apply the way things get done in their organization, whether they're in a school or whether they're in a hospital or whether they're in a company, and assume that the same type of decision making process is going to apply in the Senate, it's just naïve, it's just not how it is.

It's a very unique process, and there may be lots of good ideas, and lots of good ideas have stayed on the committee floor. Because getting something done in those bodies, it's a lot harder to pass legislation than to stop it. You know, we've seen big signature items where the need was great, but it didn't get done anyway because of a failure of leadership, a failure of judgment, a failure of being willing to work together. And there's just a lot that you can learn from working up there and understanding just how complicated it is. Because many people think they understand what politics is, and they kind of either roll their eyes or they make really, in my judgment, wrong assumptions about how things get done and say, "Well why don't they just do this?" And you say, "Well, I can give you about fifteen reasons why it just doesn't happen overnight." You've got a lot of competing interests in this country, and rightfully so, they need to kind of work their way through these systems. It's very inefficient.

But if you've experienced it and you've experienced how, you know, political campaigns are put together, or you've experienced any of this, you really understand how to strategically position an issue that you're interested in seeing and see how it fits into that broader map of issues. So I think that experience was essential to my being able to give strategic advice to my company and my colleagues on issues that are under consideration up there, in terms of how do you engage, who do you engage.

BW: Do you have three sort of basic rules along those lines that you pursue, or strategies? No?

MT: Well, give me an example. I probably do, I don't know what you're -

BW: I'm not quite sure what I'm looking for here, except you describe the - an inefficient system -

MT: Hmm-hmm.

BW: And then you are coming to that inefficient system trying to be strategic, and probably are quite successful at being strategic.

MT: Hmm-hmm.

BW: So where do you find the inroad, where's, how are you successful, given the inefficiencies up on the Hill?

MT: Well, you have to learn as much as you can about the subject, the content of the issue, and then you have to learn as much and review your own understanding of the politics of the circumstance to know, are there regional differences, are there ideological differences, are there party line differences? Because there are lots of issues you can look at and say, "Well these ones are divided by party, these ones are divided by region." If you're talking about farm policy, you know, you get into rural versus urban; if you're talking about, you know, some of the social issues, they can be more ideological. So you need to kind of run every issue through that lens. I mean you do the content, the facts of the case, you know, understand that, and you need that for certain. Then you need to understand, you know, the politics and all the variables that go with that, and then you need to find where you're, where you have common cause with others.

So in that way we're like, you know, a really tiny state, we have a tiny organization here, and we find common cause with hunger advocates, with school lunch servers, with environmentalists, with consumer groups, and you try to build, you know, what Tom Friedman would call "a platform for collaboration," you know, that's what he describes the way people work today. Well that's really how we work every day. I mean, as General Mills, you can't just go up to Capitol Hill and go door-to-door and say, "This is our point of view on an issue," that doesn't make sense. But it has to be, you know, it has to be presented in the context of the challenges of the issue, from the broad standpoint, from the broad public and societal standpoint, it has to be presented by a broad group of stakeholders, it has to be, those stakeholders should be matched up with the policy makers, it has to be done in the right timing, because timing is all sorts of it. You know, you can cry for health care reform for years and nothing happens, it's, you know, molasses. Every now and then moments come so you hope that, you know, you've gotten things lined up so you can be part of that debate and that you can contribute effectively, share your learning on it. So I'd say those are kind of the three things. I mean: always have the content; always understand the politics; and always get the right platform for collaboration. And be patient. Be realistic.

BW: Has the way lobbyists do their business changed a lot over the years that you've been, since '88?

MT: Let me think about that. As a practical matter, I don't think it has. I think you, I mean when I started doing this job, those were the kinds of things I did. I didn't run the strategy part of it, I was more on the, you know, when my senior leadership decided the strategy, I contributed to it obviously in terms of my understanding of the politics, but it's definitely a job, it's like probably any job, the more years you're in it, the more, you know, rich, you know, your understanding of things is richer and you're better able to assess. But I think all of those pieces, I mean, in many ways kind of the mechanics of it are the same. I mean, what I can't speak to are

the, you know, kind of the rules about flying people around. We never did that, we never did the big expenditure issues. So I mean I was pleased when they made all those ethics reforms because I feel like it equals the playing field a little bit.

I mean, I go out every day based on the reputation of our company that was formed in the 1860s, and still to this day has an outstanding reputation. And I can understand why policy makers would want a point of view from people in our company. There's a lot of expertise housed in that company, and if I were a policy maker I would seek it. So, you know, in terms of how advocacy has changed in public affairs, you know, I still think that members of Congress and the Senate need to hear from stakeholders on this issue. I think they benefit from hearing from a broad gauge stakeholder group, you know, not the idea of one person knocking on the door or, you know, some type of special deal. We've never been party to any of that, so I'm unfamiliar other than what I read in the *New York Times*, like everybody else. So you know, to the degree that some of those things get cleaned up.

I mean, I'm always worried that every time there's a reform, there are people that are looking for loopholes the moment it gets passed, and that unfortunately, my heart sinks, but that's what happens, it does.

BW: So at the other end of this transaction, have you seen the Senate changed very much over, you have twenty-four years of working with -

MT: I would say, and it's the obvious that anybody would say, the whole place has gotten a lot more partisan. I'm really hopeful that, you know, President Obama's, you know, open and fresh spirit will help improve things a little bit. I think there's only so much one person can do. I think the partisanship has really become a disgrace, you know. This idea that elected leaders go to the floor or get on television and start ranting about someone just because they're in another party or the other idea, I find really immature and, you know, it's really intolerable. But, so I think it's just gotten a lot more partisan. I think you could do business, you know, twenty years ago, differently. Reasonable people could get together and respect one another, even if their views were in complete contrast, and I think that's just gotten so much harder. I think the parties have become, just both sides, have become more ideological.

BW: So has that caused changes in your modus operandi?

MT: You know, we continue to do our work the way we do it. And you know, I can't be, I can't be sweating it if this office and that office do not get along. I will go in and I will speak about the issue in terms that I know they're interested in, and you do it that way. But I think the country doesn't benefit, frankly, and that's the bigger issue, is the country doesn't benefit when things are done or not done for partisan reasons. I mean there's plenty of issues and plenty of challenges here, that they should work together for the country, and I think there's too many of them that do not, that they're really thinking about their next election cycle and their base and their talk radio and whatever else, their, you know, in their, frankly, their narrow point of view and, you know, I start to tune some of it out, so -

BW: Ending on a good, positive note here, how do you think George Mitchell ought to be remembered and will be remembered as time goes on?

MT: I think he should be remembered as a man of great intellect, of great judgment, with great leadership, that was willing, that has been willing to step into some of the most challenging circumstances of our time. You know, I mean majority leader is a really difficult job. The Northern Ireland challenge, I have read a lot of the history of that, that was a long time coming and I think he did a remarkable job. Obviously he had great support from President Clinton and his interest made a big difference, but the Senator really stuck with it. And his new assignment, going into the Middle East, I mean it's just, you know, he's not, he doesn't shy away from some of the biggest challenges. And I think that people should be grateful, because having people with that much seasoning and experience and judgment and patience, and a real, a genuine passion for wanting to resolve some of these challenges, and understanding the human element. Because these issues are really human at their, you know, these are souls involved, and they go back hundreds of years in some cases. So I think someone that can really analyze and evaluate the context, and meet with everybody and treat them all with respect, and to be an honest broker, is really an extraordinary accomplishment, and not easy. Not easy. So I think those are some of the things that he should be remembered for.

BW: Good. Anything left unsaid at this point?

MT: I'm really not that negative on the Congress. I mean, in some ways, in some ways, I mean, did you read Doris Kearns Goodwin's book, *Team of Rivals*?

BW: No.

MT: I mean, Abraham Lincoln had to deal with extraordinary challenges, extraordinary, in terms of [] within the Congress. So, you know, ever thus....

BW: Good, well thank you very much for this interview.

MT: Thank you.

End of Interview