

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Walter Corey

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is May 18, 2010, I'm in Portland, Maine with Walter Corey, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Walter, could you start just by giving me your full name?

Walter Corey: Walter Ellsworth Corey, III.

AL: And where and when were you born?

WC: I was born on June 19, 1941, in White Plains, New York.

AL: And is New York where you grew up?

WC: Yes, well part of the year I grew up in New York, part of the year I grew up in Ogunquit, Maine, where we had summer property.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

WC: Walter E., Jr. and Theresa Stallone Corey.

AL: And what were their occupations when you were growing up?

WC: My dad was an insurance executive for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, and my mother was a homemaker, home economist, I guess you'd say.

AL: And did you have brothers and sisters?

WC: Younger brother.

AL: And what was White Plains, New York, like at that time?

WC: Well, I was born there, but I didn't grow up there. When we were in New York State I spent most of the growing up years in Staten Island, New York, before there was a bridge so it was, believe it or not, rural.

AL: Really?

WC: Really rural.

AL: What was it like to grow up there?

WC: Well it was like, there was a lot of grass and parks and baseball diamonds and horseback riding and stuff you wouldn't begin to associate with a borough of New York City. And it was fascinating, because to go to school, which was a Jesuit secondary school in Manhattan, I had to take a bus, a ferry, and a subway in order to get to school, and then on the way back I had to take a subway, a ferry, and a bus to get home. So it was something of a trek, but well worth it.

AL: And what was your parents' connection to Maine, or how did they choose a summer place here?

WC: Well, very simply. The Corey family comes from New Hampshire, and my parents had spent their honeymoon in Ogunquit and they'd always dreamed of having summer property near the hotel where they spent their honeymoon. So when they could afford to do so, they bought some property there.

AL: And was that your way of coming to Maine later on?

WC: Well, yes. When I graduated from law school my wife and I decided that of all the places we had been together, we liked Maine the best.

AL: And where did you go to law school?

WC: Yale Law School.

AL: So you landed in the Portland area?

WC: Yes, I was recruited by Bernstein Shur, which is a large law firm in town, and worked for them until Ken Curtis was elected governor and asked me to come and join his staff, which I did as the first federal coordinator of the state.

AL: So this was in the mid-'60s?

WC: This was, let's see, we started, yes, this was in the mid-'60s, this was '66, '67, Curtis came in in '67. Actually, yes, it was '67 and I worked for him '67, '68 and '69, and left in January of 1970.

AL: And was it during this period of time that you met George Mitchell?

WC: That's when I first met George. I was on the governor's staff, and he had left Muskie at that point and was working as an attorney for Jensen Baird law firm in town.

AL: And so what were some of your first impressions of him, or circumstances?

WC: I liked him. He was very outgoing and genial, and had a razor quick mind, and he and I spent a lot of time talking about policy. I'd edit some of his speeches, he edited some, I mean the speeches that he wrote for political figures, we took turns editing each other's speeches. It was fun, and it was challenging, and it was good because George intellectually was head and shoulders above virtually all of his contemporaries.

AL: Did you ever see him in the courtroom?

WC: I can't say that I did. I saw him in many contexts, but I don't think I ever saw him in the courtroom.

AL: Could you describe some of the other contexts in which you knew him?

WC: Well, there were all kinds of contexts, political conventions, public policy meetings involving state and federal government. But the ones that I enjoyed the best were on the tennis court, those were always fun.

AL: Yes, talk to me about tennis and sort of the group of people that you played with.

WC: Well, there was a wonderful group of people, there was George Keemonio (*sounds like*), Juris Ubans, Tom Allen – who were some of the others? Well, I'm not sure now, but there were others, there were several others.

AL: Harold Pachios?

WC: Oh, of course, Harold was in the group, and it's always fun to watch the byplay between Harold and George. Who else was in that group? Well, the names slip away now. Oh yeah, Carlisle, Scott Carlisle was in that group. But we played for a number of years, and of course we rotated and certain guys would, we had the schedules lined up and certain guys would play on certain days and nights, and then as George became busier and his career took him outside of Maine, he became the automatic instant fill-in so that when he came to town somebody would always withdraw and let George play, if he were so inclined.

AL: And where would you play?

WC: Everywhere, we'd play indoors at Tennis of Maine, we'd play outdoors at the country club or the park, or wherever was appropriate at the time. And we played singles, we played doubles, and you can really tell a lot about the character of a person by the way they play tennis. I'm convinced that the inner qualities of the person come out in competition. And so it was not only fun to play, there was a great camaraderie, lots of laughing and so forth, but also it was very insightful, because if you were attentive and you watched the way a person behaved on the tennis

court, you could learn a lot about him.

AL: And what kind of a tennis player was George Mitchell?

WC: George was a very good tennis player. He had the shots, all the shots, he had good tennis presence, a good strategy, and he was extremely competitive, and he was a good partner on the doubles. He wasn't a hog, going after balls that weren't his, and he had a certain instinct for cohesiveness on the court that made it easy to play with him. And of course I think his most outstanding and extraordinary quality in tennis as in the rest of his life, is his mental toughness. And I don't know where it began. It may have begun, like many things, early in life, or it may have begun in the work he did with the military, he was in intelligence, as you know, but when I met him in Maine, and especially on the tennis courts, George was relentless, he was a relentless player. There was never a ball that he wouldn't go for, and most often get and return. So he was extremely persevering.

He was also very intense, in a quiet way. You could feel the competitive fires burning, and if he lost, smoldering. He didn't like losing. And he did everything, within the rules, to keep from losing. And every once in awhile we'd find him foot faulting – have you heard about his foot faulting?

AL: No.

WC: Oh, you didn't hear about that. Well, George had a very unconventional serve, which sometimes entailed his moving his foot into the court before he struck the ball. Now, under the technical rules of tennis, that's a foot fault, and you lose the point. And George would do it not constantly but from time to time, and when people would call him on that he would get sore and deny that he had foot faulted, but we never had the video running, and it was always a great opportunity to needle him and have some more fun. Having said that, I think it was a reflection of, as I say, his intensity. He was extremely intense in playing the game right and hitting the ball properly, and in winning.

And of course the other part of his mental toughness, I've talked about his perseverance, I've talked about his intensity, the other part of it which is most noteworthy is his decisiveness. George knew instinctively when and where to move. He was extremely decisive when the ball was hit in his direction. A lot of players get tangled up and lose their bearings and try to figure out which way to go to get to the ball. George, as in the rest of his life, always had a great instinct for knowing what to do and doing it, and that ability to follow through in action, what his mind told him was the right direction to follow, I think is extraordinary. I mean, he's a guy who could live with mistakes.

Think of the way he came back from having lost the governorship to Longley. A lot of people would have faded after that experience. I remember sitting next to him the day when the election returns were coming in, the night the election returns were coming in, in the tower of the Sheraton Eastland. And he looked at me, he said, "Walter," he said, "I'm afraid I'm going to

lose.” And I said, “George, what are you talking about?” I said, “The returns aren’t in.” And he said, “Walter, I’ve walked the streets of Lewiston, and the only name I’ve heard is Longley.” He says, “If I can’t take Lewiston, I’m in trouble.” Have you heard that story?

AL: In different variations.

WC: In variations. So I said to him, “George, let’s keep our powder dry on this thing, let’s see the way” – and as the returns came in it was pretty clear that he was going to lose, and he got up and moved around and left the room. He left Bob Dunfey and me in the room and I don’t know where he went, but it was clearly a crushing defeat for him, but not one from which he was unable to recover. And I think that resiliency, as I say, that perseverance is another index of his mental toughness.

AL: And were you actively involved in that ‘74 campaign, or more of a friend?

WC: Yes, sure, I was involved with it, I did everything I could to help him. I raised money, I was an active supporter of his, and if he were running for office I still would be.

AL: So in 1980, George Mitchell is appointed to fill Senator Muskie’s vacant seat, and two years later run in his own right for the seat. Were you active in that campaign?

WC: I was active in that campaign as well, and I saw George with renewed vigor, with new wind in his sails. I think he had tasted those few years of being senator, he liked it immensely; he knew he was good at it. George has a lot of self awareness. I think having had the experience of seeing the Senator through Muskie’s eyes, and as Muskie’s staff person, gave him insight that few other people would have. And George capitalized on that in his campaign; he was direct, he was articulate, he was forceful, and the people liked him. And again, resilience, I mean there’s nothing that’s more in fashion or out of fashion than the popular view of a candidate. You can be a hero one day and a bum the next day, and vice versa. It takes a strong ego to come back from adverse judgment and then win the judgment of the electorate. And that’s George, he’s got a strong ego, and as I say, he’s mentally tough. And he also has extraordinary values, his values are extremely high. So he had, and has, a lot going for him.

AL: Did you see any specific things that he changed from ‘74 to ‘82? More style, or was he more comfortable?

WC: Yes, I think he was more comfortable with himself. He seemed to me to be more comfortable in his own skin. In ‘74 he was a little bit more forced. I don’t want to say artificial, because I don’t think George is ever artificial, but I think probably he had some misgivings, personal misgivings about whether it was the right race for him. But having served for two years in the Senate, I think whatever misgivings there might have been or were, were frankly dispelled because he knew that this was a league in which he could play and play well.

AL: And so were you also involved in ‘88? Well, let me stay with ‘82 for a moment, do you

recall the specifics of that one, because initially, he was running against Dave Emery and the polls showed George Mitchell way down.

WC: I do remember that but again, I've got recollections of George being in tennis matches I've been playing with him and against him where he was way down, and George never gave up. He always played each point as if it were the last point of the match and he threw everything into it, and that's the way he's lived his life, and that's the way he ran that campaign against Emery. The idea of coasting through an unhappy loss would never have occurred to him. If he was going to lose, he was going to lose with both guns blazing, and if he lost I think he'd explain it to himself simply by saying he'd run out of time. That if he'd had enough time, he would have won.

AL: And so as he moves on to the Senate and becomes busier, he still makes some trips back, well he makes frequent trips back to Maine, but is able to play tennis less often?

WC: Yes, those were the days when he did make the trip and we were scheduled to play, or even if we weren't scheduled to play he'd call up one or another of us and say, "Hey listen, I'm back in town, can we get a game?" And all of us, I mean we were friends and supporters and admirers of his, sure, we'd turn over backwards, turn ourselves inside out to get out on the court with him: a) because we thought we could see he needed the outlet; but b) we actually enjoyed being with him.

AL: And so over the years, was there a time that came where he was so busy that it sort of didn't happen.

WC: Yes, like so many things in life, it just sort of drifted away. He became so busy that the group broke up; that George wasn't a part of it anymore. It was sort of a natural and peaceful death, it just sort of drifted away. And I remember once speaking to Juris and saying, "Have you played tennis with George lately?" And the answer was, "No, we haven't even seen him." So it was clearly a phase in his life, and like many of us, he has a facility for reinventing himself. The reinvention that brought him onto that national stage pulled him further and further away from the local stage, but that was a price he was willing to pay, and in hindsight it was a good thing he did it because he was so good for the country.

AL: And so we've seen after the Senate years that he's gone on to many other things. Have you kept track of that?

WC: Yes, I do. I don't follow it diligently, but from time to time I check in on what he's doing, and I think he's made a marvelous career for himself, I think he's sampled a lot of what life has to offer, and in many respects I'm beginning to view him as a Renaissance man. I mean he's loaded with talent, loaded with ability, and he's willing to explore and have new experiences. So I think, from what I've seen, he's lived a rich, full life, and in those instances where we've reconnected I've sensed that he's happy, and his happiness comes from a deep place.

AL: When you look at George Mitchell's career, do you have a sense of what his biggest accomplishment is, or the lasting legacy for Maine or the nation?

WC: Well, I'd say there are several things. The first thing is the model he has set of leadership. George, like his mentor Muskie, modeled Maine leadership, and I think he's brought it into the twenty-first century. The quintessential Maine leader, and it's really bipartisan, I think Maggie Smith had some of this, and I know that Bill Cohen had some of it, the quintessential Maine leader has a capacity for working on a team. In many other venues, other states for instance, you see political people who are full of themselves, who are really imperial leaders, who think that everybody on the team exists to support them and advance their own standing and stature.

The Maine leader, and I'd say George is a great example of this – and so was Ken Curtis by the way – are people who can put a cluster of other people together, supposedly support staff, and work with them in such a deep and intimate way that the staff feels that they are frankly part of the persona of the person who's brought them in. And [they] treat them – again I'm thinking of both George and Ken Curtis – treat people with great respect and evoke trust, and a trust that goes both ways. So this type of Maine leader is extremely good at building consensus, because he knows how to network and work with people, and accept other points of view without abruptly rejecting anything. He'll just listen, and look for consensus, and try to move the policy discussion towards consensus, keeping his own point of view in check for a while. And then as he sees the consensus moving in a way that's comfortable to him he'll sort of – it's like Mandela used to say, leading from behind, it's like herding cattle. You get them moving in a direction, and then you keep them moving in that direction. And to do that you have to have a lot of personal humility, you have to be willing to listen to other people's points of view attentively, respectfully, and having listened to their points of view you try to coalesce them, bring them together in such a way so that they can form a consensus.

Now I think one of the reasons why Maine leaders tend in this direction is because of the demography of the state. We have, as you know, low population densities here, unlike the rest of New England states and consequently, when you get people out at public meetings and you want to get somewhere with them, you can't reject them out of hand, you've got to find a way to work with them, to coordinate with them. And most of our good leaders have developed a skill in that, and people like George and Ed Muskie and Ken Curtis, and Bill Cohen, have become extremely skilled in that, and that's why their stars shine so brightly outside of Maine, because people outside of Maine recognize and respect this quality, it's important in any democratic form of government.

AL: What sorts of experiences did you have with George Mitchell's sense of humor?

WC: Oh, God, many of them. I can't remember specific jokes, but there was always a lot of laughter. And there was one story, this is Harold Pachios, too. George and I were playing tennis, and it was supposed to be a foursome. We were on court two, behind the tennis house at

the country club, and the fourth person I think was a client of Harold's from California, a very important person, and as I recall extremely wealthy. And Harold was late, as he sometimes was for tennis engagements, so George and I were playing tennis with this fellow, and it became a little awkward because we were warmed up, [but] we couldn't start because the fourth was missing.

And Harold showed up, I don't know, half an hour late, and I said to him, "Harold," I said, "don't worry, I just explained to your client," who was standing on the other side, "that you'd be late because you were meeting with somebody really important in the city of Portland." And Harold went crazy at that, I mean he lost it, he uncorked it, and George was laughing and needling him too. By the time Harold got on the court he was so angry he couldn't even see the ball, let alone hit it.

AL: Is there anything I haven't asked you in terms of your recollections of Senator Mitchell and the times you shared that you want to talk about?

WC: Just that, one of the reasons why I've always been very comfortable in his presence is that we have a way of reading each other's body language, and consequently there's a lot of communication that has gone on between us that doesn't need to be expressed in words. So it's a sort of – how would I put it – it's a kind of nonverbal communication, that I'm comfortable with and I'm sure George is – I think he is. And it's a behavioral shorthand that enables you to sit back and be comfortable and smile, and you hear what's being said and then you read between the lines and you watch the body language, and you get a sense that, 'I understand where you're coming from;' you really don't have to talk about it, if you're not comfortable speaking about this you don't have to go into it. It's just a kind of, more than a *bonhomie*, it's a camaraderie, it's a special kind of camaraderie. It's people who have gone through similar experiences, as our experiences in politics in Maine were very similar, working for the same people. And it's been a good friendship, it's been a rich friendship, and a life long one, so I'm happy to be part of this project and reminisce and recollect what I can. Is there anything else you'd like to ask me specifically?

AL: You had one more story?

WC: Yes, one more story. The laughter was always present, despite the intensity of the tennis matches. The way that Juris would deal with George's sometimes foot faulting is, Juris would talk during the point, with the intent of getting George unglued and destroying his concentration, and it's something you're not supposed to do. So George tells the one story, which I hadn't witnessed but of course it happened, because it happened to George. Juris was serving the ball, and he struck it and it went into George's court, and before Juris struck the ball in serving it, he was talking. He hit the ball, and as he moved into the court to follow up on it, he kept the conversation going, and George was a little upset with it, and he realized how this was being used to get under his skin, and he just laughed at it and let go of it. But people don't talk on the tennis court when you're playing a competitive point, and Juris was a past master at trying to destroy George's concentration, but very, very rarely got under his skin. George was disciplined,

as we say.

AL: Great, thank you.

End of Interview