

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Kent Conrad

(Interviewer: Diane Dewhirst)

GMOH# 082

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Diane Dewhirst: Thank you, Senator Conrad. We're here in Washington, D.C., on Friday, February...?

Kent Conrad: Twenty-seventh.

DD: Twenty-seventh, [2009], with Senator Kent Conrad from North Dakota. The way that we have been asked by the oral history project to begin is to ask your full name, your title, and a little bit about your parents, so that we can place you in time, and then we're going to talk, just take a few questions with regard to Senator Mitchell. So if you could say your full name and title, where you were born, and your parents' names.

KC: My name is Kent Conrad, I'm a U.S. senator representing the state of North Dakota, and I was elected in 1986. My parents were Gaylord and Abigail Conrad, and I was born in Bismarck, North Dakota.

DD: When did you first meet Senator Mitchell?

KC: I first met Senator Mitchell in the Muskie campaign for president. And I actually worked under him, I mean several layers down. I worked for Anne Wexler, and my responsibility was for the non-primary states, and one of our states that I was responsible for was Iowa, and I had responsibility for western Iowa and Greg Craig had responsibility for eastern Iowa, and we were hired, actually, by Jim Johnson. And so that's when I first got to know George Mitchell, that was the Muskie campaign for president. And after Iowa I came to Washington and was in the national headquarters, and actually worked down the hall from George Mitchell, who was one of the three co-chairmen of the campaign.

DD: And you met up again with him later when?

KC: When I decided to run for the United States Senate in 1986, he was the head of the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee, and I came to Washington to visit with him about my campaign. And of course I already had very high regard for him after watching him in the Muskie campaign, and I thought then, "This man is a highly competent person." I was able to observe him helping direct that campaign and had been in meetings with him during that campaign. So when I came in 1986 to meet with him, he was a very familiar figure to me, and of course he knew me. He didn't know me well, but knew me and knew people I had worked with

in that campaign.

DD: In that role, when he was chair of the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee, Democrats were in the minority, Ronald Reagan was in the White House, could you comment on his style or leadership ability, both as regard to a candidate and fund-raising and political savvy in that?

KC: Well, you know, it's very interesting to reflect back on that period, because I remember it as if it were yesterday. Coming here and meeting with Senator Mitchell over in his [] office, and when you're dealing with George Mitchell, you're dealing with somebody who is very calm, analytical, has always thought through carefully not only the next move but the move after that and the move after that, and so I went over with him my campaign plan and strategy. And at that point I was more than thirty points behind in the polls, I had no money, my opponent had more than a million dollars in the bank, and my opponent had gotten over seventy percent of the vote in the last election, had served many years in the House of Representatives.

And so most people thought I didn't have a chance. But George Mitchell, after I laid out for him my campaign plan and strategy, instantly recognized that there was a possibility here. And he pledged to me that day the maximum amount from the Senate Campaign Committee, what they could provide at the time, and that really formed the foundation of my campaign and gave it credibility beyond the borders of North Dakota, and played a major role in my being able to squeak out what was at that time the greatest political upset in the history of my state. So George Mitchell will be forever in my mind linked to that period, and his ability to see beyond the conventional and the, kind of what was the 'inside the Beltway think' that the senator I was running against was invulnerable and couldn't be defeated, George Mitchell was able to see past all that and see the opportunity.

DD: You served with Senator Mitchell when you first were elected to the Senate, from 1987 until he retired in 1984 [*sic*: 1994], there were some major accomplishments in the environmental, the budget negotiations, he became Senate majority leader. Could you reflect on his accomplishments?

KC: George Mitchell is not only highly intelligent, but he's a very wise person. And he was moving ahead on a whole series of initiatives very important to the country – Clean Air Act being one of the most notable – and I had a lot of negotiations with him because of course I represent a coal state and there were, in my state, among my constituency, deep reservations about that legislation. Senator Mitchell helped us negotiate the shoals and get a package [so] that coal state senators like me could wind up supporting the legislation. And that took extraordinary discipline on his part, and an ability to listen, to really hear the concerns that we had and to adjust to achieve a greater goal.

And I was struck then – I mean, there were times where he was very unhappy with me during that period. I can remember one luncheon, he came to me and asked me to vote with him and I simply could not, and he was pretty vexed with me. But you know, he didn't show it much, he

didn't show much anger, but I could tell, watching those jaw muscles tighten, he was not at all happy with me.

But I had enormous respect for him, and watching him work, just the sheer effort involved. It was day after day, week after week, month after month of taking in the concerns of senators – and others, because the way things worked around here, it wasn't just done in one body – it was a tour de force, and it was a remarkable accomplishment. It would not have happened without him.

DD: There was a change in administrations when Senator Mitchell was the Senate majority leader, from the George Bush One, and many things, Clean Air being one, the big budget deal with raising taxes issue, and then with President Clinton coming in and health care. Can you just in general terms reflect on the differences there, and maybe something about the – I'm not supposed to ask double questions, I'm sorry – can you reflect on that time?

KC: Yes, well I tell you when President Clinton was elected, he faced record budget deficits at that time. He was inheriting a very serious fiscal mess, and immediately went about trying to write a plan that would address this and get us back on a firmer fiscal foundation. And that was an extraordinary effort that went on through much of the year, led by George Mitchell, of course, he was on the Finance Committee as well as being the majority leader.

One of the things I remember very well is his questioning of witnesses. He could get to the heart of a matter quicker and with greater clarity than anyone I've ever seen around here. He'd been a federal judge, he'd been a lawyer, and he had an ability to get to the heart of a question in quizzing witnesses that really revealed the differences in positions between different parties and different people.

And that package that was put together in 1993 made a profound difference for this country, because it put us on a path not only to balance but to actual surpluses, and even for a period, several years of not raiding the Social Security Trust Fund to pay other bills. It was a remarkable accomplishment for this country, and if those gains hadn't been squandered by the succeeding administration, this country would have avoided this extremely serious downturn that we're now confronting. And George Mitchell really led that effort, and it required unbelievable patience, once again, and discipline, and that's what he demonstrated.

DD: Okay, I'm being asked to ask this, so, if you two had differences, how would they – you referred to this with regard to the coal state and Clean Air, but how would they be resolved, or how would you move – whoops, that's a double question again – how would they be resolved?

KC: We did have differences. I represent the state of North Dakota, and North Dakota is very different from other parts of the country, especially different from East and West Coast states, and so there's always a tension between my state and some of the other states that were an important part of the Democratic coalition. And there were times that I just could not support what the majority in our party wanted to do, and I think this did cause Senator Mitchell a certain

amount of vexation but at some level I think he understood, you know, my obligation was to represent the people that sent me here.

And we had a series of issues, for example, carbon tax, that was advanced by the administration that I simply could not support. My state would have been the most adversely affected, North Dakota and Wyoming would have been the most adversely affected. And I was on the Finance Committee by that time, and I remember going to a meeting at the White House and telling the president and the other members there, I simply couldn't support it. And I know that was a great disappointment to certainly Senator Mitchell, and I think it was a great disappointment to the administration, but they got past that and we went on to find ways that we could agree on a package that did accomplish the result of getting us back on a much firmer fiscal foundation.

He never raised his voice with me. He would get a glint in his eye and I knew he was upset, and he would push me, push me as hard as he could to get me to relent, but when it became evident that I could not and would not, he moved on and tried to find another way to accomplish the goal.

DD: Is there anything that you would like to add or that I've forgotten to ask with regard to Senator Mitchell's leadership style, or his accomplishments or personal attributes – or non-attributes?

KC: Well, one thing that's often missed about George Mitchell is his sense of humor. He has a very sly, understated sense of humor, but a lively sense of humor. And that served him very well here because, during that period of time, the pressure that was on him was enormous, absolutely enormous. This country was in very deep trouble when the Clinton administration came in. Senator Mitchell had a great weight on his shoulders, and he carried it with great distinction and grace, but also a lively sense of humor.

In the meetings that were outside the public glare, he could analyze a situation and see the humor in it when it was sometimes lost on others. And the personal attributes of some of our colleagues in these difficult times were, some of it was hilarious, I mean you couldn't make it up. He was able to deal with it and keep moving forward and bring people together, which was tremendous leadership.

I said earlier on, I was with Senator Obama when he was running for president, we were alone in the gym one morning and he was talking to me about people that he should be reaching out to. And I said, "George Mitchell ought to be high on your list." I told him, "If I could only have five people in the room and this country were facing a crisis, I'd want George Mitchell to be one of the five."

In fact, when then-president-elect Obama's transition team, well, before he was president-elect, when he was running, and his vice presidential recruitment team came to see me, I recommended to them that they see if George Mitchell would accept the vice presidential spot, because I told them, "You're going to inherit so many crises, you need somebody of enormous competence,

and somebody not only that can help you win the election, but somebody that can help you govern.” And I thought there would be no better person in that role than George Mitchell.

I’ve often thought he would have been a great president of the United States. He’s just so competent, and he’s a leader. He listens, and he makes a decision, and he moves ahead and he gets results; he solves problems. And that’s exactly what the country needs, so I was delighted to see him given this latest responsibility, there’s no more thornier set of issues than in the Middle East, and to have him right at the center, trying to negotiate some kind of understanding, I think will serve this country well, and serve the world well.

DD: Thank you, Senator Conrad.

KC: You bet.

End of Interview