

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Alan Simpson

(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 Alan K. Simpson. We are in the Courtyard Hotel on F Street in northwest Washington, D.C., and today is Veterans Day, November 11, 2009, and I am Brien Williams. I thought I'd start by just asking you, when I say the name George Mitchell, what thoughts come to your mind?

Alan Simpson: Well, certainly a myriad of thoughts, because I was Bob Dole's assistant leader for ten years, and when Bob and George were leaders of their respective parties, Wendell Ford and I were the [] assistant leaders, and then Alan Cranston was there for a time under Byrd. So, and then of course not just the Senate experience, but then when he went to Ireland. The ambassador to Ireland was a former Democratic governor from Wyoming, Mike Sullivan []. George would see me and would say, "This guy's doing a terrific job over there." Well, George was instrumental in resolving 'the Troubles,' as was Mike Sullivan, the ambassador. So we'd see each other and then we did some shticks together when they were paying us [for speeches] and you're out on the road doing white collar crime, with the speaker's bureaus, George and I would do a couple of those together. I remember we did one at Michigan State and somewhere else, then [I] brought him to University of Wyoming, to the Milward L. Simpson speaker series, that's my father who was a governor and U.S. senator, George came out for that. So he has become a lovely friend, and not just a colleague of Senate days, but a lovely friend, so that's a long association.

BW: Do you recall when you first became aware of George Mitchell?

AS: Yes, Bill Cohen and I came in together [in 1978], and they were both graduates of this fine school [], and Cohen said, "Now, here comes another one. He's of the other faith, but he's a good egg and I think you'll like him." And of course when he came, well, I could see what an amazing judge he must have been [], and an [able] attorney [with his intellect]. His practice of law and mine would be impossible to compare, he actually had a cerebral approach to the law, mine was a gut approach to the law. A lot of difference.

And I think one day I'll never forget, he was asking questions in the Judiciary Committee – he wasn't on Judiciary, we were on Environment and Public Works [together], but he just as well could have been on Judiciary because of the questions he asked. And after he finished a series of questions I said, "You know, Senator Mitchell, I'm very pleased that I never had to practice before you in your court." He said, "You should be very pleased," he said, "you'd never have

made it.” And I [chuckled and] said, “Well George, that’s a cruel thing to say,” but he has a great sense of humor, and I’ll say that without any deviation, [an] awesome intellect, [an] extraordinary grasp of things, an extraordinary way of taking a complex issue and putting it in understandable terms with great patience – God, the patience – [I would have] lost my mind on half the stuff.

He put together the discussions on the Clean Air Act, he just gathered people in, he said, “What do you have to have in this bill?” A huge bill, and everyone in the Senate, Democrat or Republican said, “Well if that’s in there I’m going to vote against it,” or “if that isn’t in there I’ll vote against it.” I told him, I said, “If you put that percentage reduction requirement in there that every bit of coal has to reduce fifteen percent of its carbon, regardless even if it’s low sulphur coal to begin with,” I said, “that one’s a fake, that’s for old Metzenbaum sitting over there.” And old Howard would [laugh and] grunt, you know, he became a good pal too. And so, [George] said, “Well then it won’t be in there.”

And Moynihan and I and Durenberger, and Chafee, Baucus, we would meet [on] all those things, I’m sure you’ve found it in your interviews. And day after day, while [he’d] be running the Senate [he’d] come in and say, “Okay, where are we now? How are we doing? Are we moving?” And then he’d be called to the floor and we’d hack around in it some more, and we put together a bill, and George Bush signed it, and Bill Riley was the head of the EPA at the time. And that could never have been done by anybody else but George, because it just pissed off both sides so bad that they couldn’t even breathe.

And I came out of [a session at] two o’clock in the morning – we were still doing one – and this group was sitting [] there, they were the ‘real greenies,’ and there were some real rape-and-ruin guys, too, but this was a circle of greenies and – you know: unbutton your shirt, your heart fell out – and they were saying, well, “We’re going to make them pay.” I said, “Who’s going to pay?” “Well, we’re going to defeat Mitchell and Chafee in their next elections.” I said, “You must be the dumbest bastards in the whole village,” I said, “George Mitchell and John Chafee do more for the environment on each side of the aisle than any of you jerks, with your hundred percent purity. You’re all idiots.” Well, that earned me great fame with that group!

But that’s the kind of people they had to deal with, and George dealt with them with great patience. And things would go to hell, and then the Democrats would say, “Well we don’t know what’s going on over there, Jesse Helms must be up to something.” And our guys would say, “Well Gore’s up to something over there.” It devolved upon Wendell Ford and I to go to [] each other, and I’d say, “Wendell, this is not about Jesse Helms, this is a simple thing,” and I’d describe it to him, totally transparent. He said, “Geez, I didn’t know that.” And I’d go to him, I’d say, “What the shit is this about?” “Well here’s the deal, and I’m telling you.” I said, “Well our people have read it completely wrong.” So it was just a case of, Mitchell and Dole could [then] usually resolve it. When they couldn’t, Wendell and I or Al Cranston would go to the backwaters and [really] find out what [occurred], because there’s a reason for everything, and then there’s a *real* reason for everything, and I felt my job was to find out the *real* reason.

There weren't many times where he and Dole couldn't resolve [things]. I'm sure you found that when you interviewed Bob. But the only thing about George that was puzzling, and I nailed him once. We'd be sitting in the Cloakroom watching [floor debate], the sound would be down and we'd watch the floor. And I'd look at George, speaking very calmly, and [I] couldn't hear his voice of course or hear what he was saying, and I said to Dole, "I wonder what he's doing now, what's he talking about?" Dole said, "I don't know, it's something very bland and insignificant." Well I turned it on and, God, he was ripping George Bush to shreds, without a bit of facial expression. And he had that way of doing that, a most amazing propensity.

So I went to the floor all by myself, and he finished and he left the floor, and I came on and I said, "Just listening to the majority leader, [it's] the most amazing thing, how his facial expressions never seem to give any sense of his remarks but what he was involved in [] moments ago, was simply wretched excess." And I elaborated on that, and you could tell George's staff sent out the word, "God, Simpson just said what you said was wretched excess." George came back and said, "I'd like to ask the senator from Wyoming, where did he come up with this phrase?" I said, "It comes easily," I said, "you get in there and hack old George Bush to shreds, and do it with the most amiable demeanor, which is wretched excess." Well he was a little pissed off at that, and we had a little boxing match. All of that stuff is in the *Congressional Record*, I think, unless they take it all out, you never know what they take out.

Anyway, we always kept a sense of humor. He was on the Veterans' Affairs Committee [with me], and he was a veteran I think.

BW: Yes, and matter of fact I -

AS: Oh, go ahead, you ask a question, I could go on.

BW: I came up with an interesting little discovery, and that is that you and he were both in Germany at the same time.

AS: I think we were, yes.

BW: Did you ever discuss that with him, or make that discovery?

AS: Well, I don't remember what his tour was. Mine was April of '55 through September '56, I was about eighteen months over there. So I don't know, does that overlap with him?

BW: Yes, he was there, according to what I've read, '54 to '56, in Army counter-intelligence in Berlin.

AS: I think, had he gone to ROTC at Bowdoin?

BW: I think so, yes.

AS: Well, okay, well I went in with the class of some guys from Bowdoin and from the University of Maine, Black Bears, Cianchette, a big guy, who was part of that big contractor family up there, Ed Cianchette from Aroostook County, up in the potatoes, and I was in with him and some other great guys from Maine. But I never met George, I think we did say that we both served in Germany, I didn't know if we overlapped, but we never talked much about that.

BW: He of course came in when Ed Muskie went over to the State Department, and you'd already been in the Senate for two years. So how did he strike you as a quote/unquote, 'freshman' senator at the beginning?

AS: Well, I'd had all this glowing stuff from Bill Cohen, and they were an awesome tandem for the state of Maine for how many years they served together, I don't remember, quite a few together. So I had nothing but positive things to know about him, and then watching him work, and I mean work, I mean he worked, you just knew that you were dealing with a guy who, if you wanted to get into a boxing match or a debate, you better bring your lunch and do your homework, because he did. And so he appeared studious, and that was more than an appearance, he was studious. He appeared hard working, and he was. He appeared a no nonsense guy, and he was. But he also had a great sense of humor and a great sense of himself, which is something you have to have in Washington. But there was a sense of humility there, together with a sense of a guy that knew exactly who the hell he was and what he was there for.

BW: Did you get a sense pretty early on that he was on a fast track to leadership?

AS: Oh yes, he had all the attributes of leadership, attentiveness, courtesy, deference without being obsequious, all the traits that go with leadership, people wanted to help him. He could make a plea for assistance that didn't have anything to do with piteousness, it was just like, 'look boys and girls, we have something to do and we're going to do it.' Especially the Clean Air [Act], which was an amazing thing. So, no, you knew he was headed up, and he was deeply respected by people on both sides.

And then of course the Iran-Contra [panel], he was on that. I don't remember the day he took on Oliver North, but I'll tell you, that was a powerful indictment of a patriot from another patriot, and frankly, I loved it, I thought it was terrific. Like, "You're not the only one, Colonel," about [loving] America. Well that made me [proud], and I thought, in fact I said to him, "Man oh man, that was powerful stuff." And that really had a ring throughout the country. And I don't know what year that was.

BW: 'Eighty-seven.

AS: 'Eighty-seven, but it was long before that that he established himself as a leader, because he came in '81. When did Muskie leave and then [when did] George run for the [Senate]-?

BW: He left in early '80, because he went over to the State Department as Jimmy Carter's new secretary of state, so George came in as an appointed member of the Senate.

AS: Yes, and then he had to run.

BW: And then he had to run in '82.

AS: That was it. So he came, how long was his appointment period?

BW: Two, well a year-and-a-half [*sic* 2.5 years].

AS: Yes, well, Muskie became a great friend, and when I came on the committee Muskie was tough, and yet he was kind, another Maine trait. And then my father served with the great lady from Maine in '62 and '66.

BW: Margaret Chase Smith.

AS: Margaret Chase Smith, and her rose [always] on the desk, and Dad got to know her very well. But I got into a tangle with Muskie, I'd just been there a few months, [] and I just looked at the Corps of Engineers and I said, "These guys are allergic to running water. They would have put [Tennessee] anywhere in the United States, and get money for it." It's an awesome budget and they built the [Tennessee]-Tombigbee Waterway, which is a cloning of the Mississippi, somebody ought to look at them when they're trying to save money. So when I got elected, there were three different Corps districts wanted to fly me by jet to see their waterway, so at the budget hearing I put in to cut the budget of the Corps fifteen percent. I said, "Anybody that can fly three planes [around] for a freshman senator surely must have excess money."

Well I went on [and on], and Muskie said, "It's past noon hour." I said, "I don't care. I want to vote on this." He said, "You know what the results will be." I said, "I don't care. I'm going to finish this debate." I think I got hammered twelve to two [and] got in the elevator, and Muskie said, "You know Simpson, I knew your dad, and my first real debate was with Wayne Morse of Oregon and he really stuck it to me, and I tell you, to be a good senator you've got to be about half a sonofabitch, and [I see] you are. And you're going to do very well here." [He] patted me on the back, helped me all through the Senate, Muskie. Great guy. And Jane too, they were very, very kind and dear.

Anyway, Mitchell came on and everybody knew that he was Mr. No-nonsense, Mr. Knowing-what-the-hell-he-was-going-to-do, [he] had an agenda, don't ask me what it was but whatever it was he met it.

BW: People say that one of the reasons he was selected as the leader in '88 was because of his performance in Iran-Contra, it was a very strong one. Also, he was chairman of the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee in 1986, when they took over again. And so do you have any recollections of his running that campaign, as much as the chairman of that committee does?

AS: Unless I can remember who got beat of our fine stable of people. Who were the ones

replaced in that election?

BW: You've got me there.

AS: Yes, well, it would make a difference because if they were tough candidates and George recruited, [them], and beat this guy or that guy, I think he recruited the North Dakota candidate, Dorgan, or Conrad, to run against Mark Andrews. I don't remember, those fog in, but [] he was successful, that alone is the ultimate triumph within the triumph, that you have screwed thine enemy and won seats so that all of you could get back in the majority and chair committees and have budgets and power and fame again, instead of sitting in the back row and sucking canal water.

BW: Well it was a big change, because eight seats changed hands that year.

AS: Really.

BW: Yes, well see, that was '86, and a lot of the candidates that year, I think people told me, were the ones that came in with Reagan in '80, and some of them sort of rode that coattail.

AS: That's very true, [that] would be [so] anyway.

BW: When the election occurred for the majority leader with the Democrats, there were three men running for the leadership, George Mitchell, Senator Inouye, and Senator Bennett Johnston, and I was wondering, as you guys were -

(Outside interruption - taping paused)

BW: My question was, while you were looking on from the Republican standpoint, was there a favorite candidate among those three that Republicans felt like they wanted to deal with?

AS: I think they were all a little surprised that he beat Bennett Johnston. Bennett was the old pro, Louisiana politics, the Big Easy, anything goes. And Bennett was a massive collaborator, he could put together coalitions, he was respected on both sides, just as George was. I think they felt Inouye maybe was too old – and he's still there. But he had great respect, Dan was a great respected figure, but not a leader. He didn't like some of the harsh combat that goes on with leadership. George didn't mind that at all, and neither did Bennett, but yet they had respect on the other side. You have to have a little bit of [go-for-the]-jugular-vein in you to be a leader, you're not going to be popular, you're going to make enemies, anybody who's a leader is going to take a ton of shit, that's the way it works. And so I think the only surprise to all this was that he, I think he beat Bennett rather handily, I don't remember that there was a vote that was published. I think later there was. But no, none of our people were dismayed at all by it, and Dole I think was looking forward to it because he'd established himself very nicely as who he was, everybody knew who he was.

BW: Did George Mitchell sometimes really get on your nerves?

AS: Well, he was persistent. When he had the bit in his mouth, as we say in the West, he could ride hard, and he could push hard. He'd say, "I'm tired of this diddling around, and we're going to call a cloture vote and you guys are going to pay." And whenever he made a threat, he carried it out, instead of this gumless mumbling where you say if the Republicans do this again, we're going to be up all night for three nights in a row, and then nothing would happen. But if George got up and made some kind of statement like that, we knew that he wasn't joshing, he was going to pull the trigger. So, that was another element of respect, whether you like it or not.

(Taping paused)

BW: You had experience with quite a few leaders. I was looking up Byrd, Baker, Dole, Daschle, and Lott, in addition to -

AS: Started with Byrd and Baker.

BW: Where would you rank them, or how would you distinguish among them?

AS: Well all of them were distinctly different. Byrd was a tactician in the master craft of technicians, he knew the rules, precedent, and when he was seeking some kind of resolvment, it would be through some technical rule-making procedure, which you knew was going to work because the parliamentarian, he'd already talked with him carefully. And yet the parliamentarians were, quote, 'independent,' and yet they obviously were going to assist the majority party in doing their work, too. And then Baker was just one of the most popular leaders of all time, a very wonderful guy with patience, great patience, like George, but without the sometimes hardness that George would come to where he said, "This has to be done." Baker would say, "Now if we don't get this done, the president's going to do this" or whatever. Daschle, we thought he'd get eaten alive by Bob Dole, and he didn't, he established himself quite nicely. But yes, Byrd, Baker, who were the others, Daschle.

BW: Dole and Lott.

AS: Well, Lott beat me when I ran [again for assistant leader]. I was one of the longest serving assistant leaders, and I never wanted to run for leader because I'd seen what they had to do. I said, "I'm never going to get into that." And I heard Lott was thinking of running, I visited with him, I said, "Are you going to run for my post?" "Oh no, no, no, I never would do that, you're the cream of the crop." And he did. So I was a bit thrown off but it was a good thing that happened, and the minute it happened, I thought I had about three extra votes and they announced the vote and I lost by one. And I just said Trent, "Come over here. I pledge to assist you in any way, and you and I are going to go out and do the media right now, we're going to go to the television, we're going to do the print, and I'm going to say that I'm going to help you. I don't want to wait a day, I don't want to swallow hard, I don't want any thought of remorse or sadness." Although Ann did tell me, she said, "Now, if you [still try to] figure [who] those three

people who turned on you and you're still trying to think that over, why, just give it two more days and then I don't want to ever hear about it again, as to who they might be." I said, "Well that's fair enough."

Anyway, but I never really served under Lott in that sense, because I then knew I wanted to get out, because George Bush was gone, I knew President George [H.W.] Bush, I'd known him since '62, [had] spent a lot of time in the White House with Barbara and George and Ann and I, I mean we had a ball. You're never going to have that relationship again, so the Trent Lott defeat was a good wake up call to move on, and [yet] I'd always call him and visit with him when he was leader. But I worked mostly with Cranston and Wendell Ford, and they were the assistants that I worked with, I believe those were the only two.

BW: It's interesting that you talk about working with Democrats as the assistant leader. You were also obviously very much involved with Dole, I would think.

AS: Oh my, every day. Yes, we were right across the hall [from each other], where the media didn't know where we were. And I'd come out of my cubby hole, it was right next to a tiny two-person elevator right off the rotunda, you don't even see it, and you could get up [] there and the media would [wonder where you went] – but if they saw Dole and I visiting, then they'd want to know what the hell we were up to. Dole would assign me things, he'd say, "Go talk to McClure, see where he is on this vote. Go talk to Lott, go talk to our people," and I was the whip so that was my job. And Dole, I would have gone over a cliff for him, I said, "Just put it on a military basis, you're the commander, the captain, I'm the first lieutenant of the platoon, and you tell me what to do and I'll go over the hill [with you]. You never have to worry about me running for your post," which was important because those footsteps can destroy a leader, if they know the guy behind him is just waiting for him to make a miscue or retire so they can get him.

BW: And is your version of being a whip a fairly typical one for others that have served in that position, or not?

AS: I don't know, I never knew, I just knew it was my style, and I knew that Cranston trusted me; I spoke at his final services. I know Wendell, Wendell would see me, he'd say, "You big skinny sonofabitch, what are you doing now?" And I said, "Wendell, just because you were the poorest governor that Kentucky has ever had doesn't mean you can't succeed here in some way." And he'd say, "You bastard," and then we'd sometimes have lunch [together]. And we would very much personalize what was happening that looked like an impasse, because all you had to do, if you were a Democrat, is mention the word Jesse Helms, and then everybody would just go crazy, thinking Jesse was messing them all up. On our side it happened to be Gore, 'Gore is doing this.' We called him 'Prime Time Al.' I didn't confer that on him, but nevertheless, that was often just a sticking point, and it often wasn't true, with either Jesse or Al. So my role was to make the trains run and get it done.

BW: And you thrived in that role.

AS: Yes, I liked that, I did. And then Dole ran for president, and for about sixteen or eighteen weeks I *was* the minority leader, Byrd then was the leader, and [there] was a bill on campaign finance reform, and Byrd wanted that badly and our party said, “That’s the end of our party. If you can’t raise money,” you do – I can’t remember what it was – but he brought eight separate cloture votes. And I told [my] people, I said, “Look, I’m not running for leader but I am your leader, and I want you to stick with me till your backbone sticks out the back of the wall, because Byrd is coming at us. He knows I’m a green pea, and he can tack me on the wall, and he can unless we stick together.” And they did, and it was quite a thing.

And oddly enough, I knew that I was in a parliamentary box, but I knew Kennedy also had a parliamentarian on his staff, and I went to Ted and I said, “Ted, can I borrow your parliamentarian?” And he said, “Oh sure.” So this guy took me in a room for half a day and said, “Here’s how you get out of this.” Well when I went to the floor, and Byrd was sitting right there, and a lot of senators, I said, “I’ve researched this carefully, given it a lot of thought,” and I think George Mitchell was just sitting over there chuckling because I was certainly no wizard. I said, “Under Rule 35.D and the precedent written in 1923 by Harvey Moglance [or some such gibberish],” and I quoted all these things, [and] “I believe that I’m at the position where I could seek to do this.” And, “Is that correct, Mr. Parliamentarian?” And he said, “That is correct.” I thought Byrd was going to faint, and of course all the guys on my side said, “Simpson, [] what the hell [was he] talking about.” But it was very impressive.

BW: That was in ‘88?

AS: Yes, ‘88, when Dole ran for president.

BW: Well, he really ran for president in ‘96. I mean he got the nomination in ‘96.

AS: Well when he lost, I mean when he -

BW: Lost to George Bush.

AS: [Yes], when he left to run and then came back. I remember George seemed to be chuckling over there when he watched me go through this pedantic ritual, which was really quite dazzling, I was impressed myself.

BW: Were you surprised when George Mitchell announced he was retiring?

AS: What year was that?

BW: He announced in ‘94.

AS: Yes, I think I was. Had he just married? That was it, yes, when I think Heather, and I’ve met her several times, but I think that he had had all the honors you could confer, and I can’t

remember, he retired in '94, and Olympia won that race – [she] came in.

BW: Yes, I guess that, yeah, that's right.

AS: Anyway, no, I was surprised at the time, but then when I got to '96 and wanted to retire myself, I wasn't surprised at all because it's like wearing away a rock, and with George I'm sure it was that same way.

BW: Do you think he saw the Republican revolution coming in November of '94, or not?

AS: I wouldn't know, I wouldn't have any idea. I knew we all knew that Newt Gingrich could throw fire bombs from the top of the castle steps and the parapet, with a catapult.

BW: Do you have any vivid anecdotes or memories of times with George? You've mentioned a couple of them in the course of this. Did you ever do any traveling with him?

AS: Yes, I think we did a trip or two, but of course the 'wretched excess' anecdote was one, and then of course the Clean Air Act conferences, those were, I said, "George, you should have a whip here, some kind of an instrument to give us a flog." He said, "No, I don't need that, I just expect you to do your work." I mean, we'd laugh about that. All he expected was that you do your work, and you do it for the country, not for your party. And yet he was a partisan guy, I mean George Mitchell was an awesome partisan but the partisanship ended if it was country-[first] time.

He came to the University of Wyoming, I don't know, several years ago and gave a lecture, and he and I did a little shtick together and people loved it. And we had to get him out of town to get back to Ireland or somewhere, I don't know where he was going, and the snow began to fall, and in Laramie, when it falls it falls. And so they called and said, "We can't fly out of Laramie, can't get you out of here." And we had a plane for him, not a commercial [one]. "Well," he said, "I have to get out, I have to get to Denver." And we said, "Well, we can't fly there, so get in the back because we're going to drive to Denver."

And it was a bitter night, and cold, and George was in a jovial mood, I mean we'd had dinner. And I don't think George ever, I never saw him do anything to excess, you know, he might have had a glass of wine. But he was exhausted, and he'd been there all day for my brother and I. And the leader of the foundation [Ben Blaylock] said, "I'll drive, I've got a 4-wheel." [] And I said, "I'll go with you." I didn't have to go. And George said, "Would you mind if I get in the back and just rest." Let me tell you, we'd been out of Laramie twenty minutes, and he said, "I've got to rest." And we had a pillow [and a blanket], and the poor guy slept all the way to Denver, must have taken four hours through the snow, and dumped him at some motel near the airport so he could get out the next morning. He said, "Simpson, you owe me one." I said, "I owe you two." It was just terrible.

And he's just a wonderful sport, and he was very gracious about his relationship with Mike

Sullivan. He said, not only to the university and the people of Wyoming, he said, “I get a lot of credit for resolving the troubles, but a great deal of the help and support I had was your former Democratic governor, Mike Sullivan, U.S. Ambassador to Ireland.” So he got to know Mike [well]; Mike has told me about how he enjoyed him and respected him. And then as I say, we did a couple of shticks together and had dinner together at a couple of forums where we were both involved with the speakers bureau type stuff.

BW: When you went and performed in tandem, was there a certain agenda you followed, or a focus to your remarks?

AS: Well, people would ask questions and then we’d answer or give our own version, and he’d say, “Simpson has a wonderful sense of humor, and he’s very clever and articulate, but you got to be careful of him,” he said, “because often the things he says have lost themselves in some kind of stuff,” he’d give one of these ‘big babblers’ [references]. And I’d say, “I just didn’t come here to be talked about like that,” I said, “I don’t need that.” I said, “This man is a fraud,” you know, and we’d go through this song and dance and laugh. And as I said, the biggest one was [when I] said, “I said I’d hate to practice law in front of you when you were a judge,” and he said, “You’re not kidding, you wouldn’t have liked it at all, Simpson.” [p/o]

No, I can think of serious times, very serious times, the Gulf War, the second Gulf War. People forgot the first Gulf War where it was fifty-two to forty-seven [to go to war], that was in ‘91, that wasn’t a slam dunk, and the last one was very difficult. And George and Sam Nunn were organizing the votes against the president, and it was a bipartisan vote, not as big as the first vote, but George lost his patience completely with Al Gore. Al Gore vexed him, and there weren’t many people that vexed George. Sam Nunn was a prince to deal with, as was George. And during the Gulf War, that [was a very] serious vote, and Nunn felt very strongly about it, as did George, about getting the votes.

Al Gore came in to our cloakroom that evening before the vote and said to Dole, and to me, “How many minutes will you give me tomorrow on this vote if I support the president?” And Dole said, “How many minutes did they give you on the other side?” And he said, “Seven.” And Dole said, “We’ll give you fifteen minutes.” And I said, “I have twenty minutes, I won’t use all those, I’ll give you five of mine, so you’ll have twenty minutes.” Imagine. And when [Gore] said, “Well I’ll think about this carefully,” and he walked out. Dole said to me, “Put him down on our side, we’ve got him.”

Because we called him ‘Prime Time Al,’ and he, at several occasions in the Senate, would ask to speak at seven or eight at night, which is unheard of because if people [are in their] seat, they’re ahead of you. And I’d say, “Well Al, if you want to speak, there’s three guys ahead of you, [so] if you want to go over and talk to them and talk them out of [their order, do so].” And then at eight o’clock he would have told the people who were [interested in] the issue – I think it was satellite television, that he was going to speak at eight o’clock from the floor of the U.S. Senate. How impressive can you be? But that was a violation of everything. Goldwater came over and jabbed him with his cane and said, “You know Al, I’m sitting in my office, and you’re [telling

people] ‘call your senator.’” He said, “My phone line broke down, I’m over there all by myself waiting to get the hell out of here. And your old man, I loved [your dad], (Gore [Sr.]), and by God, I don’t like what you’re doing.” And old Al said, “Well, get over it, Barry.”

[Gore had] called Howard Greene [(secretary of the Senate)] in the night, and he said, “Am I going to get the twenty minutes tomorrow?” And Greene said, “I don’t know sir, have to talk to Mitchell and Dole and Nunn tomorrow.” And Al said, “Goddamnit, if I don’t get twenty minutes, I’m going to vote the other way.” Now this wasn’t about satellite television, this was about going to war. When he came in the next day, and Mitchell and Nunn knew they’d lost him overnight just because of [the debate time he wanted], I tell you, I never saw George – I don’t know what George relates [on] this because he wouldn’t want to embarrass Al Gore, or maybe Nunn – but I know how they were and how they looked at him, like, ‘Well Al?’ and [then] they put him so far back in the lineup to speak. They went to Dole and [they] said, “Well if he did that, [we] don’t give him prime time.” So I think he went on at nine in the morning or something with his twenty minutes [].

And so then in his campaign he said, “Don’t forget, I supported [the president],” it was heavy stuff for me, the most difficult person that I ever dealt with in all of political life. And I’m sure he feels very strongly about me, and [also] Jim Baker, because Jim Baker became such a force during the contested election. And yet Ann and Tipper were great friends, [and] worked on mental health issues, Tipper, a wonderful person, Nancy Domenici, Sheila Wellstone, didn’t matter what party you were in if you were working on an issue. But anyway, that was the only time I saw George [really] bristle, as I perceived him, and Dole said, “Look what’s going on over there.” Man oh man, it was heavy.

BW: What in your mind is the neatest thing about having been a senator?

AS: Well, the relationships, the friendships. Sounds corny, but it was very real. And I loved it, I loved the combat, I loved the camaraderie, the fun. It was hard work, but in a sense it was fun. And I often said to my wife Ann, I think I’m more comfortable with the guys on the other side of the aisle, I was always a suspicious Republican, much like Olympia or Susan, I was looked at that way by the hard right. I was pro-choice, which is a failure of the biggest order on the big conservative block. I worked with the gay-lesbian community, not only in the Episcopal Church but openly and even lately, in the latter years, [with] the Republican Unity Coalition, which is a group of gay/straight Republicans. The Log Cabin Republicans, I’ve addressed their national convention. I had a cousin who was gay, the Matthew Shepherd thing happened in Wyoming, a terrible thing. So it’s an easy call for me, and [one] that will not earn you great accolades among the far right members of your party.

And I didn’t always follow the party platform, I said, “I didn’t write it.” “Well, you have to follow.” I said, “No I don’t, I wasn’t there when they wrote it.” “Well then, how can you run?” I said, “I don’t know, throw me out.” I couldn’t stand the rigidity of the party, and it’s very disturbing today, the rigidity of the party, in my mind.

BW: I was struck, looking at the class of '78, so many big names came in with you to the Senate. And then in '96, so many of those same people left. And I was wondering if it was mainly because of the sort of unspoken rule of three terms, or whether it was the winds of change that really promoted that departure.

AS: It was a strange thing. Nancy [Kassebaum], a dear friend, she and I had such fun, all of them, Pryor, Bradley, Cohen, Exon, he got out that year, [too].

BW: Nunn, Simon.

AS: Simon, did Simon go out that, I didn't think, I thought he went out the next year.

BW: And Johnston, too.

AS: Bennett, yes. Well, whatever it was, I remember they interviewed us all on *Meet the Press* or something, on a joint Sunday, [there] were all the seven of us, and all of us had a different reason. It wasn't any bitterness, none of us said 'we can't stand this anymore.' We just said, 'seems like time.' I said, "I could do this for another couple years, but I don't want to do it for six." I couldn't go for six more, but I'd go for a couple but they don't elect you for a couple. Nancy was just ready to move on, and she and Howard [Baker] married and they've had a wonderful time together in Japan and stuff. And Pryor went on to help with the library of Clinton's, Bradley went into his own stuff on the road. Bradley and I did a lot of shticks together with the speakers' bureaus, a dear friend. And so all of us had a different reason.

I think Exon was ill; he died soon after that. He wanted to be in Nebraska. He was very popular; he'd been a governor I think. And you could just see that he was frustrated by it. He could get ornery, and I'd say, "What the hell's eating you?" He said, "Oh, you know..." "I don't know, what." He and I got into it a couple of times, but he just was tired of it. So it was interesting, all of us had a different view.

Sam Nunn said, "What did you have to drink before you made your decision?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Give me some of it, because I'm going to do the same thing." And he went on, [and] he and Luger [are] doing beautiful work with nonproliferation. All of us have continued our work. Cohen, [as] secretary of defense, and I was at Harvard, I went on to Harvard [and] had the most marvelous four years of life teaching at Harvard. I couldn't have gotten into Harvard if I'd picked the locks! Mitchell would love to hear that story. Boy, wait'll I rub it into him, teaching at Harvard. He thought I couldn't cut it, I know he did!

Anyway, yes, I don't think, we ever collaborated, we just, you had it in your feelings, and Ann and I talked about it. [It was] just time to move on. And we never would have had the [same] relationships, I enjoyed the Clintons, [so it] wasn't the case of not working with them, I was assistant leader while he was there, for a while.

BW: I think of you as a humorist, because of what I've seen you say on various programs and

whatnot, and Bob Dole of course is famous for his sense of humor. And you've mentioned, and a lot of other people have, that George Mitchell had a sense of humor as well. Is that an important thing for a body like the Senate?

AS: Oh yes, my mother said humor was the universal solvent against the abrasive elements of life. And humor throws off the opposition. You show me a serious 'person' who's very serious and humorless, and I can have their head within a half hour, because they think you're an idiot, they think you're goofy, they think you're silly, and they misread the fact that you're disarming them, and then you drive a truck right over the top of them. It's a wonderful thing to do, it's not nasty, it just throws people off, and it is a great tool.

When Dole and I were elected leaders, assistant majority leader and majority leader, I remember there were editorials in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* that said, "This is going to be a very genial, pleasant leadership, with Dole and Simpson." [Dave] Broder wrote nice things. And it was nice, [I] enjoyed it. And Wendell and I, Wendell had a great sense of humor, Cranston had that but not to the degree, Cranston was a very serious man and a journalist at heart. And don't forget, he'd traveled in Germany and read *Mein Kampf* in the German edition, and came back and said, "This sonofabitch is writing a book *Mein Kampf* in Germany which is totally different than the one on the newsstand in New York," and it was Al that pointed that out. Hitler was writing heavy, heavy stuff in Germany about what he was going to do, and over here, *Mein Kampf* would have been a totally different English version, and Cranston's the guy that pointed that out to the world. He was a cerebral guy. He said, "Watch out, this is not the same man babbling in Europe as this pap he's putting out over here. His version over there is extreme and vicious."

Then Al went out of the Senate with a tough time when they said he had done [an unethical thing], and all he'd done was make some phone calls. We all had done that to raise money, but the phone calls were connected with the votes [by the media]. He'd be raising money right and left, he raised money day and night, but his [Senate] staff never told him that somebody had contributed five grand [to his fund-raising staff] and then two weeks later they were there to talk to him. So they tried to say that: "Well, [so] the guy gave five grand, then Al saw him." And it was very wrong, because his staff should have told him. But hell, he raised money from Republicans and Democrats, he was a money machine, and he had to have it out there in California. So he was hurt when he got into that.

But Wendell and I, God, we've always [laughed]; people would look at us and we'd just call each other everything and laugh to beat hell.

BW: You said something interesting in another interview that I am aware of, that humor comes from pain. Explain what you mean by that.

AS: All humor comes from pain. Humor is something you have gained because it was your sword and your shield, it warded off pain. I was a big, heavy, knock-kneed, pimply-faced guy, and they'd say, "Well he's, you know." Well, I wasn't pleased with myself, and so I'd get

picked on a little, and I was big and ungainly, so there's a way to keep people from picking on you and wanting to fight you because you're big, you just pick up humor. And then a teacher, God bless her, Mrs. Campbell, in the sixth grade, she said, "You are very funny, Alan, but you want to understand whether they're laughing with you or laughing at you." And then that hit like a hammer.

And then in law school I would use my humor and even write it in my papers, and this instructor, who I thought he was a jerk of the ages at the time, he said, "You're very clever but your work is just bullshit, absolutely bullshit." I said, "Well, I worked hard on that." He said, "No you didn't, you just covered it up with humor and little cute phrases and I'm going to give you a bad grade." I went home to Ann, I was married, living on the G.I. Bill then, I said, "Boy, this [guy is a] sonofabitch." And Ann, being who she is, she said, "Well you don't want to ignore totally what he said." I said, "God, I wish I hadn't talked to you."

But yes, all humor comes from pain. And you talk to, look at Bob Reich, he's four-foot-ten, and he and I did a show on WGBH in Boston for seventeen weeks called "The Long and the Short of It." We'd come on, shake hands, there he is, I'm six-seven. We interviewed Kennedy, Democrats, Republicans, I think George even came on our show. People loved it. And he had a great sense of humor, and, "How'd you like to be four foot high when you're a senior in high school, or grow [up] to four-ten?" Wonderful wit, warmth, teaching at Berkeley, we see him every time we get to the Bay.

Danny Kaye taught me that, too. *The Danny Kaye*, the great Danny Kaye was conducting the Jackson Hole Symphony, and I'm with him during the intermission and afterwards, and he said, "You have a good sense of humor," he [then] said, "All humor comes from pain, Al." I said, "How's that?" He said, "I was just a Russian Jewish kid running around the streets of New York, my parents can't speak, kids kicking the shit out of me, I learned humor." And I said, "Boy, did you." I mean there was no one like Danny Kaye, and his real name was Danny [Kaminsky], some twisted up Russian Jewish name. And if you look, and Manny Arzenburgh taught me this, the great producer of all of Neil Simon's plays, [that] some of great, great humor of America all came from people who were persecuted, mostly Jewish. Sid Caesar, Phil Silvers, [Neil Simon], on and on and on, all those people had beautiful humor, Fred Allen, Jack Benny, Benny's name was [Kubelsky] or something, all those guys, humor came from pain. So it is, it's very real.

BW: Let's finish up with this. As history looks back on George Mitchell, how do you think he should be remembered?

AS: Well, he would be remembered as probably one of the most solid citizen politicians of our time. His roots went deep into his own heritage, of an amazing heritage, he didn't come up with a silver spoon, he came up with a piece of cast iron in his teeth. And he was strong, he was annealed by the hammer and the forge and there's a strength to him, an inner strength to him which is quite unique and startling. And that's why the Irish troubles finally yielded to him, the baseball thing, his work on drugs and steroids. Whatever criticisms came from that all just fell

away, because it was George Mitchell who did it. And if he can do something over there with this intractable bunch, Israelis and the Palestinians, and there he is, Heather must be ready to kick him in the head when he comes home, because he just will give it his all, he'll give it everything he has.

And I think he's in good health, I hope so and pray that he is, but he will die with his boots on doing something for the betterment of the United States of America, and he will be forever known as a guy you would want on your side, and that you knew that, without duplicity or cunning or chicanery, he had a directness which is stunning. He could just say to somebody on the other side, "I don't like what you're doing, and I don't admire it at all." I've seen him say that, and seen them, instead of saying, 'you can't talk to me like that,' they just chambered it, said, "I heard you," or they didn't say anything. But he's a noble chap, honest, direct, a patriot, he's a patriot. And the thing with Oliver North will be played over and over again in various venues as to who is the most patriotic.

And respect, integrity. I've always said if you have integrity nothing else matters, and if you don't have integrity nothing else matters. And that's George, he had that. There wouldn't be anybody who would say at the end, George Mitchell tricked me, or, he ran a fast one on me. And I can tell you, I know people like that. And George, there would never be, ever an utterance like that with him. [Always] up front.

BW: Good, thanks a lot, thank you. Shall we stop there?

AS: I can't remember anymore, there were just a lot of nice times. There were good times, social times, fun times, and I can't remember them all because they were more myriad than the tense times. But I'm sure what you got from Dole is most interesting, and Dole is not an expansive man. Dole is very honest, very direct, very humorous, and no tendency like mine to flower things up. I'm sure that you would get a real sense of George Mitchell through the honest words of Bob Dole. Mine would be, you know, just a very pleasant man to work with, a genial and amiable companion.

BW: Good, we'll stop there.

End of Interview