

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Jim Sasser

(Interviewer: Diane Dewhirst)

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Diane Dewhirst: This is Diane Dewhirst for the Bowdoin oral history project for George Mitchell. I'm here with Senator James Sasser from the state of Tennessee, it is Tuesday, April 27, [2010], in the afternoon, downtown Washington, D.C., and Senator Sasser, for the purposes of this, I am going to ask you a series of questions, hoping that you'll tell some stories and some recollections of Senator Mitchell, but to begin with if you could state your name, spell it, where you're from, and then we'll get started.

Jim Sasser: I'm James "Jim" Sasser, S-A-S-S-E-R, from Nashville, Tennessee.

DD: Tell me about the first time you met Senator Mitchell.

JS: I think the first time I met Senator Mitchell he was running for chairman of the Democratic Party, and at that time I was chairman of the Tennessee Democratic Party and I supported Mitchell for chairman, and of course he was defeated, as I recall by Bob Strauss, and Bob Strauss never forgot that and used to give me a pretty hard time about it. That's the first time I met George.

DD: Why did you support him for DNC chair, and what did you think of him?

JS: Well, I thought he was very intelligent, and he was a protégé of Senator Muskie's and I was a great admirer of Muskie, and I thought it would be good to have someone from New England as chairman of the party. And I guess I just was impressed with George's demeanor, his intelligence, and what I perceived to be his leadership ability.

DD: Okay, so he lost, never became DNC chair, went on to be a judge. When did your paths intersect again?

JS: Well our paths intersected again I guess in 1972, when Senator Muskie – Ed Muskie – was running for president, and I was supporting Muskie and I was going to be his Tennessee campaign chairman. And the campaign had run into trouble, and Muskie had brought George Mitchell in late in the campaign to try to resurrect it and get it going again, as I recall. And George I thought brought a sense of order to the campaign and a sense of calm and maturity, but by that time I think it was just simply too late, and Senator Muskie himself had made some, I think, some mistakes, and the campaign was just lost. Although I was, again, very impressed with Mitchell.

DD: Was the next time you met up in the – I’m guessing here – the early ‘80s, when you were in the Senate together?

JS: I guess so. I may have seen George around during the late ‘70s at Democratic National Committee functions or something like that. I just don’t remember completely, but when he came to the Senate I guess in, oh, he succeeded Senator Muskie in 1979, was that correct?

DD: He was appointed when Muskie went to the State Department in ‘80.

JS: In ‘80.

DD: Yes.

JS: Well that’s when I really came to know George, when he came to the Senate in 1980. And of course we were both going to be running in 1982, and I was running for reelection and he was running for his first election, having been appointed, and we became quite good friends at that time.

DD: How?

JS: Well, we just seemed to, the chemistry seemed to be correct, we both shared I think a common political philosophy, and we were seated fairly close together as I recall, on the Senate floor. I had very little seniority, and of course neither did George, and we just became good friends leading up to the 1982 campaign. And we discussed how he was going to run his campaign, and he seemed to be quite concerned about putting together the campaign, but went about it, I thought, in a very methodical and confident way, and of course he was elected.

DD: In 1985 and ‘86, Senator Byrd had asked Senator Mitchell to head the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee. Democrats had been out of power for a while and there was an attempt, or a hope, that in Reagan’s last two years to win back the Senate and the majority. Senator Mitchell was the chair, and I believe you were involved in recruiting.

JS: Well, Senator Mitchell was named chair of the Campaign Committee by Senator Byrd, and that was a quite surprising appointment. Senator Bennett Johnston of Louisiana was trying to get that appointment, and I was surprised to see George get it, and quite frankly, I was a little alarmed about it. I won’t say alarmed, but a little apprehensive because I knew that Bennett Johnston had prodigious fund-raising capabilities, and I worried that George Mitchell, coming from a rather sparsely populated state like Maine, I worried about his ability to raise the necessary funds to get us through the 1986 election.

I don’t know how, I ended up on the Campaign Committee myself, and I can’t remember whether George selected me to be on it, or whether Byrd put me on it or how that occurred, but I do remember us meeting and interviewing candidates and talking about the candidates. And

Senator Mitchell turned out to be a excellent Campaign Committee chairman, and in selecting candidates and encouraging them to run and trying to help them, and of course we recaptured the Senate in 1986 and I think his efforts played a large role in that happening. He would talk to the candidates, discourage some that he thought would not be good candidates, encourage others, and again, I think he had a big role to play in our taking the Senate back.

DD: I believe it was a committee that Senator Mitchell asked you and Senator Bradley to work on, to go through candidates, and to recruit, and it was a big field of vulnerable incumbents, a couple of key open seats, and then a lot of, you know, if we were going to win back we had to win a lot of seats, which we ended up doing. But I think that was an appointed committee that you did with Senator Bradley.

JS: Yes, and I think Mitchell's the one that appointed me, so Bradley and I, I guess we worked together. But Mitchell was by far the - We were just sort of spear carriers, he was the person who really did the work and got the job done. We were counseling with him and we'd talk to candidates and try to help, but he was the one who got the work done.

DD: Senator Mitchell then returned to just his - just, I say - his role in the Senate. Senator Byrd was majority leader for two more years, Senator Mitchell was up for reelection in 1988 and also served on the Iran-Contra Committee, and many would say that the combination of - many outsiders I would say, or observers, would say - that the combination of his political success with the Campaign Committee, how he performed on the Iran-Contra Committee, and his legislative record, which was brief because he hadn't been in the Senate that long, led to him running for majority leader and being successful. You were a supporter of his for majority leader. Can you speak to the majority leader's race and that effort?

JS: Yes, I think Senator Mitchell comported himself extremely well on the Iran-Contra Committee. As a matter of fact, he was the bright star among the Democrats. He had a very judicious approach to the questioning of witnesses and his statements, he was extremely logical in his approach and his questioning, and he came off, I think, as the heavyweight among the Democrats on that committee. He had a real stage presence I thought, and reflected credit on the inquiry from the Democratic side, and did all around a superb job. And I think that evidence of his judicial temperament, a sense of fairness, a sense of good judgment and maturity was very, very helpful to him when he decided to run for majority leader.

Of course, the senators who'd been elected in 1986, when he was chairman of the Campaign Committee, they also were sort of the bulwark, were helpful in his effort to run for majority leader. And I think it was just those things, he very methodically approached the job of trying to round up the votes for the leadership, and was very good in dealing with various and sundry senators and meeting with them and working with them and trying to secure their promise to vote for him. And so he ran an excellent campaign sort of inside the Senate for the majority leader post. And it was a combination, I think, of his performance on the Iran-Contra Committee, his performance as Campaign Committee chairman, the manner in which he ran his campaign, and his own judicious and fair minded personality, I think everyone thought that if George Mitchell

were majority leader, that everyone would get a fair shake and there wouldn't be any favorites, he wouldn't play any favorites, which he did not do, and this put everybody's mind at ease and so he was elected.

It was not an easy campaign. I mean there were others. Again, Senator Johnston was running for leader as I recall, and Senator Inouye, and Senator Inouye had been there for a long, long time and he'd made a lot of friends. And Johnston of course was very popular among the southern senators and some of the moderate to moderate conservative senators, so it was not an easy campaign for Mitchell to win. But he did, and as I recall he won on the first ballot.

DD: Just briefly looking at the kind of two-folds, one is, when he became leader and took over in 1989, Senator Byrd went to Appropriations, the economy – life repeats itself – the economy was front and center, and I recall you, Senator Sarbanes, Senator Bentsen, and Senator Mitchell spending lots of time together leading up to the budget discussions at Andrews, you as chairman of the Budget Committee, Senator Bentsen as chairman of the Finance Committee, Senator Sarbanes as chairman of the Joint Economic Committee, if I recall correctly, and laying out the predicate for the budget deal which led to Bush's breaking of his tax pledge, which many, again outsiders, say that that led to – and what you all did laid the predicate for a lot of the '92 campaign which gave us President Clinton. I know that's a lot right there, but could you reflect on that a little bit?

JS: Yes, I sure can talk about it. That was a time, in 1988 and '89 and '90, when we were once again concerned about budget deficits, and frankly, it seems like every time you get a Republican Congress in conjunction with a Republican president, it's a budgetary disaster. And of course the disaster had occurred in 1981 with Ronald Reagan reducing revenues, in conjunction with a Republican Senate, dramatically, and then the increase in defense spending dramatically, and we started having some of the largest deficits that we'd ever had, and this continued through almost the eight years of Reagan's administration.

And then when George W. Bush was elected and we had a Democratic Congress, then we moved forward to try to do something about the budget deficit, which now seems minuscule compared to what it is at the present time. But we began work on it, and we couldn't agree on a budget between, in the Congress, between ourselves and the administration, and batted the budget back and forth and back and forth. And finally this resulted in an agreement to sequester the various leaders and chairmen out at Andrews Air Force Base with the charge: don't come back until you've got a budget deal. And so we were out there for a number of days, coming back sometimes at night, but we were out there for a number of days and finally agreed with the Republicans on a budget, or we agreed among ourselves on a budget, and came back.

And I remember things like, Newt Gingrich was out there as the number two guy on the Republican side and just didn't participate at all, sat there and read a newspaper while the rest of us were around the big table trying to work out a budget. And John Sununu was out there representing the president, Bush, and he put his feet up on a table and I remember Senator Byrd lecturing him that that was improper conduct, to put your feet on the table while you were

dealing with senators and others. Anyway, we got a budget that made some sort of arrangement and came back to the Congress to get it ratified and get it passed, and it broke down, where the Republicans who had agreed with us out in Andrews Air Force Base, once they got back they just wouldn't go forward with it.

And so we had to take another bite at the apple. And I recall, Diane, we had in there an increase in taxes, among other things, and I think that's why the Republicans sort of reneged and wouldn't go along with it – I'm speaking from memory, so that's fifteen years ago, or longer. And the administration and leadership in the Congress wanted to get a budget deal, but the administration didn't want to go along with the additional revenues, although they knew they had to. So the question was, they wanted the Democrats to come forward with a budget that raised taxes, and then they could say, "Well, the Democrats did it." Well, George and I were determined that wasn't going to happen, that if we were going to jump off this cliff, we were going to all hold hands and do it together.

And we were worried about Speaker Tom Foley, because Tom and Leon Panetta, they were not too stout, when you got right down to the tough part of it, and we were afraid that they would cave and say, "Look, getting a budget deal is more important than who takes the blame for it." But we knew if we took the blame for it, that we'd pay the price for it in the election in 1992. We were willing to do our share, but we weren't going to do our share *and* their share. So the showdown came when George went over to the White House. On the way over, he had Tom Foley with him, and apparently he really pumped – Foley was then speaker – and he pumped Tom up quite a bit, stiffened his backbone. And when they got over there apparently, George told me that Tom did a good job of laying out what the deal was and that we wanted them to go along with it.

And so President Bush finally said well, he would, and sort of waffled around, and as I recall George wrote out something and got President Bush to sign it, with regard to how this thing was going to go. And I was at home that morning, I knew they were at the White House, and so I got a call from George in his car, when he left the White House, and he said, "Well, they've done it, and I've got Bush to sign this thing." And he said, "We're going to get the release out right away," and so he got the press release out, I think maybe from his car. And then after he had done that, then John Sununu got in his car and went over to the House, to a House Republican caucus, and tried to represent to the House Republican Caucus that the Republicans had not been a party, the administration had not been a party to raising these taxes. But by that time it was all out in the press, that President Bush had gone back on his "read my lips" pledge, and that the revenues were going to be raised. And of course this had a very serious effect on President Bush's efforts to reelect.

But this was a serious effort on the part of the Congress, led by George Mitchell, and I like to think that I had something to do with it, and others, to try to put our fiscal house in order and recover from the disaster of the Reagan deficits. And to George Bush's credit, he knew something had to be done, and so that effort by all of us to put our fiscal house in order really laid the foundations for the later budget surpluses we started running in the 1990s. Now, we

wouldn't have gotten there, to surpluses, just with what we did in the Bush administration. Unfortunately, just after we got the budget deal done, the economy fell off into a minor recession which reduced revenues, so we did not really narrow the budget deficit. But when the economy recovered, the things that we had put in place in that budget agreement started moving us in the direction of balance, and then in '94, with additional spending cuts and revenue increases, then we got to, later on, not just to balance but to surpluses in the later '90s.

So you can track it all back to George's efforts over there in the White House in trying to get President Bush to come along with us. And to his credit, he's now deceased, but who was the director of OMB then?

DD: Darman.

JS: Yes, Dick Darman, who had been one of the architects of the Reagan tax cuts and who understood the magnitude of the deficits, Darman came in as director of OMB under Bush and he knew something had to be done, or at least he felt something had to be done. So he was also pushing President Bush to go along with the budget deal, although I'm sure Darman never wanted Bush to take the rap or share the responsibility of raising the revenues, but of course he did and I think that played a role in his defeat and Bill Clinton's election.

DD: The piece of paper was, Mitchell got him to put in a little caret that said, something, these aren't the exact words, but it was something like, "It became clear that revenue increases are necessary," or whatever, and Mitchell had him go back and say, It has become clear *to me*." And it was the "to me" that was the, after the Foley stuff, that got the whole – and I think Senator Mitchell actually has a copy of that piece of paper with that little caret that has the "to me" in it.

JS: Well I'm sure that's correct. All I remember is George calling from the car.

DD: Right, after the White House meeting.

JS: And catching me at home and telling me what had happened, and he was exuberant. And I was exuberant, too, when he told me what had occurred. And I was particularly exuberant that he had it in writing.

DD: Yes, and it was released, yes.

JS: And then it was released to the press, and John Sununu rushed to go over to the House of Representatives, to the Republican Caucus, to say, "Oh no-no, we had nothing to do with it," when it was already out in the press and George had it in writing.

DD: Senator Mitchell spent a lot of time talking about his 'patience muscle' and his work with his colleagues, that he needed a patience muscle to work with his colleagues, both within his loved Democratic caucus, but also the hundred members, and also that sometimes he referred to it as 'herding cats,' those would be the two negative things. He also felt it a tremendous

honor. But could you just talk about him working with his colleagues a little bit?

JS: Well, Mitchell was excellent in working, I thought, with his Democratic colleagues. Actually, majority leader really has nothing, no rewards to give or no punishment to mete out much, and to bring people along who are really more concerned about what's happening in their own states and their own political future, to bring them along sometimes on votes that are politically risky, is a difficult process. And then of course you've got very egotistical people in the Senate. If you think you're going to run for the United States Senate and you get elected, that sort of bolsters the ego, and of course a lot of the folks who get there had a pretty substantial ego in the first place. So to try to deal with them and bring them along is a very difficult thing.

Well George was very patient. He'd listen to them, sort of like a psychiatrist giving them oral therapy sometimes, he'd listen to them and he would slowly bring them along. Some were much more difficult than others. Some I think almost drove him to distraction. The truth is, you could see George aging as majority leader. It really took a toll on him, physically, and I couldn't tell if it did emotionally, but you could see him fatiguing and growing older. It did take a toll on him. But he was very steadfast in his views, and when he perceived something should be done, and something was fair, that he would stick to his guns to the bitter end. I remember battles we had with Republicans over capital gains; they kept wanting to reduce the capital gains tax. I remember George telling me one day, he said, "You know, the real wealthy people in this country, the extremely wealthy people, ought to really be able to sleep well at night with this Republican group over there protecting them." He said, "They just protect that wealth so vigorously." But if you had something there that he thought was in the national interest, he was really tenacious in putting together the votes that were necessary.

(Personal telephone call interruption.)

DD: Tell me about anything you perceived as a change with regard to Senator Mitchell when President Clinton came in.

JS: Well yes, when Clinton became president, Mitchell was called upon as majority leader of course to try to get the president's program through the Senate, and he was exceedingly loyal in trying to get that done. He really worked very, very diligently at it, trying to put together the votes to get it done. Now he did not always agree with the president, and I remember once both Senator Mitchell and I felt that it was a mistake to reduce the cost of living benefits for Social Security, the so-called COLA, and there was an effort on the part of the Republicans and others to reduce the cost of living adjustment as a means of reducing budget deficits. And as a matter of fact, Mitchell would be at the White House and he was over there one time with Danny Rostenkowski, who was head of Ways and Means, and I think Speaker Foley, and Senator Mitchell and I guess Lloyd Bentsen, who was chairman of the Finance Committee. Anyway, [they were] trying to work out some way to reduce the deficit even more.

And Mitchell came back and told me, he said, "Look, I'm the only one who's not agreeing to reduce this cost of living adjustment." And we thought it was unfair to do that because number

one, the Social Security fund was generating enormous surpluses, and secondly, that this was going to hurt older people who were the neediest of all, who needed this Social Security. We also thought that it would be a political disaster, because we had seen what had happened with the Republicans in 1985 or '86 when they had voted to reduce the cost of living adjustment. And that had played a role in the Democrats winning the 1986 election to the extent that we took the Senate back.

So he was very steadfast in trying to get that defeated. I remember I wrote a column that got into the *Washington Post* about it, and President Clinton became very angry about that. But anyway, we defeated that, and it was not brought up as a matter of fact. But that just, I think, points out his sense of fairness and what a sensitive political antenna he had, and also that he didn't always agree with Clinton. But he never disagreed with him, to my knowledge, in public, the disagreements were always private.

DD: There were two – many accomplishments – but there were two, no, one accomplishment, one effort. One accomplishment was the – I think we did call it a stimulus bill back then, in early '93, that you were involved in, and it was a matter of getting every single vote possible because it was Democrats only who passed it. And the other was the attempt at getting health care, and how that had to be pulled after a strenuous effort by the administration, Senator Kennedy among others. Is there any reflections you have on either of those?

JS: Well the thing that I remember vividly, in passing the budget of '94, and that budget called for returning the upper tax bracket to where it had been prior to President Reagan reducing it by some five percent, as I recall, and it was touch and go as to whether or not we could get that budget passed. And I remember that George was working hard to put the votes together, and you get two votes, and then somebody would slip off on the other side, and it's just a constant struggle to keep together enough votes to have the, if we get up to fifty votes, then we could get Vice President Gore to break the tie. So when he called the budget up for a vote, that had these revenue increases in it, we weren't sure we had the votes, because Bob Kerrey wouldn't tell us how he was going to vote, one way or the other. And if Kerrey didn't go with us, then we would not have had the necessary fifty votes and the thing would have gone down. But to our great relief, and somewhat to our surprise, Kerrey did vote with us and Al Gore broke the tie and we passed the budget, which raised the revenues and reduced spending primarily in the military, our Defense budget. We were trying to get some of the peace dividend at that time. So that was the frosting on the cake that led us into the balanced budgets with the surpluses of the '90s. But many people paid a price for that, because that was a weapon that was wielded very effectively by the Republican minority in '94 to propel themselves then into the majority.

DD: Senator Mitchell worked closely with Senator Dole for the workings of the Senate. Can you comment at all about Senator Mitchell's dealings and the Democratic leadership's dealings with the Republicans at that time? Some folks reflect on it now that it was different then or whatever. I'm not looking so much for that, but anything – and then I have one more question.

JS: Yes, I thought that Senator Mitchell and Senator Dole worked pretty well together.

Neither one of them - Both of them kept their word, I felt. There was no going back on a commitment. Once they'd made a commitment, well, they stuck with it. And I thought they got along reasonably well. Senator Dole is not so difficult to get along with until he starts losing, and when he starts losing or he's backed into a corner he can be pretty waspish and angry. But I felt that all in all, considering the tough issues that came through the Senate when Mitchell was leader and Dole was the Republican leader, I thought they did about as good a job as could be done in trying to hold the place together and represent their own side of the aisle, their constituency.

Then later on there was, I think, more acrimony between the leaders on both sides, in the late '90s after Mitchell and Bob Dole had both gone. But I think Mitchell and Dole both had a sense of pride in the institution, they both had sort of a, well, what do you call it, when you got a memory of what had gone before, and a civility that had marked the conduct in the Senate. And also had appreciation, particularly Mitchell, of his responsibility, I mean this is a big responsibility, to be the leader of a political party, and instrumental and a necessary ingredient in solving the important national issues of the day. And I don't think Senator Mitchell took that lightly, and I think he felt a sense of deep and sincere responsibility. And Bob Dole would do a lot of laughing and joking around, but I think in the final analysis he kind of realized too that, hey, we're making history here, and what we do affects the lives of tens of millions, hundreds of millions of people. So they were responsible for what they were doing.

And I think the important ingredient between the two of them was, one, mutual respect, and number two, trust. And that doesn't mean that there weren't times when they'd get angry with each other and maybe they would say to their staff some uncomplimentary thing about the other leader, but that was just blowing off steam.

DD: Last question, anything you wish to add about Senator Mitchell's leadership qualities or his accomplishments in his Senate career, anything I may have forgotten you wish to add?

JS: Well, I don't know, I'm sure there will be things that will come to me. I made it sound like it was all serious business, but we had a lot of laughs. George is very capable of, he had a good sense of humor, and we had a lot of laughs along the way. I remember we were in the Soviet Union, and we were meeting with Gorbachev who was then still the premier of the Soviet Union, and George asked him, he said, "Mr. Premier, how are things going?" And Gorbachev answered, he said, "Well," he said, "I'm still afloat." And George said, "Well, you're fortunate," he said, "I've had a tough time keeping my boat from sinking on occasion, too." And so we had some laughs along the way, and I'm sure I'll think of a hundred other things, little anecdotes and vignettes, and if I do I'll try to pass them on to you.

DD: Okay, great. That was his first CODEL that he took as majority leader, and he took you and Senator Sasser [*sic*: Glenn], Senator Bradley – there must have been a Republican on there, too, but that was his first CODEL that he took as majority leader. []

JS: I wonder who the Republican was. It could have been, who was our friend from – oh, I

bet I know who it was, our friend from New Hampshire, Rudman?

DD: I think it was Rudman, yes, I think it was Rudman. But it was quite a historic trip, if I recall correctly. Thank you, Senator Sasser, for your time.

JS: Sure, Diane, my pleasure.

End of Interview