

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Christian “Chris” Potholm

(Interviewer: Andrea R. L’Hommedieu)

GMOH# 127

August 12, 2009

Andrea R. L’Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is August 12, 2009. I’m in my office in H-L Library at Bowdoin with Professor Christian Potholm, and this is Andrea L’Hommedieu. Chris, could you start just by talking to me about your first recollection of knowing who George Mitchell was.

Christian Potholm: Well I think he came primarily into focus in 1974 when he ran for governor. I had known him as an aide to Muskie, someone that worked with Muskie, somebody that was in that world of Muskie. But as an independent entity, it was in 1974 when he ran for governor. I had been Bill Cohen’s campaign manager in 1972, and I don’t remember that he played any role or came on the scene during that election; I think Muskie was still in the process of running for president.

So, my first recollection of him was when he ran for governor. And it’s interesting how that initial reaction to him was conditioned by his rather ignominious loss. And I have often used him in my classes as an example of, in 1974, if you put together all the things you shouldn’t do in a campaign, he really did do that, it was like an incredible set of misperceptions and mistakes and things that were really quite an object lesson. And yet, after that horrible defeat I’ve always assumed that he replayed that campaign in his mind in later years, so that when he was appointed to the senate and ran again, he ran nearly a perfect campaign.

So in my world of campaigns he’s the best and the brightest, and then one of the worst. I mean, he had a huge lead, made all kinds of mistakes in that ‘74 campaign, that he then obviously learned from and then ran a perfect campaign. I remember on election night he said how he tried winning and he tried losing, and winning was a lot better. And I could have great sympathy with that because I think when you, unless you’ve been in that arena of campaigning, it’s hard to describe to ordinary people what the roller coaster is of, a defeat is a terrible, terrible feeling, and then a victory, there’s no elation quite like it. So, I’ve often thought it would be interesting to, for your project, to try to get inside his head and see what happened to him in between those two periods.

AL: Now what was your role during that ‘74 campaign, were you working with any of the candidates?

CP: Well, I had had, my candidate was a man named Harry Richardson, who was running for governor and who lost the Republican primary by five hundred votes. And I can remember going

into a bathroom, wherever we were, and just feeling like throwing up when it was clear to me that he wasn't going to be successful. I do think – and this is very interesting – I think if Harry Richardson had won the Republican primary, George *would* have been governor, because Harry Richardson really, viscerally disliked Jim Longley, he thought he was a total fraud. And all during the May before the primary, he said, “I hope that Longley runs,” he said, “I will crush him, I will attack him from day one.”

And I believe Richardson would have held onto enough Republicans, because he was a very good campaigner and he had a lot, he was a moderate Republican, he would have done very well, and he would have taken enough votes away from Longley so that Longley probably would have finished third and George, we wouldn't be having this conversation because George would've been the governor. So I thought it was kind of interesting that that terrible night that I had, Richardson of course had a worse night, but that really doomed in one way Mitchell in the '74 race, because looking back on it, Mitchell made a horrible mistake, and the people around him made a horrible mistake, in ignoring Longley until it was too late.

And I can remember being up there in '74, because of course Cohen was still running for Congress. So on Election Day, I can remember going up to Lewiston and running into Charlie Micoleau, and Charlie Micoleau said, “Boy, we've got a big problem, Christian.” I said, “What's that?” And he said “Well, we've got the biggest get-out-the-vote effort ever launched in Lewiston,” he said, “we don't know how to stop it now and we're just taking Longley voters.” And a lot of Longley voters were Cohen voters, interestingly enough, and you could just see the excitement in the efforts on the part of the people that were for Longley. I remember that day saying, “Well, he's going to finish second,” but I didn't think he would win, he, Longley. I can remember that that was sort of the beginning of the end, I wasn't sensitive enough to figure it out, but that was a very bad sign that the Democrats were so organized and were taking so many voters who were *not* going to be voting for their man, Mitchell.

AL: And so, what was the next time that you had contact with George Mitchell? He, there was '74 when he lost, and then '80 when he was appointed to Senator Muskie's seat, but he was active in state politics in between.

CP: He was, but in those days it was more as a staffer and some behind the scenes, and he was not the public persona that he subsequently became. And that defeat weighed very heavily on him, you could see that, and he was a very proud man, he'd succeeded at just about everything else he'd done in life and that had to be a terrible blow. So, I don't have a very firm recollection of that.

I do, to this day – and I know it's against the historical record – but I remember at the time thinking that when I, I've been wracking my brain, whoever told me this, it made a lot of sense, but I can't remember who it was, said that Muskie's first choice for senator was not necessarily Mitchell, but was Ken Curtis, and that Brennan had said, “I will not appoint Curtis.” So, although the historical record is clearly that Muskie appointed him, and I have no reason to doubt Muskie saying that or anything else, certainly in political circles it was, Mitchell was the second

choice beyond Curtis, and that there was this great meeting at Brunswick Naval Air Station in which Brennan and Muskie met and that this conversation, real or imagined, took place, and afterwards Mitchell was appointed.

And I remember talking to John Menario, who subsequently I got to know on the Maine Yankee campaign, and he and I both thought that Brennan had made a huge error in appointing Mitchell, just from a personal perspective, that if Brennan was smart, he would have appointed, I've forgotten the guy's name but he was a city counselor, and both Menario who had been city manager and I knew this guy and I thought, what a perfect situation for Brennan, would be to put this very loyal Brennanista in the position for two years and then he, Brennan, run for the Senate. And both John Menario and I just, in this political gossip world, we could not figure out why Brennan didn't do that – and hold this seat for himself, because Brennan in that era was, he was quite popular and he certainly would have had a very good chance at reelection.

Now when Mitchell came up for reelection, I think all, all Republicanism, with probably the exception of Mert Henry, they thought that George Mitchell would be easily defeated. And indeed, the polling showed that either Emery or Snowe could win by a big margin over Mitchell. And I think a lot of us thought the old Mitchell from '74 would be easily defeated, and of course he was a brand new souped-up version, and he was to teach us all that there's no such thing as totally dead in politics.

But I do remember, on the way over here I was thinking, Dave Emery wanted desperately to get into the United States Senate. He was sick of being a congressman and he'd had a kidney removed, a cancerous kidney, and he said, "Life is too short. In the House you have to run every year, you have to raise money, it's awful, I don't care whether I lose, I don't think I'm going to lose, but I don't care if I lose, I don't want to do this anymore." And so he just jumped in with both feet, while Olympia Snowe was kind of waiting, and Emery lined up enough people so that when Olympia went to these same people they said, "Well, I wish I'd known you were going to run, I've promised myself to Dave Emery."

And so Emery, I mean he looked like he was going to win, he was twenty points ahead, and so I remember being up in the State House when Emery announced, and there was this great meeting, maybe it wasn't the announcement, but anyway, there was a meeting of Olympia and David to get everything all squared away, and of course Dave was ebullient, because he'd beaten Snowe to the punch, and he had this really easy task ahead of him. And Olympia was just distraught; she just thought, 'oh my God, for the rest of my life I'm going to be in the shadow of Dave Emery.' And I remember going out on one of the verandas up there and I said, "I'm not just saying this to make you feel better," I said, "but this is not a done deal, and there is no guarantee that Dave" – I mean I thought Dave Emery was going to win but I said – "it's not guaranteed, and that Democratic machine, it's not going to end up looking like it looks now."

And, well, that was without realizing that I think I made her feel a *little* better, but more importantly how excited and happy she must have been in November of 1980, that Dave Emery, not her, had been the nominee, because I think George – first of all, it was a very bad year to be a

Republican, and George did everything right anyway. And then Dave Emery, who was a very - There are few people in Maine politics that a lot of people regard as losers; one is Bill Hathaway, the other is Dave Emery. I really think highly of them in that they went down with their flags flying, and Dave Emery fought hard for the Reagan tax cuts and all of those things, and he even in fact was an assistant minority whip or something, so he went down with his flags flying and supporting Reagan and everything else, but it was just the absolute wrong year to be identified with Reagan.

So it was a combination of: Mitchell ran a very good campaign, Emery's campaign made a fundamental mistake in, they hired the wrong media firm and the media got off to a bad start. So the next thing I knew George Mitchell was the senator, and that whole campaign, I was just taking notes about all the things he had done right that he had done wrong before.

AL: Do you recall in that detail what some of the things were that he changed?

CP: Well, for example in 1974, both he and Muskie were slow to pick up the importance of the environmentalist vote in Maine. George, or his campaign, went out and bought all of the billboards in Maine for that campaign in '74, and that was just at the time when Bowdoin students and environmentalists were trying to cut down the [billboards]. The other thing about George was that George became a very good campaigner, there was a certain magnetism and charisma to him later on, but he was more scholarly and introverted in that campaign. And I remember in October he was having his third or fourth meeting with people on the Bowdoin campus in '74, and I remember saying, "Why is he doing that?" I mean, he had these Bowdoin people in the spring five meetings ago, why is he wasting his time here? So, those are two little emblematic things that, you know, a big mistake on the environmental front, and then more a symptom of a pattern of, this is not a guy who likes to get out there and wade through the streets of Lewiston and buys the guys a beer at Pierre's After Dinner Club, this is a guy that, he's more comfortable in this academic environment and he wasn't a very good campaigner.

Fast forward to when he ran for the Senate, he *made* himself into a very good campaigner, and he would go and just be out there, and every last vote he was going to get. So I've often wondered what went on in his head between '74 and '80 that transformed him. He's a very thoughtful guy, and I bet he replayed that defeat thousands of times and said, "If I ever get a chance again, I'm going to do everything right."

I do remember that campaign, I was on Cohen's staff then and I was a sacrificial lamb, that I always had to go to these Democratic events that Cohen didn't want to go to, and one of them was the COPE Convention, the AFL-CIO annual meeting. And of course it was a completely stacked deck, I mean they never even supported Margaret Chase Smith, so they never were going to support Cohen so he wasn't going to go. And I remember walking out onto the stage and people are booing and 'look, I'm just here to represent, I'm not even Bill Cohen.'

And I was sitting next to George Mitchell, and the COPE people had come up with some rating system that gave Mitchell a hundred percent and Emery a twenty, and so with all the bravado of

somebody who didn't give a shit I stood up as they're booing, I said, "Don't take this little silly thing. Don't pay any attention to these ratings, they don't mean anything." Whereupon George got a big grin on his face, and when it was his turn he said, "It's interesting that the professor should say pay no attention to this," and then he pulled out an Emery thing where Emery had a thing for the campaign, had rated him for the NRA, for the sportsmen. "So," he said, "maybe you should pay no attention to *these* ratings."

And he had quite a good sense of humor, and of course by then he probably had a good idea he was going to win. You always have a much better sense of humor when you're on the upside. But I got to remember that little grin on his face, like, 'okay, I got you.' And now that was, I couldn't imagine the George of '74 being that cool and seeing how to make his opponent, in this case me, who's supposed to be here talking about Cohen, but God help Emery, Emery's beyond help. So that was a kind of interesting little side liner.

The one thing, I don't know if anybody has raised it in your other tapes, but it seems to me of the big four, Margaret Chase Smith and Muskie and Mitchell and Cohen, I think of the four of them, although George would go on to play this international role even more than the others, although of course, Muskie and Cohen both went into Cabinets, I always thought that George was the most partisan of those four. In other words, he was more at base a true Democrat, whereas Margaret Chase Smith and Cohen were much more likely to *see* the Democratic side of things, and then when George got to be the majority leader in the Senate I think he certainly played a very important and very partisan role there. So, again, I'm anxious some time to read what other people have to say about Mitchell the statesman, and then Mitchell the partisan and I think it's a tribute to him that he could be both simultaneously or at least *ad seriatim*.

So he's a guy obviously of enormous talent, but lots of people with enormous talent don't do well in politics. And I think George had a lot of talent in '74, but in 1980 he, without that political talent, he wouldn't have gotten in the position to subsequently be all the things he was. So that's an important, campaigns are an important testing ground for a certain kind of person, that he obviously excelled at.

AL: I want to comment on something you said, and I've heard it mentioned before about George Mitchell being very partisan as a Democrat, then also look at Ed Muskie and sort of, Ed Muskie, from what I've learned from that project was, he was very much for the Democratic Party, extreme loyalty to the Democratic Party, but maybe that's not the same as partisan to Democrat politics. In other words he would do anything and everything to keep the Democratic Party, as a party, very strong.

CP: Well, let me put it another way. I think that analysis is not correct. Muskie came out of this rock-ribbed Republican, flinty, fiscal conservative world, and I think yes, he certainly, I mean he was the father of a new Democratic Party, it was his baby, he did everything to nurture it, all that's true. But when you put Muskie in the national party, he was *way* to the right, and he didn't believe in a lot of those, oh yeah, principle of the working man and all that, but the left wing lurch that cost him the nomination, I mean one of the reasons he didn't get that nomination

was, he didn't fit with the national party.

And Cohen was going to run against him obviously, and we did all kinds of surveys, and Muskie, by seeking the Democratic nomination had gone, he had a more liberal voting record than George McGovern, but as soon as that fiasco took place, and had his own polling that showed, 'my God, if Cohen's not going to beat me, at least he's in the hunt,' and so Muskie then went *back* to his original fiscal conservative – I know how to save a dollar – and so, so yeah, believing in the Democratic principles and believing in the Maine Democratic Party was one thing, but being a national partisan the way George turned out to be, when he was of course in a position in the Senate to do that, he had to be, but I think he took more relish in doing that. Whereas Muskie, until Cohen came along, there was this Democratic flood tide, that if Cohen hadn't won that year, the Democrats would have had the governorship with two Senate seats in both Congress.

So, I think those things maybe, the two things are true simultaneously, Muskie was deeply committed to the Democratic Party, but he was odd man out with the national Democrats. Never got along with Johnson very well, didn't really think that much of McGovern, and so I think, I see a little bit of a difference there between those two. And it's not worth a hundred points, but it's worth ten or fifteen points kind of in the middle of fleshing out the analysis.

AL: Now, what was your position on Cohen's staff?

CP: Well, I don't remember what my title was, but I was his political guy in Maine and then I was his campaign manager in '72, and then I was in charge really of his offices up here in Maine and that was sort of boring. I mean once I had good people and they did the Social Security, I was in the strategic, what does Cohen do? Does he run against Muskie? No, it was my judgment; I was the *only*, the *only* Cohen staffer that said, "No, it's not going to work." I thought it was going to work in the beginning. We kind of did a mock election that went on for a year and we could see that, I could see that Muskie was getting back these Democrats that were for Cohen. And then Muskie and Charlie Micoleau ran a very effective campaign of moving his image from this wild, left wing, loony, to – oh, he created this, what was it, some Finance Committee and then he was going to do this, and he very cleverly got back into the mainstream of Maine politics.

Now, interestingly enough, because I was up in Maine and because Cohen was never going to run against Mitchell, I never had the kind of visceral, competitive animosity toward Mitchell that a lot of the Cohen staffers in Washington did. They, Cohen and Mitchell, became friends. They didn't particularly like that, they thought Cohen was being used by Mitchell, and they wrote a book together. So there was a lot of staff animosity in Washington, which I didn't give a shit about, I mean Cohen wasn't going to run against George and George wasn't going to run against Cohen, so in my world, he became completely irrelevant.

I think it would be helpful, you mentioned some Republicans, to talk to Tom Daffron, who was Cohen's administrative assistant, and then Bob Tyrer who is now the president of the Cohen

Group. I don't remember what his title was, but he was under Tom Daffron at the time, and I'm sure they could regale you with stories of how on a given Tuesday the Mitchell people beat them to some thing and then they beat them. There was no love lost with those staffs. In fact, when the Emery campaign kind of imploded, and Cohen was very much against this, he did not want it, but Tom Daffron and Bob Tyrer came up here and ran Emery's campaign for the last six or eight weeks. And again, you've got to give them credit for jumping on the Titanic and bailing like hell but, well, you can imagine, George must have been furious. If you're Cohen saying, "Well jeez, I'm, believe me, I don't, George, I don't mean this." But, well, if you're Mitchell, 'when your two chief staff guys are up there working for him -.' I'd have loved to been a fly on the wall when *that* conversation took place.

And I think George and Bill had a very good relationship, and they recognized each other as kind of Bowdoin guys and blue collar guys that had worked their way up and they got along. And Iran-Contra, they were great buddies on [that], so again, I don't know much more about the relationship. Just from my political, my very simple minded trout, I'm biting this fly, not – if the fly wasn't there to be bitten, or wasn't going to bite me or Cohen, then I just kind of lost [interest], so I don't really have a lot of memories of him the way I would have of Hathaway or somebody else. Because when Muskie was a target, I had every chapter and verse, and I would have the ads in my mind that I was going to write and how we were going to beat Muskie and figure everything out. So there's some gaps there, and then of course Mitchell as the statesman, once he – I have one more story that popped into my head. When Mitchell ran for reelection, contrary to the first time, nobody wanted to run against him.

AL: This is in '88?

CP: Yes, nobody. And so the Republicans had to get some sacrificial lamb, and that's when they came up with Jasper Wyman. I remember Wyman came to the Tower and I said to him, "Well look, you're never going to beat Mitchell and you're probably going to get slaughtered. On the other hand, let's say the Republicans give you a half a million dollars, or two hundred and fifty thousand," whatever it was. I said, "Whatever they give you, you're going to have a chance to redo your own image." Because he had been the Christian Civic League, he'd been against the gays, he'd been a champion of anti-abortion, he had a one-to-two negative ratio in the state of Maine. I said, "So look, I think you ought to do it," but, I said, "don't expect to win, and just take the money to give yourself a new image," because he was tired of being the poster child for anti-gay stuff.

So I said, "Okay, look, Cohen wants you, everybody wants you to run because nobody else, and you'll be a credible candidate," and I said, "you can talk about the..." I tried to give, because Cohen was then into missiles, and build-down. So he came to Bowdoin, I talked to him for a couple of hours about how you can talk and get out (*throw height statistics---sounds like*) and ICBMs. I said, "You can sound like..."

Well, Jasper was extremely pleased with this approach, and so he went around taking the very high road and talking about these things, and of course his base. I think he ended up with

seventeen percent of the vote, I mean the base, I don't know if they voted even, but he had the best time, and he was just smiling. He's a little, I've written about it in one of my books, the little friend of all the world, he went around there, and then he went down to Connecticut and they wanted him to run for Congress, and got into the prison ministry and he had this golden opportunity that very few people get which turn their life around and remake their own image.

Well, Wyman had, and maybe you ought to talk to him, because he should have some fascinating insights into various things like that. I do remember this, that it was: one, again, if you were a Cohen partisan, you might say Mitchell was a little two-faced on this, but Mitchell was the *king* of PAC men. He took more, he set an indoor record for PAC contributions against Jasper Wyman; he took friggin' money from *everybody*. Fair enough, great, no problem with that, but he ranted and railed against PACs, "We've got to stop PACs." We've got to go back and look at that campaign, and it was a virtuoso performance; I mean they're bringing the Brinks truck up and dumping the shit in his office, and he's waving, 'we've got to stop this.' Well anyway, so it naturally bothered Wyman because he [wasn't getting any] PAC money. So, at one of these debates, I don't know whether it was Public Television or Channel 6, but one of the big debates, Mitchell's going on and on about the PACs and the this and the that, and Wyman had that little kind of moment that George had had. He said, "I've got a *wonderful* idea, Senator Mitchell, the best way you can strike fear in the heart of these PACs," he said, "is to give *me* your PAC money." I said, "Oh, that is so beautiful," this guy knows he's going down, the ship is sinking. But that was one of the few times I ever saw Mitchell kind of go, "Huh?" hoisted on his own petard. But, 'well just give me some of it.' Oh, it must be on tape, on film somewhere, one of those debates. It really was, again, an insider's magic moment. But, George with a straight face.

The other thing is, you kind of look at people in politics, and most people in politics get themselves into trouble when they talk too much. You live by the sound bite, usually you die by the sound bite. But the two best in my whole history in looking at Maine politics, Cohen would *always*, I don't care what reporter you were, I don't care how smart you were, whatever tough question you gave him, he would give you some perfect bullshit answer. He did this all the time, he said, "Well, you can look at the glass, and the glass is either half full or half empty." And then he'd kind of go on, or, "As the Roman poet Virgil said," and then he'd throw in a couple of these. And grown men reporters, they'd be there, "What did he say?" So, he'd [win that round].

And George was the same way. I never saw either Cohen or Mitchell ever make a mistake when that red light in the camera of TV was on. George had a little different style. He went into what I would call the judge mode, and he would sort of swell up like he was up on the bench, and if you're the reporter, it's a strange question you've asked, but now there's this precedent and then there's that precedent, put this together and we have two precedents, and then one could lead in this direction. And no sound bite, you know, it's not going to be on the six o'clock news, it's just George taking us through some tour of a law book.

Well those are priceless, priceless attributes to have as a political figure, because you are going to get caught with questions you don't know the answer to, you're going to, and you can jump

ahead and say something to be smart and clever like John McCain – oh, very quick and verbal and straight talk express. Well, too many times you get it out there and then you make a mistake. Those guys, I never saw them make, either one of them, make a mistake, and they would handle a reporter by giving the non-answer that didn't just say, oh, I don't know, or, I'm not going to tell you, it made the reporter think, "Jeez, I must be dumb, I didn't get that." And the whole idea was, you aren't going to get it, ever.

I remember Cohen, Cohen, the best one, you know Dan Schorr, he's still on Public Radio, blabbing and every Saturday morning about something – I have no idea why he's still there. Anyway, Danny Schorr, when Cohen voted for the AWACS and the whole Israeli lobby got all up in arms and there was this, oh, a painful press conference, Dan Schorr got up and said, "Haven't you sold Israel out, and what about this and this?" And Cohen said, "Well, the clash (*unintelligible*), now, one of the reasons he said, I voted for it, because I didn't want to stir up anti-Semitism. And if I voted against the AWACS deal, it could have stirred up anti-Semitism."

And Schorr kind of went, "huh", like it didn't make any sense. Well, maybe it wasn't supposed to make any sense. I happened to be down in Washington in the Gallery watching it and he was literally, for the first time, he was speechless, because he usually, Schorr can talk about 'when I was on the Nixon enemies list,' whatever. But both of them had that very, very great talent that, whereas Muskie and Margaret Chase Smith, they'd pop off, they'd say things to reporters, they'd get themselves into trouble, but not those two guys.

AL: Now when you were on Cohen's staff, were you also teaching at Bowdoin?

CP: Yes.

AL: How did that work for you? I mean, you taught full time and -?

CP: Yes, worked very well.

AL: Well, obviously dovetailed with what you taught, so -

CP: Yes, if I was teaching medieval music, it might not have been such a good background. What I'm teaching is what I'm doing, and of course I always maintain that people that teach about politics, if they haven't actually been inside the campaign, then they really miss, you can't really do an analysis of campaigns, unless you've been on the inside of at least one of them. Because the dynamic, so much happens in the campaign that at the end of the day, well, Mitchell did all this and Cohen did all that and you got to see those staff consultant fights over: you've got to go on television; don't run that commercial. People think, oh, the candidates do it well. They don't do a lot of it, and campaigns can end badly, like Mitchell, Mitchell wasn't doomed in '74, nor was he guaranteed election in '80, so I'm a great believer in my books that the campaign, as a campaign, makes a big difference.

If you look at so much of the political science literature, it's written by people who have never been in the campaign. So they tend to put this great man of history or these big tidal sways, the Republicans come in and then the Democrats go out, and a lot of times it's really what happened in the campaign, and it's one campaign against another.

AL: Right, and I think that's an important piece that we try to discover in these oral histories, is to really get into the campaigns and get those stories about things that happened and how they all came together, or fell apart.

CP: Well, in my book *This Splendid Game*, I went up and looked at the Muskie Archives to do the chapter on Muskie and I discovered, there it was in the histories, that the Democrats had given these major Republican figures money to be on television. Neil Bishop was one, and as a result, these guys were big players in the Republican Party, and they delivered Waldo County and Hancock, almost Hancock County, in huge numbers to Muskie.

Now, again, that's not in any of the Muskie books, it was all 'the father,' and he did this and that, but now, to me, that was somebody, and I've traced it down, it was some Sagadahoc Democratic chairman who came up with the idea. Statewide television cost a hundred bucks, and they put him on, it was so effective they gave him another hundred bucks. Well, that was an important decision. Remember, Muskie didn't expect to win in 1954, remember they didn't have enough liquor, they said nobody (*unintelligible*), it's not going to be a victory.

So yes, I think my bias is toward at least understanding. I mean, Emery didn't have to lose that badly to Mitchell. Mitchell's campaign, for whatever reason, turned out to be much better than Emery's campaign, and at the end of the day Mitchell turned out to be a better candidate for the U.S. Senate that particular year, but it didn't have to be that way. Mitchell could have run in 1980 just the way he ran in 1974. He didn't have to have *learned* the lesson. I, in this discussion, assume that he figured out in those intervening years what was wrong, but maybe some political guy came along and said, jeez, George, you lost eight points by doing this, and you lost six points by doing that, maybe you'll try a little different this time.

AL: Now, were you Senator Cohen's Maine person until he became secretary of defense, or how -?

CP: No, there was a period there, we had a falling out, when I was investigated by the Public Utilities Commission. I had done polling for, or I had worked with CMP to set up that polling operation, you probably don't remember it. A vice president lied to the PUC, they ran around and destroyed all this stuff, and for a year-and-a-half, while Cohen was running for reelection against Libby Mitchell, for a year-and-a-half I was investigated by the PUC. And now I can look back on it – of course Cohen wanted some distance from this investigation, but the investigation was really prompted by Johnny Martin who wanted to defeat Bill Cohen.

So I was caught in this horrible, horrible mess for a year-and-a-half, and really, you don't want to

have, because the state can print money, and the state can have these committees go on forever, and what it amounted to in a nutshell was, the Democrats assumed, and Baldacci – the great irony of me working with Baldacci now is that Baldacci was the head of that committee. And the assumption was that these utilities had been doing polling, and that I had stored that in some mysterious vault and then I would help the Republicans win. Well, how do you prove a negative? They hauled up the, Myron Curtis was the guy that did the Bowdoin computer in those days and he had to go up and testify, ‘no, it was nothing on our computer.’ Well then, ‘Potholm must have hidden it on the Dartmouth computer, where he used to live.’

And so anyway, there was this terrible, and that led to a little bit of estrangement. And then we got back together again, and then when he was secretary of defense we had a very close, and we still do, very good relationship. But it’s like a marriage that goes on for forty years, there’s going to be some ups and downs. But once he got to be in the Senate the second time, there really, my skill was getting him there not, I mean I would go and represent, like I said, I’d go to all these things in Maine he didn’t want to go to, or not all of them but a lot of them, if it was an important staff thing.

I remember once when Jim Longley was governor, and if Cohen didn’t run against Muskie, then the next shot was against Hathaway in two years, ‘76 to ‘78. And so Longley was a very popular governor, so as a strategist I said, “Well look, we got to look at, yes, Cohen against Hathaway. We also have to put up another question or two in there about Hathaway, Cohen and Longley, to see how that three-way race would come out.” Well, Longley had said he wasn’t going to run for any other office, so we’re in the field with this poll, and the first night we’re in the field, and I’m guessing maybe Longley found out about the fact that we were asking a question about him, and he was paranoid to begin with, so here was this - Anyway –

Well he must have found out about it about eleven or twelve o’clock at night. Well, he *stewed* about it till two o’clock in the morning, whereupon he called Cohen and began ranting and raving, “You’re calling me a liar by polling, you’re doing this,” and just completely off the wall. So naturally, at two thirty, who does Bill call? Me. So my penance for this was when, anytime it was a Longley mess, I’d have to go and represent Bill Cohen. And of course, the elderly Longley died, and then young Jim Longley, supposedly was picking up his banner.

Well, I can’t remember what it was, but it was some issue where they were all mad at Cohen about something, so I had to get in my car and go up to Lewiston and sit there in little Jim’s office, and he ranted and raved, this and that, and Cohen had done this, and Cohen had done – (*snoring noise*) – you know, all right now. So this is what I get paid for, I’m a flak catcher, you know, and I’m nodding. And then at the end of it Jim says, “Chris, my father thought the world of you.” I felt like saying, “No, he didn’t.” He said, “And he wanted you to have something.” And he looks all around, like somebody’s watching, and he goes over and he gets a safe, he opens the safe, he comes and brings me some, “My dad wanted you to have this.” And it was a reprint of a *Reader’s Digest* article, okay?

AL: In the safe.

CP: In the safe. And the dad had, on his death bed apparently said, “I want Chris Potholm to have [this].” Well, I called Daffron and Cohen, I said, “By the way boys, this is my last visit to the Longley legion, put that down in the book,” I said, “no more.” So, it wasn’t a full time job, but there were things that had to be done, I had to do.

AL: Hold on just a sec -

(Taping paused.)

CP: - the context from Daffron, and Tyrer especially, they were super.

AL: Well, we’re now on Side B and, and I know you, so you said even though Senator Cohen and your relationship was a little up and down, he went to be secretary of Defense and then was done with government service in those aspects. Did you keep in touch with him later?

CP: Oh yes, we’ve still kept in touch, and he was very helpful to me. I’ve been doing a book for ten years on war, so during the war in Kosovo, I got to go down to Washington and I went to the Pentagon, and it was just, it was wonderful to really see, it was like a campaign, here were some ‘real time’ things. And so we’ve ended up, with the Clinton administration there were lots of ceremonial events that my wife and I got invited to, and throughout this whole, when I had these ups and downs, my wife stayed very close and very friendly to him, and then his subsequent second wife. And then writing this book now, I’ve just sent it down there to him to have him take a look at it, because, again, I’m writing this about war but he’s really been inside a war and I’m very anxious to see how he, how *he* evaluates something that was mine, something I’ve been studying for a long time. I teach Maine politics, but I also teach war, and Maine politics is pretty far from a war, that’s two very different subjects.

AL: And now, he doesn’t live in Maine, does he, at all?

CP: No, when he got divorced he, and then his second wife, I think they have a whole national life, really. And he worked so hard on the Cohen Group, he’s always going around the world, they’ve got five offices in China, he was in Mumbai two days before that hotel attack – so he spends a lot of time in the air. But no, he comes back to Maine for the Cohen Library [*sic*: Cohen Papers at the Fogler Library] once in a while, that might be your best chance to get him, you might have to go to Bangor, but when he’s up there for one of those events, I’m sure he would love to spend some time with you giving you his recollections of this.

AL: Is there anything I haven’t asked you about in terms of Mitchell or connections to him through your work on Maine politics over the years that I haven’t asked you?

CP: No, I think not only have you been very thorough, but as I said in the beginning, he kind

of swam into my consciousness on various levels, other than 'oh, we're going to run against you' or 'we're not going to run against you.' Whereas, both Hathaway and Muskie, I had to know them inside and out, and what their strengths and weaknesses were and where the fault lines were and everything else, but no. I think it's super when you think about Bowdoin having produced both of these guys that achieved such national prominence. I just wish - Unfortunately, we didn't get the Cohen papers to come here.

AL: I was going to ask you about that, I was, I couldn't figure out why, unless it was just two people competing -

CP: No, two words, Chuck Beitz, the former dean of the faculty here, he was personally responsible for alienating Cohen and the Cohen people, and that's why we didn't get them. And it really irritated me at the time, and irritates me now because, in one sense, yes, it's nice that the University of Maine has it, but we could have, should have had both of them. And there was something there, but Cohen was treated very badly, very rudely, and I think was asked, you know, if you want us to take the papers we need a half a million dollars, or some huge amount. And it wasn't, oh well, you can go out and raise it and we'll help you. It was, I mean that's all hearsay, all I know is, Cohen was *going* to, *wanted* to, and then as a result of interfacing with the dean and the faculty it all came a cropper, and I don't know whether University of Maine was the second choice or, it's now like Muskie and Mitchell versus Muskie and Cohen, I don't know what the official history is. But from Bowdoin's point of view, wouldn't it have been spectacular to have the two senators, contemporaries, the Iran-Contra, all of the reasons it would have - I get sick sometimes when I think about how we didn't get them but, water under the dam.

AL: Yes, thank you so much.

CP: Well, thank you so much for having me.

End of interview