

## ***George J. Mitchell Oral History Project***

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**Gordon L. Weil**  
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

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**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is August 17, 2009, and we're in the H-L [Hawthorne Longfellow] Library at Bowdoin College. Today I'm here with Gordon Weil, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Gordon, could I have you just start by giving me your full name.

**Gordon Weil:** My name is Gordon Lee Weil.

**AL:** And where and when were you born?

**GW:** I was born on March 12, 1937, in Mineola, New York.

**AL:** Now Gordon, at what point did you come to Maine?

**GW:** I came to Maine in February 1954, for a sub-freshman weekend at Bowdoin College, that's the first time I set foot in the state.

**AL:** So your experience at Bowdoin College is what gave you the Maine connection?

**GW:** Right, well what happened relatively soon after I was here, I came in contact with Clem [Clement E.] Vose, who was a professor in the Government Department, although I never took a course with him. And he wondered if I wanted to get involved with the Maine Democratic Party, and I said I was interested, and he was involved and so I would go with him to various meetings of the Maine Democratic Party. The combination of the two, being at Bowdoin, most students at Bowdoin had nothing to do with politics, it was a very conservative era and everybody was busy getting an education, and certainly most students not from Maine had nothing to do with Maine while they were here. They lived in an almost hermetically sealed surrounding. But I got to meet a lot of people from Maine through that. I arrived on campus to begin my freshman year the day that Muskie was elected governor the first time, and amazingly enough, within two years I was with the Maine delegation at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, in 1956. So it was a very small party; it was easy to get yourself involved.

**AL:** Yeah. And that was very early in sort of the rebuilding of the Democratic Party in Maine.

**GW:** Well really, yeah, the rebuilding, if you consider that it stopped being built around the

time of the Civil War, yeah.

**AL:** Who were some of those other old time Democrats that you met in the mid-'50s, do you recall?

**GW:** Sure, I met Frank Coffin, who was really very largely responsible for the re-growth of the Democratic Party. Muskie gets a lot of credit because he was the candidate, but Coffin was really the operator. Don Nicoll, who later was Muskie's AA, John Donovan, who was from what was then the 2nd District.

**AL:** And he was at Bowdoin.

**GW:** Later, [he] taught at Bowdoin, yeah. And Dick Dubord was a lawyer from Waterville; Louis Jalbert, who was a famous politician from Lewiston. I knew a lot of the people who would now be classified as 'old timers' in the Democratic Party.

**AL:** Was Eben Elwell active at that time?

**GW:** Could be, I know the name, but I don't remember whether I knew him or not.

**AL:** Yeah, and Dick McMahon, does that ring a bell?

**GW:** No.

**AL:** He was involved in Muskie's '54 campaign. So you went to the Democratic National Convention in '56?

**GW:** Right.

**AL:** What was that like?

**GW:** Oh, it was a great experience. I asked if I could go. They essentially needed somebody to be what they called a page of the delegation, which is really the secretary of the delegation. And they said sure, as long as you pay your own way and take care of your own expenses. If you want to come for nothing, we'd be glad to have you. It happened that my mother's family was from Chicago, so I had a floor I could sleep on out there so I didn't need lodging, and I found at a convention you didn't need to worry about feeding yourself, there was lots of free food, so I didn't have to worry about that either. And I just managed to fly out there, I guess. I had had a summer job in college and I quit that job to go out to the convention.

What it was like was, that was the second convention where Stevenson was nominated for president, and that was a pretty [much] foregone conclusion, but it was a real convention. Things were decided at that convention, as opposed to today where they really aren't. One of the most interesting experiences I had was with regard to the selection of the vice president, because

Stevenson decided that he would throw it to the convention, that he would not pick a running mate, but he would let the convention decide on who his running mate would be. That was announced the day he got the nomination, and then the next day there was going to be balloting for the vice president. And I ran into, at the convention, a member of the class of '57 [at] Bowdoin, a year ahead of me, a man by the name of Vince Villard, who came from a very historic family in New York. Clearly, not someone I expected to be a Democrat since [his grandfather] was one of the robber barons [ ].

But Villard was a Democrat, and I ran into him and we spent some time together, and the night after Stevenson got the nomination, he said, "There's a party over at Stevenson's suite at the hotel, do you want to go?" And, of course, I said I did. And we went over there and there were cameras and news people, we had to wade our way through, and we got to the door of the apartment, knocked on the door and Mrs. Ives, who was Stevenson's hostess, [ ] his sister, he was divorced, came to the door and Vince introduced himself as a prep school friend of Stevenson's son, John Fell Stevenson. And that was enough to get him [in] and me in his train.

Well, it turned out it was a party of about forty people, including everybody who wanted to be vice president. So there was Harriman and Kennedy and Kefauver, and you name it, the real wheels of the Democratic Party at that time. And so I had a very interesting evening, needless to say, meeting these people, and listening in on these conversations. That was clearly the high point of my experience at the convention.

But it was a wonderful experience. Maine people in the delegation were very restrained, timid almost, you might say, and so when there was a demonstration and somebody had to go around the floor carrying the Maine banner or the Maine name that was on a post next to the delegation chair, they said, "You carry it." And some of them would follow me, but I had to carry it. The [delegation] chair was given a limousine, which he seldom used, and so they said, "But you can use the limousine." So I got to ride around Chicago in this fine car. I was a kid who had no money when he came to Bowdoin, zero. And here, and I had just walked into Maine, and within two years I was doing all of this.

Muskie was the chair of the delegation at that time, and as it happened he sat on the aisle and the delegation was off to his right, and I sat right behind him, also on the aisle. The chair of the South Carolina delegation happened to sit right in back of me, and that was J. Strom Thurmond at that time. And Muskie left after a couple of days – he was up for re-election again, and he did not feel he could be out of the state that long to be at the Democratic convention – and Dick Dubord became the chair of the delegation when he left.

The interesting thing about the vice president, when the balloting took place, there was none of the electronics of today, and there were people announcing who they supported and then they were changing, "Oh, we've changed our vote in our delegation." And I was writing this down on a piece of paper, trying to keep track of who was getting what votes, and at one point I looked up and there's the heads of four delegations standing around, because the two from across the aisle,

[plus] Dubord and Thurmond, standing around me, looking at my count, and I said, "Look gentlemen, do not rely on what I'm doing. I have no idea whether this is right, this is happening so quickly." But it was an interesting moment, and of course in the end Kefauver got the nomination. Kennedy was at that point launched, became a real contender for four years later, because Kennedy came in second to Kefauver, I believe, for the vice presidential nomination. So that was that experience.

Another thing I did that was significantly related to that, was later than that. Maine had two things that distinguished it from most of the rest of the country, it had its election in September rather than in November, although previously in the nineteenth century, people had had elections, states had had elections all over the place, but Maine [would be] the last one to fall in line. And secondly, you could vote a straight ticket by checking what was called the 'big box.' And there was a campaign to do away with that, and Vose got me to write a paper that was paid for by the Bureau for Research in Municipal Government at Bowdoin College called, "As Maine Goes: the September Election in Maine." I don't have a copy of it and I don't think there is one that exists, but it was then used in the campaign. And in 1960 the September election was voted to be changed and the big box [also] went, and my paper was used in the campaign to argue against the September election. So that was my other contribution to Maine politics in those days; all of this while I was an undergraduate at Bowdoin.

I didn't know George Mitchell, and he wasn't, I think, involved in Maine, or even [present] in Maine at that time, when I was a student, I think he was in the army or whatever. But I didn't know him, and I didn't know a number of people who later became very active in the Democratic Party. As you know, I was in Joe Brennan's administration and I used to kid him that I was a Maine Democrat before he was and, which was factually true. So that's the long answer to your question.

**AL:** Right. And so, when did George Mitchell first come on your radar?

**GW:** I think I had known there was such a person as George Mitchell, but I don't think I actually met him until 1972. I don't think I had ever met him before that. It's possible, as I think I probably said in the Muskie interview, there was a point where I was either going to work for McGovern or Muskie, and it turned out I worked for McGovern. I was in Muskie's office a fair amount and it's quite conceivable that I met George at some point then, but I have no memory of that.

My clearest memory during the '72 [primary], Muskie of course did everything possible to keep McGovern from getting the nomination, right up to the convention; he was part of the ABM movement, "Anybody But McGovern" movement, and so we didn't have a lot to do with the Muskie people. But when we got to the convention, I was one of the two people assigned to deal with a platform [for] McGovern. Ted Van Dyk, who is a very good friend of mine, and the two of us worked on the platform, and we had to deal mostly with Muskie people, who we wanted to have in agreement on platform issues. And at that time, I met Shep Lee for the first time. He

and a woman from Waterville [Nancy Chandler], whose name I don't remember, who was later mayor of Waterville, I think, were the two Muskie people on the platform committee. And we worked closely together very well, and I got to know Shep quite well. We'd gone to Bowdoin, we were both members of ARU [fraternity] and so on, so that it was a pretty quick connection that I made with him.

And so I knew about George, I do not remember exactly when I met him, until December of that year. After McGovern lost, the Democratic National Committee was clearly not going to keep the person [Jean Westwood] he had appointed as chair of the committee. There was going to be a new chair, and there was a meeting at a hotel in Washington to select the new chair of the Democratic National Committee; the whole committee met there. And there were two principle candidates, Bob Strauss from Texas, who was a Johnson-Humphrey person, and George Mitchell. And three of us from the McGovern campaign decided to go down, we weren't asked to do this, go down to the DNC and work for Mitchell.

I had told everybody [that] anybody from Maine is great, we've got to support Maine people and so on, and that I had heard good things about George, and they knew, one of the other guys who went with me was Joe Grandmaison, who was from New Hampshire and had been the McGovern chair, or chief staff guy at least, in New Hampshire, and he knew of George probably as well as I did, if not better. So Joe and I and somebody else went down to work the members of the DNC, lobby them to vote for George. Well, it happened he didn't get it. He didn't [lose it] by much, it was like three-and-a-fraction votes, I think, that he lost by. It was very close. And he lost, and there was some concern that somehow the Democratic Party was going to revert to sort of the bad old days, which in fact did not happen. Bob Strauss came to Maine soon after and made it a point to tell me and others that he was really going to continue the reform of the Democratic Party.

So I met George then, he lost obviously, so he came back to practice law in Maine, from that. And at that point, soon thereafter, certainly in '73, we needed a lawyer, actually, who was well connected with Augusta. And so we hired George to handle a matter for us, my wife and I. And coincidentally, and having nothing to do with anything but it made the other link that we had with George, was that my father-in-law, Roberta's father, Robert Meserve, was one of the two trustees of the Boston and Maine Railroad, which was in bankruptcy. And he got recommendations from people about hiring a counsel and hired George as the counsel for the Boston and Maine Railroad since, though my father-in-law was an eminent lawyer, he obviously couldn't also be the counsel when he was a trustee. So that way Roberta got to know him, on the strength of her father's involvement.

So anyhow, we hired George, we were his clients and we didn't succeed, but it worked out in the end all right, but we asked him to intercede with the Department of Education for us on a matter and he did, but it didn't happen. And then after that, and I wasn't involved, he ran for governor. And Shep Lee, I remember him coming up to me on the Bowdoin campus saying, "Who are you supporting for governor?" And I said, "I don't know." And he said, "Well I want you to support

George Mitchell.” And I remember saying, “Well who else is running?” And he said, “Oh, a state senator from Portland,” which turned out to be Joe Brennan. And so on the strength of Shep and having worked for George for the DNC and gotten to know more about him, I said, “Sure, I’ll work for George.” And I became part of the strategy group of that campaign.

So we had periodic meetings and laid out what we were going to do in the campaign and so on, and I was very much involved in that. As a result, at that point, I got to know George quite well and he got to know me and how I thought about issues and so on. That’s really when I began to know him well, in the strategy meetings for his campaign. And a couple of times they asked me to go out on the road with him when he was campaigning to give my view of how that was going, and my opinion of how the campaign was going, and I did that, I traveled with him a couple of times.

**AL:** What was he like in strategy meetings in terms of taking in information and considering during -

**GW:** Oh, I think he was very open. I think he was very interested in getting the input. How much he was going to use, I don’t know whether he thought that was good politics or he really was interested, I don’t know. But he certainly is an easy person to talk with, and does not say, ‘you can’t tell me anything, I’m the candidate,’ or ‘I know a lot, look at where I am.’ It never has been like that with him. So, he was very open to discussion.

I thought that he made two mistakes in that campaign. One was to underestimate Longley; one was to assume that [James B.] Longley could be beaten. And that was a mistake I think a lot of us made, I don’t think he was alone in that, but we underestimated Longley. I remember, I was a visiting professor at Bowdoin that year, and Longley came to see me and asked me to support him. And I remember that very clearly, and I spent the whole time that he was there trying to convince him he ought to support George, and obviously it didn’t work. But I wasn’t going to support Jim Longley, I had already signed on to support George, and I liked him so I wasn’t going to, I didn’t see any particular attraction to Longley, but I couldn’t convince him, obviously, to support him. But I think we underestimated him, and particularly in Lewiston, there was a sense that Mitchell was going to win in Lewiston and that’s all that mattered. Well, it mattered a lot by how much you won in Lewiston, not just whether you won there. And you had to get a good Democratic vote, which he wasn’t going to get, that Longley was really working on.

The other thing was, George was too serious a candidate, so that he would, when asked a question say, ‘well I have a five-point program on that,’ or ‘I have a three-point program on that,’ or ‘I have a ten-point answer to that,’ and he’d immediately launch into it. And it was right – I mean substantively, I agreed with what he was saying – but it mostly went past people, who will never remember any-point program, and who won’t get much of a feel for you, the candidate, as a person, although you’re a smart guy and you have all these ideas, but they mostly don’t vote on that basis.

So I thought that George was talking mostly above their heads on that, and when you get to the Senate campaign, he remedied that. But I think that hurt him, I think the combination of the two hurt him. And of course Longley did well because of a very weak Republican candidate, Jim Erwin, who simply, a stronger Republican candidate and George would have been elected, but Longley got an awful lot of Republican votes in that election.

Well in any case, I got to work with him during that. He was certainly open, there were good discussions. One could say anything, I tried to be diplomatic if I had a comment, but I made sure he understood where I was coming from, but I certainly wasn't the only person he was talking to. But it was a good experience in terms of working with him, perfectly fine, I had no problem with him and I don't think he had any with me. So that's '74, and then he goes back to practicing law, and then he became U.S. attorney, and I had nothing to do with that. I assumed that Muskie just got him the job as U.S. attorney and that was all.

**AL:** And then the federal judgeship.

**GW:** Then the federal judgeship was another matter. Then he called me, and I'm sure [many] others, and he said, "Can you talk to Muskie and ask him to appoint me to be the federal judge?" And I said, "Sure, of course I will," and I did. And then he called me again, he said could you talk to Muskie again, and I did, and I did it repeatedly until the point where we were at some dinner and Muskie and I were both there, it wasn't on the phone or anything, and Muskie just told me to cut it out. Muskie's temper I think was not always put on, I think he really had a temper. And at that point he just told me, he couldn't have loved me, because I supported McGovern as it was, but he put up with me because I contributed to the party and I was active in the party, and I was certainly loyal to the Maine Democratic Party. But I don't think he ever had a really warm feeling toward me after McGovern, and he just told me, "I don't want to hear from you any more about this." "Okay, Senator."

So that was the end of it, and of course I'm not sure that that was significant. I think that George wanted to demonstrate to him that there was interest and the support, but I can't believe that Muskie would have supported anybody else for it anyhow. In any case, he got the appointment that he wanted, and I thought that was kind of going to be the end of the story. Well, there, he's a judge, and I'll see him from time to time, one place or another.

**AL:** And now you're working in the Brennan administration, starting in '78?

**GW:** '79. Oh, I did want to say, there was one very interesting thing that came out of the [campaign], rolling back to the gubernatorial campaign. After he lost, for some reason David Broder, who I had known from the McGovern campaign, from the *Washington Post*, was in Maine. And so we invited David and George to dinner and we had a very interesting postmortem [p/o]. And we had a direct postmortem about what had gone wrong in the campaign. So I did have an opportunity then to express directly my concern about the campaign,

which had kind of taken Lewiston for granted and the too many points at the beginning of anything that he said, being over the head of a lot of voters.

**AL:** How did he take that?

**GW:** Oh, I thought he took it very well. Broder had followed the campaign somewhat and I think made useful comments as well. I don't think we differed very much. No, he took it very well, he listened. I mean he lost the election, you certainly want to hear what people who are on your side think you could have done better. Unless you're an idiot, or you don't want to run again, you should definitely be open, and my recollection is that he was perfectly open to that discussion and it was a good, positive discussion. It wasn't a down meeting; we knew he would run again for something or that he was going to do something else, that that wasn't the end of George Mitchell. So it was a positive kind of discussion.

And I've never found him, ever, to be resistant to what you're saying to him. And a good politician doesn't give you that impression. But even more than a good politician, a lot of people are clearly looking right through you and they're polite, but it isn't taking. [With] McGovern, it's taking, and Mitchell as well. Not that he will do the thing that the last person told him, but Mitchell I think takes it all in and then makes up his own mind. He's obviously an enormously intelligent person and in the end I think takes his own counsel, but he gets a lot of input from people. And an intelligent person in Washington, let me say, was a reasonably rare item, in my view. So that distinguishes him quite a bit.

So anyhow, I kind of went back to that. Then I'm in the Brennan administration. Well, I didn't really mean to be in the Brennan administration, I turned him down several times, but eventually I went in, so that's why it wasn't until '79 that I went in. And then comes the question of [ ] the Senate seat coming open, of Muskie leaving the Senate seat. And Joe Brennan is a very careful person, I think Joe Brennan is a greatly underestimated person; he's a good deal more intelligent than I think a lot of people think he is. And he's extremely careful, so he will do nothing. I think he made not a single mistake when he was governor, his only mistakes were of omission not commission, things he didn't do. But he didn't *do* anything wrong. I wish he had done some other things.

**AL:** So who, I mean that Senate seat came open; he had in his head at least some people that -

**GW:** Well, he called me into his office, and I was regarded as one of his closest political advisors, Brennan, and he called me in and it was just him and Connie Lapointe, now Connie Brennan, and I, just the three of us. And he said, "Well, who do you think I ought to appoint to the Senate?" So, I said, well, "I assume you might be interested, but you can't appoint yourself obviously, that would go over very badly in Maine, so what you need to do is appoint a place holder, if you want the seat, and somebody who will serve out the term with the premise that he won't run again." And I suggested that he appoint Russ Wiggins, from the *Ellsworth American*, former editor of *Washington Post*, to the job, on the understanding that he could then run for it



the next time.

I'm loyal to whoever I'm working for, and I was working for Joe Brennan and that was Joe Brennan advice. And he listened to all of that very carefully, and then he said, "Well that's interesting. What do you think of George Mitchell?" And they weren't the closest buddies, he and George. And it was one of two cases where I saw Brennan do this, which shows that he could overcome his personal feeling about a person.

**AL:** Because they had competed for the primary -

**GW:** They had competed in the primary, and Brennan was the kind of guy who remembered. Now, not that Mitchell did anything dirty in the primary, but he was the competitor, and Brennan knew I had worked with Mitchell, obviously, I hadn't worked with him. And he said, "What do you think of George Mitchell?" And I said, "Well you know what I think of George Mitchell," and this is a precise conversation. I said, "You know what I think of George Mitchell, I think he'd be perfect." But I didn't want to say that, I didn't want to come right out and say that, and so then we talked about Mitchell for awhile, and how would he do and so on, he'd have to run for it and so on.

And I think he was talking to other people, and he didn't say what he was going to do at that point. He didn't say, 'well it's going to be Mitchell,' and I have always been of the opinion there are people who say that Muskie said to Brennan, 'I'm going to be secretary of state, I'm leaving the Senate, but I'll only do it if you agree to appoint George Mitchell.' I don't believe that ever happened. I don't think that would have gone over very well with Brennan. Brennan was the governor, he'd been elected in his own right, [and] he wasn't very beholden to Muskie for much. I mean Muskie was God, was highly respected for what he had done for the country and for the party in Maine, but I don't think Brennan would jump when Muskie said jump.

And so I think Brennan was really making up his mind at that point, and that was his inclination and that was in fact the right choice. But it sat for awhile, because I then started getting phone calls from people who wanted him to pick them. Bill Hathaway, who had been a senator and had been defeated, called me and asked me to intercede with Brennan on his behalf. I was in a difficult position getting these calls, my mind was made up, I had already stated my view, but I couldn't work for Brennan and look like I had a closed mind, I had to be a message carrier and say to him, well, "I got a call from Bill Hathaway and he's looking for the appointment."

**AL:** What about Ken Curtis?

**GW:** I knew Ken Curtis, I had come to know Ken Curtis well, and Ken did not talk to me. And I would have thought very highly of Ken, and I do think very highly of him, I think he was a fabulous governor of the state; I have great admiration for him. But I would have favored George because he was smart, as I said, and he had a lot of relevant experience by that time. I did not hear from Ken, and I would never say anything negative about Ken Curtis. I have a great

deal of admiration for him, but he didn't call me.

Hathaway was kind of the biggest name that called me, but lesser lights. People thought, I don't know what they thought, maybe they thought Brennan would do something really dumb and appoint somebody who was relatively unknown. Hathaway clearly wasn't unknown, but he had already been voted on by the people so I couldn't see Brennan doing that. Brennan did not have a close connection with any of these people, somewhat with Curtis, maybe, but basically not. Brennan was Brennan, and Brennan had his own political organization which was quite separate from everybody else's, even from the Democratic Party in some respects. We were called Brennanistas, and there's a great deal of loyalty in that group even today, but it was kind of separate. So Brennan made up his own mind, and I'm convinced really did think that George was the best choice to be senator, and was willing to take himself out of it. Because I had suggested a way that he [Brennan] could be in it, and he didn't think of that at all, which is, I think, a good thing about Brennan.

So that's all I know, other than the conversation went on, but it clearly was Mitchell for, I think this went on for several days, and maybe as long as a week. It went on for several days before the Muskie announcement was made and all that. Brennan had maybe a half dozen people who he talked to a lot about political strategy, and I'm sure he talked to all of them, although I was never in a meeting to do with it, it was just one-on-one, or with Connie, the three of us together. He didn't get us all grouped together and say, "What do you think I ought to do?" So anyhow -

**AL:** Yeah. Who were some of those people that were really close to Brennan?

**GW:** Isn't that terrible, I'm drawing a blank. Arthur Stilphen, who was the commissioner of Public Safety and was a real Brennan worker; Mike Petit, [a Bowdoin grad] who was a commissioner of Human Services; Davie Redman, that's who I was trying to think of, who was I think on the governor's staff, or in the legislature; Connie, of course [and David Flanagan, his counsel]; probably a couple of others, but as I said, about a half dozen or somewhere around that number. Somebody did a piece in the *Sunday Telegram* about the people close to Brennan, in 1980 probably, and that's what I'd go back and look at that.

**AL:** Has Arthur Stilphen passed away?

**GW:** Not that I know of. I haven't, I would have heard, and I'm sure he hasn't [*sic*: deceased February 21, 2009].

**AL:** He was somebody that I think would be interesting to talk to.

**GW:** Well, he might be. Arthur was a very grassroots operator, he organized campaigns at the grassroots level. If there was a Brennan sign in this state anywhere, Arthur had something to do with it being there. And I think totally Brennan, obviously there is a little bit of, well David Flanagan also, there's obviously an Irishness to all of this, that was directly to Brennan. I don't

remember how I got originally involved with Brennan. Oh, I do remember, he called me up, and I don't know if you want to talk about Brennan.

**AL:** That's, yeah.

**GW:** He called me up and he asked me if I'd meet with him, having known I'd worked for Mitchell, and we met at the old Howard Johnson's on Pleasant Street, I'll never forget, and we had a cup of coffee. And he said, "How do I deal with Jim Longley, because I've been the attorney general, he's been the governor? I want to tell people that I am not going to be like him, but I don't want to attack him." So I gave him the line that he used, I said that, "You are going to be a governor with warm blood."

Because Longley was business, business, business, 'I'm going to run government like a business,' and that was kind of the 'accountant' as governor. And I said what people want is the sense of compassion for people, and not just it's about saving money. And so I suggested that he say that he was going to have warm blood, which is the line he used. I don't know how significant it was but, so I signed on with him after that conversation, because he was very receptive. That was just the two of us talking, and after that I just got more and more into that campaign. I got along very well with Connie, and Connie was very key to anything that Brennan did. So that was that. So here we are, Mitchell then gets to the Senate.

**AL:** And immediately has to start thinking about the reelection campaign.

**GW:** Right. And I was involved somewhat, but not as closely as I had been in the gubernatorial race. But the one message that he got probably from lots of people, clearly was the message that I was trying to get to him, was, 'take it easy.' And so he would start, not with the ten-point answer, but telling a story. It frequently was the same story, but that was all right, different audiences, and he would always start and he would get people to laugh, and that was key. That's not what he did in '74. But when he was running for reelection to the Senate, people got to know *him*, not his positions on issues, but George Mitchell, and that was a huge difference. And clearly, that he was more intelligent than his opponent took no time to figure out.

I don't mean to be negative, but clearly, George came across as competent, he'd been there, he'd been in the seat and he came across as competent, but he also came across as human. And that was what was important I think for him to do, that was the bridge he had to cross in that campaign. And he knew it, and he did it, and he did it concentrated, he paid a lot of attention to doing it. I'm sure that I probably talked to Shep a lot, and Shep of course is extremely close to George, and I'm sure you've interviewed him, and I have a feeling that a lot of what I wanted to say to George in that campaign I said through Shep or at occasions that Shep made sure I'd be there, and he was there, and that sort of thing. But I was pretty well satisfied with what he was doing because I would go to events and I would see how he was handling them, and he handled them very well. And it paid off, obviously, because people liked him. They just had to get to

know him, which they hadn't previously. And so that was a huge difference.

**AL:** Yeah. And learning to tell stories like that, that's not an easy thing when you, do you have any insight or sense of how he developed that ability?

**GW:** Oh, I think it was purely intellectual. I think he just knew he had to do it, and so he did it. And the more he did it, the easier it came to him, and I think when he saw the reaction, I was in audience after audience, I heard these stories, but I think the more he saw that people related to him when he did that, the more relaxed he got about it in the campaign, more confident that he was doing it. That by telling these little anecdotes or stories or whatever, kind of warming the audience up for the message, which there always was, he was always a serious candidate, he never was a hundred percent superficial, but you had to get them to listen to you. He got more and more confident that it was working, and so he got more relaxed, and that came across. Because it wasn't, 'hmm, is this working, when I tell a story, does it work or not?' It was, 'I know this story works, and I know people respond and I know they start listening to me at that point.'

I think any public speaker, and I do a fair amount, always has a store of stories that you tell to get - Number one, people don't start listening right away when you start talking, you can't sort of say, 'that's a very good question and here's my six-point answer to it.' People need to get into gear to listen to you, so it takes a little bit of time, simply. I throw away the first sentence of any talk, I'll say anything just to let them get used to the sound of my voice. And then I always start with a story, because people like to laugh, they like to get to know you, if you can kid yourself in the story, all the better, then you're not looking down at them; all that kind of stuff. You can just learn that, and he learned it I'm sure, I learned it. I think you just learn it in public speaking; it's one of the things you need to do, and in politics in particular.

If I'm giving a lecture at Bowdoin, that's a different proposition. Not that different, but a little different, but in politics you definitely have to do it, because people aren't going to go away from a political speech with more than a couple of thoughts. They're not going to remember your ten points, they're going to remember you *had* ten points, so if you want them to believe you're intelligent and knowledgeable, that's fine. If you want them to believe you're a nice guy, that's fine, that's it, that's all you need to do. And particularly, you're going to do something for them, you know, something. If you have a homogeneous group of everybody is a labor union member or whatever, then you say the right thing if you can, if you feel like it, that if you're able to politically, that says this is what I'm going to do for you.

And he was good at that, he got good at that, and that worked in that campaign, beautifully, and he obviously turned it around radically, because he was just a much better candidate in every respect, knowledgeable, better on the stump, and people were determined, this time he was going to win; he should have won the last time and this time he's going to win. The Democrats focused better on that.

So there he is, senator, and I didn't have a lot to do with him as a senator. As it happened, the day that he ran for Senate majority leader, I was in Washington at a meeting for a client, and the news was on or something, we knew the voting was going on, and I said, "Gee, I want to go up the Hill and see what happened." So I went to his office, and Larry Benoit took me over to the Senate, and we were there like five minutes, and he was elected majority leader and walks out, and I think I was the first person to congratulate him, the first person from Maine at least, to congratulate him on his election as majority leader. Which he did obviously a great job on, although the Republicans thought he was too partisan. I don't. I think he did the job as it was supposed to be done.

And then while he was majority leader, we had this thing that arose in Harpswell while he was senator – I have to say one sort of cute little story. They have internships in the summer, and our son wanted an internship with him one summer, and we contacted the office and he got a four-week internship in Washington, in his office. I think it was half the summer, whatever it was. And so one day my father-in-law calls my son and says, "Can you get me an appointment with Senator Mitchell on Monday?" And our son, Richard, says, "Me? I don't think I can do that, I don't have that kind of influence around here." So not knowing the background of the B&M Railroad, of course, he said that.

So, this was late in the week. Monday he's in the office and the desk calls Richard and says, "Your grandfather is here, and he's going to see Senator Mitchell and we would like you to take him in to see the Senator." Well Richard couldn't believe that this had all happened, but he didn't know the previous connection. And my father-in-law, who had been president of the American Bar Association and was a very eminent lawyer, wanted Mitchell to support a new federal courthouse in Boston, which he did and the courthouse was built. So, he went in and asked him for that and that [was how] that came about.

**AL:** Now, what was your father-in-law's name?

**GW:** Robert Meserve, Robert W. Meserve. The other story was in Harpswell,

**AL:** Hold that, I am going to flip this -.

*End of CD One*  
*CD Two*

**AL:** We are now on Side B, and the story in Harpswell?

**GW:** Right, the Navy base in Brunswick had a fuel depot in Harpswell, where tankers would bring aviation fuel, it would be off-loaded into storage tanks there and then go to the base in a pipe line, about a ten-, eleven-mile pipe line. And the Defense Department, in its wisdom, decided to shut down the fuel depot and truck it from Searsport. And my wife and I first made an effort to keep it open, tried to lobby DOD to keep it open, because there were Harpswell

people employed there and to keep the jobs in town, and that didn't work, and they shut it down.

And then she had the idea that they then ought to turn this over to the town. It had been taken from a bunch of homeowners around 1950, and they had been compensated one way or another so the government wasn't going to return it to them, and the government *had* it, I don't know how it is now, a process for disposing of surplus property. It would first be offered to other federal agencies, to the Indian tribes, to the State, to the county, any higher level of government than the town before it got to the town.

Roberta got the idea that they ought to come directly to the town, got the selectmen to agree that she ought to take a shot at doing that, and she contacted Mitchell's office, contacted Mitchell, who knew her and assigned a person on his staff to deal with it. And they sent us sort of model legislation, and she and I drafted the legislation and sent it back in, and then he needed a statement to go in the *Congressional Record* for why he did that, and she and I drafted that and we sent it in, and Mitchell got it. It was in the Defense Appropriations Bill, that it would go directly to Harpswell, skipping over all the intervening things, we didn't have to pay for it, we just got it. It took a lot of years to clean it up environmentally before the town actually got it, but we received it, thanks to his efforts. He was majority leader and that was the kind of thing that majority leaders could make happen.

We weren't the only place in the country where that happened, but it was relatively few. And subsequently, when it came to the town I was a selectman at that time, and I put on the warrant that we should name it after Mitchell, and explained why at the town meeting, that we wouldn't 've had it without him, and the town voted and it was named George J. Mitchell Field. It was not named Park, because one of my selectman friends didn't like the idea of creating a park, so we called it Field. And he came for the dedication of that, and both he and I spoke at the dedication of that, and then subsequently, there was somebody in town, and this was only a rumor but, who had worked on Cohen's staff and who thought this was an excessively partisan thing to do. And I said, "I'm going to fight this to the ground if anybody tries to change the name of this. It'll be an embarrassment to me and to the town," and the matter went away. She later became a selectman and never, never raised the issue. So it is George J. Mitchell Field. I thought there should be more things in this state named in honor of his efforts, but I guess that will come in time. But at least in Harpswell, we did something for him, and he did something for us.

**AL:** Right.

**GW:** And he came to the dedication and went around the field and so on. Oh, the other thing about Mitchell and me that's worth mentioning. I knew Bill Clinton from the McGovern campaign. Bill Clinton ended up on the campaign [ ] running Texas for McGovern, one of the few states we didn't carry.

**AL:** And he must have been quite young at that time, too.

**GW:** He was just out of law school, and his wife, Hillary, also went to Texas. And I knew both of them; I mean I was more senior than they were in the campaign at that point. And he called, when he started to run for president in '91, I guess, he called me and asked me to support him, and I said of course I would, and did, and worked for him and contributed to his campaign. And I wanted an appointment from him afterwards, a minor, really, appointment, as these things go, and I asked George if he would help me, and George did help me. I did not get the appointment, I think Clinton thought I was too liberal, but actually it had nothing to do with liberal or conservative, but he didn't give me the appointment.

But Mitchell was really very good and made me extremely grateful to him, because one time he called me from National Airport. He was getting a flight somewhere and he says, "I just want you to know, I just came from a meeting with the president at the White House and I told him about your interest in this appointment," but he didn't even have to call and tell me that, I would have assumed that if he said he was going to help me, he was going to help me. But he went out of his way to update me on that, and the State Department called me, it was in the State Department, and then they called me and said for this appointment they had a list that consisted of one person, me, but that the White House would do things for political purposes. So I know that this really all happened, but I didn't get the appointment and, but I'm extremely grateful for the fact that Mitchell went out of his way for me to see if he could get it.

And I know that Clinton thought very highly of Mitchell. You've seen the reports that he twice offered him a Supreme Court appointment and so on. So I'm sure that if Mitchell went to the trouble to call me and say that he talked to the president, he had talked to the president, I had no doubt about that.

**AL:** What did you think about that, Clinton offering him the Supreme Court position? Given what you know about George Mitchell.

**GW:** Well it's kind of what I learned about George Mitchell later. I think that George and I coming to Bowdoin weren't all that different. Neither of us had two nickels to rub together and needed all the help we could get. And George, exceptionally, for a person at the level he had reached in politics, had not made money out of being in public service, hadn't gotten to be wealthy. It's mysterious how people in public life do that. And it became clear to me, it wasn't clear to me when he could 've done these other things. Why, like he said that he wanted to get the health care plan through and he was dedicated to getting that through, and I'm saying to myself, the Supreme Court's a life-time appointment, health care is going to pass or not pass and then what? I'm probably sufficiently conservative for my own affairs; I'd say, gee, take a life-time job, forget that.

But I don't think it was about health care, I think it was about George Mitchell, and I think it was about his view about where he wanted his life to go after. The day he said he wasn't going to run again, and therefore wouldn't be majority leader, I talked to Larry Benoit and he said Mitchell had had a staff meeting to tell his staff before it went public, and he said that Mitchell said, "I

don't want to die in this job." And that said to me, I mean Senate majority leader, it's a pretty influential job as these things go in the country. And the fact that he said that was all about George Mitchell, I thought was, 'I've done public service, my life has been public service, now I deserve to get something more out of life for me, I've been doing this for everybody else, now it's time for me to get some of the benefits.'

He's continued to provide public service, but sort of at will, he didn't have to, he could do whatever he wanted with his life as well. And so I took that to mean what it has turned out to mean, to some degree. 'I want to have a family, I want to have some money and some freedom that goes with that, and that I'm just going to do it. My time has come to do that.' And I think it was a very personal, my sense was that you could offer him anything and he wouldn't do it. My view, as I'm sure you've heard lots of people say, is he should have been president of the United States. There's no question, as I look at the people who were available to run, that in every respect, he was more qualified.

I know, there's a bias – I know him, it's Bowdoin, it's Maine, all of that – but I think I can be objective enough about who ought to win and who could govern. Muskie's problem was that Muskie probably would have been a good president, but was a terrible candidate. He thought he should be given the presidency. Mitchell understood that you had to run for it; that you had to run for office; that nobody owed you that, so I don't think he had the attitude that Muskie had. But Muskie had been on the ticket, had been viewed well in '68 and thought something came out of that.

But as majority leader, he had done so well, the Democrats loved him, that he could have gotten the nomination, I think. And that he's a northern Democrat, that [doesn't mean a lot to] people elsewhere in the country. But his style as conciliator, negotiator and so on could sell to people that they ought to support the Democratic ticket, and they ought to support George Mitchell. I think he would have been a splendid president, he knew how Congress worked well, very intelligent guy, knew the issues; my gosh, knew the full range of issues. He should have been president.

But he knew people thought that. I'm not saying something that nobody's ever said. Lots of people have said it; lots of people have thought it. And I think he walked away not just from the Supreme Court, but from the opportunity to do that, and I think it was because, and I give him a lot of credit, I give him huge credit for this, he knew he didn't want to do it, it wasn't what *he* wanted to do with his life. He wanted to do something else with his life, and he did it, and that's admirable. So you don't sell your soul to Washington, you don't totally get wrapped up in that, and believe that is your whole world and I am the leader of the free world and influencing it. You have to be true to yourself. And I think in the end, that's what he was, and that's what he wanted to do.

Now, in the end, he should also get the Nobel Peace Prize, I think. I don't understand how they figure out who gets it; I thought Carter should have gotten it long before he did too, for what he



had done. So that's obviously politics of another kind. What he is doing now, what he did in Northern Ireland, what he did in baseball, all of these things take great skill, diplomacy, intelligence, managerial ability. He didn't do it himself, he had a staff, he had people helping him. It wasn't like it was one guy with a brief case, and he managed it well.

I hope he'll make some progress in the Middle East and get recognized for it. I think he is a person of immense ability, looking at people in Washington. When I was working for McGovern, I got to know the senators pretty well, because this was when we were trying to get a vote on the so-called Amendment to End the War. I came to the conclusion, out of a hundred senators, twenty actually understood what was going on. But as I said, intelligence is a rare thing in Washington; the cream does not go to Washington. I think we have a president now who represents intellect and ability, I hope, but that's pretty rare. And we don't really want them, I mean Stevenson probably would not have been a great president, but was a very intelligent man; we didn't want anybody that smart.

**AL:** Is there anything I haven't asked you about Senator Mitchell, any recollections or stories that you want to add?

**GW:** I probably forgot something, but that basically is my interaction with him, has not been continuous, it's been from time to time. I mean now it is in the sense that every time we see one another, it's a continuation of the previous conversation, it's not like starting from scratch. He likes Roberta a lot, he always asks for Roberta. The first words out of his mouth are, "How's Roberta?" And, no, I can't think of anything else that's of any significance. You really got kind of a data dump from me of all my various -

**AL:** And do you see him at all in these later years, since he's been out of the -?

**GW:** Probably the last time I saw him was when he came to Harpswell a couple of years ago, or probably three years ago now, for the dedication of that. I wrote a book and he wrote a squib for the back of the book for me, which I arranged through his office and so on, and so that was nice. I've written several books, but that's the only one I ever tried to get little endorsements on and I got his, among others. So no, but I know his secretaries, telephone numbers in Washington and New York, and I feel that if I needed to pick up the phone and say I'd like to speak to Senator Mitchell, I'd speak to him. But I don't need this for my ego, to say, "Well, I was just talking to George Mitchell the other day -," so I don't create opportunities to do that. But I'm glad to know him, obviously.

**AL:** Thank you so much.

End of Interview