

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Carl Levin
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

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Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College with Senator Carl Levin. We are in the senator's offices in Washington, D.C., today is Monday, January 25, 2010, and I am Brien Williams. I thought I'd like to start a little bit before Senator Mitchell arrived in the Senate with your own arrival. And I was struck by the fact that you moved from the Detroit City Council to challenge a sitting senator who was then the Republican whip, and why, how did that happen?

Carl Levin: Not only was I great, obviously, but he made a mistake. He announced – that first I said tongue-in-cheek, I have to say when I'm being tongue-in-cheek because it's not being

BW: We don't have a video camera to see your tongue in your cheek, right.

CL: Right. In any event, I think that he made one mistake which hurt him, and that is that a year or two before the end of his term, he said he was tired of the job and wasn't going to run for reelection. And then he missed a lot of votes, and so I was able to use his own words against him, that he was tired of the job, and said accurately in my radio commercials, which was all I could afford at the time, that he then had the worst attendance record for votes of anybody in the U.S. Senate except for one person who died in office.

BW: So you got here, and like a year-and-a-half later, George Mitchell arrived on the scene.

CL: Right. And by the way, one other thing is, I think I had a good campaign theme, which was that I had a local perspective instead of a Washington perspective, and there's nothing, you hear a lot about that now, people pointing out the importance of having kind of a grass roots, close to the ground kind of approach to issues. I did that. We took on some federal agencies that we thought were doing unintended damage to my community, because they were distant from the community, we took on regulations which could not be overridden by Congress, we were constantly referred to bureaucrats in Chicago or Washington for relief in the problems that we had, and I felt very strongly that elected officials should be responsible to the people who elected them and should have to answer questions about policies that negatively affected our communities. So I had, I think, a good theme, a good approach, and he had kind of been somewhat distant from Michigan.

BW: Do you consider yourself a populist?

CL: No.

BW: What do you consider yourself as?

CL: A fiduciary.

BW: Describe that.

CL: That I should listen carefully, I should be accessible and open to people, I should spend a lot of time at home, I should think carefully about issues and listen to varying points of view and be well informed, but then I ought to vote for what in my best judgment is best for my state and country, even though it may not be popular at the time.

BW: So that's why you're not a populist.

CL: That's why I'm not a populist. I view my responsibilities, using my best judgment after going through a fair and open process, to represent my state, even though it may not reflect the popular majority at the moment.

BW: Of course in 1978, people didn't realize they would be getting the same senator for, what is it, thirty-one years so far?

CL: Yes, I'm not sure they would have voted me in if they knew that.

BW: What does it feel like to be serving for such a long time?

CL: It feels like it's not that long. It went pretty fast for thirty-one years; it's hard to believe it's been that much time.

BW: And you are the longest sitting senator from the state of Michigan.

CL: I am.

BW: So do you recall when George Mitchell made his first appearance down here?

CL: I remember he was a sitting federal judge who left his judicial position, which was pretty startling to begin with, and that he filled in for [Senator] Muskie, and we knew he was close to Muskie. As a matter of fact, my brother I'm pretty sure knew Mitchell, because my brother, who's now a congressman was, when Muskie was running for president, my brother I believe ran the Muskie campaign in Michigan, and so came to know George Mitchell at that time. But I didn't know George Mitchell; I heard great things about him through my brother, and anyone who supported Ed Muskie was good enough for me.

BW: So when did you become more familiar with him, and perhaps worked with him some?

CL: I'm trying to remember if we were on any committees together. I just don't think so, he focused mainly on Finance, governmental affairs, I have no real recollection of him through joint service on committees. He was obviously extremely talented, very well liked and respected, and had a demeanor and a bearing which was and is extremely pleasing and nonthreatening. As tough as he is, it's a velvet glove there on the outside.

BW: Did you see him pretty soon after he arrived as a strong comer and, how would you describe him?

CL: Yes, I think people saw him generally, as I recollect, as an unusually gifted and talented and well prepared person for Congress and for the Senate. Unusual in his kind of grasp of nuance, of his listening ability, of his ability to kind of encapsulate issues but to incorporate varying perspectives into his perspective, so that people had the feeling, even if they ended up in a different place, that this was somebody who knew how to listen.

BW: And how did you see him emerge as a potential majority leader?

CL: Well, I don't remember. I know he was elected majority leader in -

BW: Nineteen eighty-eight.

CL: 'Eighty-eight. I remember that he was up against Bennett Johnston and Inouye, and I think he was viewed as the likely winner in that race. He was very methodical, and spent a lot of time with his colleagues. I think people really felt that he would be a very wonderful face to the public, he's very well spoken but he's soft spoken, so that people had that impression of him, and accurately so.

BW: Did that contrast a good deal with the other, the leader he succeeded, Robert Byrd?

CL: Byrd had a different set of skills. He probably was viewed as a stronger leader on the outside, in terms of his rhetoric or his ability to command the rules. I think people would view him as playing hardball, more than Mitchell seemed to play. Mitchell played a game of hardball, but it seemed like softball, Byrd played a game of hardball which seems like hardball.

BW: Was Mitchell your man for the job?

CL: I think so. I'm ninety-nine percent sure, but I'll be darned if I can say that's a hundred percent. It's hard to be a hundred percent sure, but I'm just about a hundred percent sure.

BW: And what would you say were his strongest characteristics as leader?

CL: His ability to listen to people, to address their concerns in a way which seemed to be

welcoming and understanding, to say things, when he disagreed with people, in a nonthreatening way, non-personal way, and to remember colleagues' needs. Amazing memory, I mean you'd say something to him on the floor, people gather around the leader saying: I need this, I need this, can you do this, can I have, next weekend I can't be here – bombarding him with bits of personal positions or personal needs, and he remembered them. And so I'm sure when he got back to the office would tell his staff: one, two, three, four, five. But I'd be lucky to remember the last one who talked to me, number five. So he had that ability to – which is essential I think in a leader – to try to meet the legitimate needs of his membership, and he was extremely good at that. And even when he couldn't meet your need, at least it wasn't because he let it slip through a crack, he'd say 'hey, I can't do that, sorry, but I tried,' or whatever the answer was. But he seemed to be very, wanting to be accommodating and thoughtful and gentle in his mannerisms. It's a very appealing personality.

BW: Was he very different in his public persona, as opposed to working one-on-one or in small groups?

CL: Not particularly. I think his outcomes were well thought out, what he wanted to achieve. But how he got there was kind of unique, you didn't have Mitchell doing any kind of explicit arm twisting or threatening, or he never came across too heavy. He could get his goal without that. And I think he's shrewd in a good sense, which I think leaders had better be if they want to succeed. So I think he is shrewd, and I think he thinks through how he's going to get to a goal, and is able to do it in a way which I think is rather unusual in its non explicitly, excessively heavy way.

BW: Did he have any downside, as you look back on it?

CL: Yes, he was on the wrong position on NAFTA, I remember that – I'm just kidding.

BW: You're probably not kidding.

CL: Well, that's not a downside, that's just an area where I disagreed with him. None that I can remember. Obviously there were a few issues we disagreed with, including NAFTA. I always remember him on the floor giving those of us who opposed NAFTA a lecture of why free trade is so important. And we were saying, "Hey, from our perspective it's not free trade. You've got a provision in here that Mexico can, for twenty years, discriminate against American used cars, and you've got a provision for Mexico in here for ten years doesn't have to open its borders to American auto parts, they're allowed to discriminate against American auto parts and prohibit them from coming into Mexico, and you've got provisions in here which give a prejudicial position to Canada and automobiles. You call that free trade, George? And by the way, you got a whole bunch of stuff in there protecting Maine shoes, at the same time you're calling us protectionists." I gave him a hard time on NAFTA, as you can tell, it's one of the few things specifically on policy that I remember where I disagreed with him, so I gave him a hard time on NAFTA.

Gave him a hard time on a tax bill once, too, I remember, and I'll bet you he'll remember this. He may not remember anything else, but I'll bet you he will remember when I was either the fiftieth or sixtieth vote that he needed on a tax bill, and I would not budge. He had almost all the Democrats with him, but I would not budge. And he kept the vote open for about an hour.

I don't know if you know how the votes work around here, theoretically they're supposed to be fifteen or twenty minutes long. I think he kept that vote open an hour while he had to go round up someone to change their vote. I think he ended up talking Byrd into changing his vote; Byrd sympathized with him just as a former leader, what he was going through to try to herd these cats, including me in this case. But I'll bet you he'd remember it. I don't even remember what the tax bill was. I'm pretty sure it was a tax cut that I didn't agree to, but I'm not sure. He generally was great on taxes; he had the right instinct about who should pay more and who should pay less. In other words, the wealthy folks should pay more, and middle income folks less, he was right on that. He took on Reagan on that, as I remember.

BW: I know you were one of only three Democrats to vote against the '86 tax reform bill, would that be what you're referring to? That was the Packwood -

CL: No, I don't think so. Where was he on that?

BW: Well, I assume that he was for it, because there were only three Democrats voting against it.

CL: There were a lot of Republicans voting against it, but that may have been the one, where he needed fifty-one or sixty, it could have been.

BW: It may have been the one, too, where Senator Wilson was wheeled in from the hospital to vote, is that -?

CL: I don't remember that.

BW: Okay. Any other issues where you and he parted company pretty strongly? What about environmental issues?

CL: I don't think so. I think we might now, but I don't know that we did then. I think Clean Air Act, I'm pretty sure we worked together. I'm not on that committee but I had some involvement in the drafting of the Clean Air Act, and I can't remember what specific provisions, but I don't think there were any differences on the environment.

BW: What about your perspective from the Armed Services Committee, how was he as a, quote/unquote, 'Cold War warrior'?

CL: I don't think he was a Cold War warrior, exactly. He had a solid position on nuclear weapons, on arms reduction treaties, he obviously was, as we all were, very anti-Soviet and anti-

Communist, that wasn't the issue. But in terms of any issues that would divide people in the Cold War, I think the issues may be on Defense budget size, I don't remember where he was on that. But on nuclear, I'm pretty sure that on arms control treaties that he and I would have been in the same place.

BW: One of the most dramatic things during that period was the Tower nomination for secretary of defense. Where were you on that, and what kind of leadership did George Mitchell provide?

CL: I was opposed to the Tower nomination, my chairman Sam Nunn was opposed to it, and Mitchell was opposed to it, I'm pretty sure, and I was just talking to David [Lyles, my chief of staff], about that and he reminds me that Mitchell was helpful in gaining the support to defeat that nomination.

BW: In your thirty-one years here, how has the Senate changed?

CL: Oh, it seems to be a lot more House members who have had their bitter partisan experiences in the House who come over here and we have to live with the fallout. So I would say it's a much more difficult place to get a bipartisan effort going. It's still possible. And on a personal basis, everybody I think basically, with a few exceptions, works as friends and there's not a lot of bitterness I don't think between members of the Senate on both sides of the aisle. But in terms of policy, getting together on policy, it's harder to get a bipartisan group together, and I think some of the rhetoric has gotten harsher as well.

BW: When was the Senate working in its most sort of well-oiled period, looking back, would you say there was a time when it was really -?

CL: When you had some moderate Republicans. There's very few moderate Republicans now, from our perspective. Probably if you talked to some of the few moderate Republicans that exist, like the Maine senators, that they might tell you that, hey, there's not as many moderate Democrats as there used to be. I don't know what they would say. From my perspective, though, there's just a handful of what I would consider moderate Republicans, and there used to be a lot more, and including a lot more that were really courageous, they would very openly join coalitions, including on some of the Defense issues.

We had a good debate on the Iraq War, and I was on the losing side of that one. And on the Gulf War, there was a good debate, Mitchell was here then and I'm pretty sure he was opposed to the Gulf War, and I was, and he was very persuasive on that. I think we were both wrong, but he was persuasive. I think as history's turned out, the decision to go in was right. Colin Powell was privately against it, he thought it was premature to go in at that time, so he was persuasive privately. But I think we had a president then who understood limits, and that makes a big difference, the difference between first President Bush and the second President Bush is, I think the second President Bush would have gone all the way and created the kind of problems that still exist in Iraq, and exacerbated it probably. I think the occupation of a Muslim capital, I think

was, the problems of occupation were seen in the second Iraq War, and were avoided in the first Gulf War.

BW: How much was '94 a watershed year?

CL: You remind me of what happened.

BW: Well, the Republican revolution.

CL: Oh, when Gingrich came in, yes, when Gingrich came. It was a revolution, but it also was a good object lesson as to how, when you do the right thing and make courageous votes, that there's a price to be paid for it frequently in terms of the country, and in terms of personal political lives that, where elections were lost because of casting the right vote. People have to be ready for that. If they cast unpopular votes, they got to be ready to lose the next election, which is what happened when we adopted the deficit reduction program of President Clinton in 1993, or '94 I guess. And in that November, people who voted to increase the gas tax by four-and-a-half cents were lambasted for raising taxes; people who voted to, even though the income tax raise only affected one percent of the people, the upper bracket, upper one percent, people were blasted for raising income taxes; even though that Clinton deficit reduction program involved the reduction of the size of every federal agency except one, nonetheless, people were blasted for voting for big government, because of the tax increases. And we lost control.

We did the right thing, it proved to be the right thing, [and] deficits came down in significant measure because of that vote in '94, so that by the end of the Clinton years we actually were in surplus. But you have to put on the scale when you do that what the possible consequences are, and I still think you ought to vote to do the right thing, because again, I'm not a populist but you have to be aware of what the risks are, not just for you personally, but for the policy of the country that can take a negative turn, from my perspective, when things can be mischaracterized.

BW: Have you ever thought about how George Mitchell might have operated in a post-'94 Senate?

CL: Post-'94, after we lost?

BW: And after he left.

CL: My hunch is that we might have tried to find a way to do the right thing without the negative fallout. But in terms of after we did the right thing, and after that led to the Gingrich revolution, not offhand. I don't think so. He was viewed as having a velvet glove, but I think that the Republicans also, while they liked him personally, and he never did anything really rhetorically to antagonize him, I think they viewed him as a very partisan leader underneath. And I think that's probably what happened after '94 as well, when the Republicans took over they played hardball, and I'm not sure he could have affected that.

(An Aside)

BW: Okay, I'm just editing my questions accordingly. One person that I haven't been talking very much about was Edward Kennedy, and what effect has his leaving the Senate, dying, had on you all? Is he still spiritually here, or not?

CL: Well I think he'll always be spiritually here for those of us who served with him and loved him and admired him. But I can't, obviously it's had an effect in terms of who's taken his place, which has had a negative influence on Democrats for the time being. I think if it weren't for that, I'm not sure we would have done health care any differently, as we should have I think, looking back. What I had suggested was that we do kind of a grass roots health care thing, that we start with people giving us a recommendation from the grass roots, have there be a conference out in the middle of America somewhere and spend a couple months and bubble up from there some kind of a program which could not be mischaracterized as a Washington power grab or whatever. And I don't know that Ted Kennedy would have agreed with that, I think he really felt that we ought to be able to do what had to be done here.

So that's kind of a basic question, is how to proceed. I think his eloquence and his inspiration maybe would have made this a little shorter process, and if we still had sixty votes, would make a difference in terms of working out the differences between the bodies. That's where I think the biggest difference would be specifically probably, would be if the sixtieth vote were there – in other words, if he were here – we would be able to have worked out the differences between the House and the Senate a lot more quickly, I think.

BW: With a bipartisan component, or not?

CL: No, no, I think he would have, I mean he always tried to work on a bipartisan basis, but I think he'd probably agree that there was just too hard an opposition here.

BW: Do you have any vivid memories of interactions between him and Senator Mitchell?

CL: I don't.

BW: Time is short, and thank you very much for your time and comments, I appreciate it.

CL: Thank you.

End of Interview