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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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John Breaux

(Interviewer: Brien Williams)

GMOH# 189

January 28, 2010

Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College with former Senator John Breaux. We are in the offices of the Breaux-Lott Leadership Group in Washington, D.C. Today is Thursday, January 28, 2010, and I am Brien Williams. I noticed that you came to the Senate in 1986, and George Mitchell at the time was chairman of the [Democratic] Senatorial Campaign Committee.

John Breaux: Yeah, I'd been in the House since '72, and so when I came to the Senate, it was to replace Russell Long, and George was the chairman of the Senatorial Campaign Committee. I remember one of my first interviews with him, because we had about ten Democrats running for the Senate, for the nomination in Louisiana, I was just one of them but I was the only House member, and I remember having a meeting with Mitchell and Lloyd Bentsen where they were sort of interviewing all the Democrats to see where the lay of the land was, and going through the procedures of finding out who was good and who wasn't good, and asked me why I wanted to be in the Senate. And I said, "Well, you all have a tennis court over here, and we don't have one in the House, and if I get to the Senate I'll have access to the Senate tennis court, and that's a good reason." And they just cracked up laughing at me, said that's the oddest thing, they said, most everybody says I want to change the world, and [] do good for humanity and pass great laws, and Breaux comes in there and tells you, I want to be able to play on the Senate tennis court.

Of course there was a lot more to it than that, but both Lloyd Bentsen and George Mitchell were big tennis players, and they really cracked up at that answer. [p/o] [George] and Bennett Johnston were good friends, and we actually had done events together and so I knew him before that, but not really personally, but had a relationship with him before that.

BW: What was it like filling Russell Long's shoes when you got to the Senate?

JB: I had the luxury of having spent seven terms in the House, and I always felt that, had I just come into the Senate for the first time in Congress, it would have been overwhelming. But I knew most of the guys, and I had good relations with Bennett, and I knew Lloyd Bentsen, I knew Mitchell, and we also had seven, I think, of our colleagues from the House that came over at the same time. I mean Harry Reid, Barbara Mikulski, Tom Daschle, all of us were elected in that same group, so we had a lot of people that came over with us to the Senate, and we gained control of the majority. So it was impressive, but it really wasn't overwhelming, because I knew them, I had a relationship with them. Like I said, had I come just out of state government or out

of no elected position, it would have been really overwhelming.

It was overwhelming to a certain extent to my wife, I mean meeting John Glenn and these people that you had read about and seen and not had a relationship with them, and my wife was still calling them Senator So-and-so, instead of John and Lloyd and George. And so it took a while to make the adjustment. And I was very young – well, I wasn't that young then, but was young when I got to the House, I was twenty-eight. So it was a wonderful experience, and George in his position as chairman was a hell of an accomplishment, because we gained control of the Senate as a result of that.

BW: So did the Campaign Committee actually fund you and do things actively in your campaign?

JB: Yes and no, I mean in Louisiana it was, I think they were helpful but it wasn't overwhelming. I mean it was important, but Louisiana was sort of an independent state. They were helpful in raising money, but I didn't bring anybody in from the campaign to help me, other than Russell Long, who was a huge help but he was Louisiana, so I mean I had Russell Long's support and that was very, very important.

BW: You talk about the group of you coming over from the House, and I've been hearing lately a lot of people attributing the current partisanship in the Senate to so many senators having started out in the House, where it was more contentious. And I suspect -

JB: Well, more recently that's been the problem with the Tom Coburns and the Jim Demints and David Vitters; they brought this extreme partisanship from the House over to the Senate. The Senate is not the House, and it takes House members a while to learn that. And if you are a partisan House member, it takes you even longer to learn it, if you ever learn it. Now, a lot of House members that come over want to change the Senate and make it look like a House, and there's rules over here, you have to have rules. Well, the Senate I think was structured to be exactly what it is, a place where the things that are hot cool off in the saucer, as Jefferson said, and it's meant to allow for delays while people cool off and don't react in the short term. And so many people from the House had come over – Trent Lott, my partner, was one of them – he had the same impression of the Senate when he first got there, but rapidly grew to understand it.

What is different today, it's much more partisan. I mean, Tom Daschle and Trent Lott, when they were both leaders, probably spoke more in one day than Mitch McConnell and Harry Reid speak in a month, because they don't speak. Now when George was the leader, it was quite different. I mean Bob Dole and George Mitchell and everyone, they were friends, served on the same committee together, both became leaders, and had a terrific relationship. Some of it's personality, some of it is the type of troops you have that you're trying to lead, and some of them won't let you be more bipartisan, they don't want you to do that. But in those days it was very collegial.

BW: What do you recall of the election of the majority leader in '88?

JB: I was for Bennett Johnston, and George never asked me to be for him. Was it George? Let's see, when was he running, was it George against Bennett?

BW: And Senator Inouye.

JB: And Inouye, that's right. Was that the '86 that he won?

BW: No, it was '88.

JB: That's right, '86 it was Bob Byrd, and Byrd also did not ask me to support him, because he knew that in the delegation I was supporting Bennett. I actually nominated Bennett against George. And then to show you the type of man that George Mitchell was, he ended up appointing me as deputy whip, chief deputy whip, even though he knew that I had supported his opponent, and he only won by one vote I guess, or it was close, wasn't it close, fairly close? But he reached out and asked me to be part of his leadership team, even though I had supported somebody else. But he expected me to support Bennett, because Bennett and I were colleagues from the same state.

But he was elected because I think his personality, he worked very hard at it, he was perceived as a hard worker. Bennett had sort of had his chance before against Byrd and that didn't go very well. And I think that maybe some people thought this house was too parochial and wanted someone from the Northeast who was more of a traditional, more liberal Democrat. And because of his personality, his friendships, and his leadership qualities, he was able to be successful.

BW: Did he start out really strong as majority leader, or was there a growing period?

JB: Started off with a lot of good will I think, people wanted the new guy to be successful. And we had a pretty cohesive caucus. I mean Trent just wrote a book, when he got out, while he was still in I guess, calling it herding cats, and it was like it, people all over the place. They don't like to follow a leader very much, but I think back when George was there, it wasn't the case. I think people fell in line a lot easier perhaps than they do now.

Harry Reid has a very diverse caucus, I mean we've got some, everybody from Joe Lieberman or Mary Landrieu or some of the Ben Nelsons, all the way to Barbara Boxers and Russ Feingold, it's a very extended caucus philosophically. And I think it was more cohesive when George was there. It was easier, I think, to get people to support a common theme. And he also had an ability to work things out with Dole better than we have now. It's much more polarized now, so the leadership, the leader's job is more difficult than probably it's ever been.

BW: What is the leader's job, or maybe I should say during Mitchell's time, what was the leader's job?

JB: To lead, to present a party position, get people to rally behind it, to work with the White House if you're the party in power, to help get nominated the committee members – now they appoint them, which is different from the Republicans. I'm not sure whether George was actually appointing them then, but what he said was pretty much what happened as far as the chair of the committees. You go by seniority, but I mean committee assignments, for instance, a huge piece of the power structure of a leader's office is to be able to put new members on committees. Then they owe you, and George put me on this committee, and god I'm thankful for it.

So I think he did very well. I mean the whole role is to try and present a legislative package that is in cooperation with the White House. Now, leaders can get in trouble sometimes by doing that. Tom Daschle was the classic, he lost. Harry Reid may be the next classic example, of having a position as leader that is incompatible to some extent with the state that you represent, with a lot of bad political consequences, as Harry's finding out and Tom Daschle experienced.

But I think from George, being from where he was, I think it was a more compatible thing. I don't think he had problems with the White House's Democratic agenda, and that's obviously what he's supposed to do - And also to coordinate that effort with the leadership of the House. And his background made him a perfect person, in the sense that he had a world of experience, having worked for a senator and been a federal judge, a prosecutor I guess, and then never served in the House but he had a lot of life experiences that guided him in what he was doing. Boehner doesn't have a lot of that, I mean that's some of his problems he's having I think, but George had been around a while by the time he got to be leader.

BW: Did he leave any Democrats out during your time there?

JB: None that I can think of. I mean, I think that it was a pretty inclusive thing. He made a lot of decisions by himself, though. There were some that would argue that he was an insular – I did not find that myself, I was always just a part of the leadership team there – but a lot of people felt that, not a lot of people but some people would argue that George wanted to do all the work himself, he didn't give out responsibilities as much as they would have liked. I think it was just sort of, he was a workhorse, and if he wanted to make sure it got done, he wanted to do it. And I think that's how he operated. Tends to be how I operate, I just want to make sure it gets done so I'll do it. And a lot of times I try to do too much, but I think that was the only critical aspect of it, was that he was sort of insular, they would argue, in his operations. I never found that because I was part of the leadership, I guess, and was on the inside.

BW: So as whip, what was your role?

JB: You do vote counts, check to see how so-and-so is going to vote, getting counts on, you know, just basically trying to reflect what the policy was. I was sort of more of a bridge to the conservative Democrats, and I think that was important, and served that same capacity with Daschle later on.

BW: As leader, would you say Mitchell was more into the functional aspects of leadership, or into the ideological aspects of leadership?

JB: I think he was more functional. I don't think he was, he was probably more of a public person in advocating the policies than Harry is, Harry is more of a manager; keep the trains running on time. I think George had a little bit more bigger picture vision of what he was trying to get done. He did both, because he was a day-to-day manager, but he was also someone who could do television and give the big picture message, and I think that was an attribute that some leaders don't have; maybe one or the other but not both. He did both.

BW: Right, and when you mentioned Reid, one could make the argument, I think, that he's somewhat less appealing as a public figure, and he might be quite effective as a manager.

JB: Yeah, he did both, but he was probably more effective as a manager, I would agree with that. Lyndon Johnson probably was more of an inside player like that, could really twist arms and bend arms.

BW: But for the Democrats in the caucus, Mitchell being their person on view most of the time, you were all comfortable with that.

JB: Oh yeah, nobody would argue that he was not a good representation of the caucus, or say, 'well that's not what we think and he shouldn't be saying that.' That was never, I think everybody was always in tune with what he was trying to say.

BW: You intrigued me a moment ago by saying that part of being a good leader is knowing how to work with the House. Talk about that relationship.

JB: Well like today, Nancy and Harry, there's a lot of extreme tension between the House and the Senate, the House hates the Senate. They think that everything they pass gets sent to the graveyard that is the Senate, and there's a lot of the old feelings between House members about the Senate in general. And partially it's because they don't understand the rules are different. The Senate doesn't have a Rules Committee like the House does. So the job of a Senate majority leader is to make sure the House has a good working relationship.

We met on a regular basis with the House, and I think that was very important. And we'd have leadership, House-Senate joint leadership meetings, and I don't think Harry does that. Harry talks to Nancy, Nancy will talk to him, but you don't bring the whole team in there I think like we used to. And I think that was a good positive trait.

BW: Talk about the Mitchell-Robert Dole team, if that's a word to describe it.

JB: I think a good relationship. Dole was easy to get along with, he had to lead the Republicans, but he was a person that you could cut a deal with, and that's different from a Mitch McConnell today. I think that today the atmosphere is that, my team has to win, and your

team has to lose, and they can never meet in the middle where both sides could win. I think the attitude between Dole and Mitchell, 'look, we got to make government work, and we're both going to have to move and be flexible,' and I think Dole was flexible with Mitchell. And I think they were good friends even though, entirely different backgrounds, but they were good friends, and I think that helped make the Senate a much better place.

BW: Do you have any vivid memories of interesting, funny, off-the-beaten path experiences with Mitchell?

JB: I remember one incident in the Finance Committee when George was chair. Was he chair? No, he might have been just the ranking [member], I mean he must have been the senior Democrat after Lloyd Bentsen or something. And we were debating the highway gas tax, and we were arguing about whether it was going to be 2.5 cents or 2 cents or 2.8 cents, and I remember George Mitchell telling Max Baucus, who was a junior member – I was the most junior member probably, but Max was a very young member – and he kept arguing about why it would not be good for Montana. And I remember George Mitchell getting pretty strong with him and telling him, "Look Max, you're going to be chairman of this committee one day, and you have to understand, you got to have responsibilities of not just the one state but of the whole country, and quit arguing about whether it's 2.5 or 2.8, it's not going to make a lot of difference, you can sell either one of them as being good policy." I remember him telling that to Max.

BW: What about those dining room round-tables that he had typically.

JB: I wasn't part of that very much, no.

BW: What about observations of his working with first George Herbert Walker Bush in his White House, and then the Clinton White House.

JB: Well, I don't really have any. I think he was willing to go down there, that he was a strong partisan Democrat but I think he was willing to listen. I think he and Forty-one had a good relationship, I would call it, but he was always strong to stand up for the Democratic position over there. [I] went to meetings with him, and he was always strongly assertive. And he was also very smart. I think he was, I wouldn't say how much smarter he was than the president, but there was no question that he knew the subject, and he could argue the merits on just about anything with clarity. And it was more than just political posturing or repeating what somebody else had told him, he knew the subject, and knowledge is a very powerful weapon in this city, and George had it.

BW: How would you characterize his relationship with Bill Clinton?

JB: I don't think, I don't know that it was that close. It was kind of a different generation, different geography, and I think perhaps he probably didn't understand Clinton very much, but a lot of people didn't.

BW: Now, you were fairly good friends with the Clintons.

JB: I was close, used to have a lot of late-night conversations. When you understood, we were probably a little bit closer age wise. How old is George now?

BW: He's seventy-eight, I believe.

JB: I'm sixty-five, so I was a little bit older than Clinton and younger than George. Is he seventy-eight?

BW: I think I'm right on that. No, I'm sorry, seventy-six.

JB: I was playing tennis with him, like I said, about three or four weeks ago, he's still super competitive, super competitive.

BW: I've heard you described as a moderate Democrat, as a conservative Democrat. Where do you put yourself in the political spectrum?

JB: Moderate in Louisiana, probably on the national level it would be more conservative, but a Democrat. I really would never even consider ever being a Republican, and I've always felt that the Democratic Party was interested in giving people an opportunity to do good and do well, and the government had a role in doing that. And I like Bill Clinton's philosophy of being a Democrat, and so probably a moderate to conservative Democrat.

BW: And what about the Democratic Leadership Council, did that reflect your philosophy?

JB: Yeah, I was chairman of it right after Bill, after Clinton, after Sam Nunn, and Bob, let's see, who else was chairman. Senator from Virginia. God, I'm forgetting their names.

BW: Robb.

JB: Yeah, sure. And so it really reflected what I believed in, opportunity and responsibility and community, and trying to help your community, and those principles I think had a major impact on Bill Clinton, that's how, it helped him get elected.

BW: Did you think of yourself as to the right of George Mitchell?

JB: Oh, I was more conservative than George would have been.

BW: And did that result in any tensions between the two of you?

JB: No, no, understood, everybody comes from an area that they pretty much accurately reflect. It's important in this business, I think, to understand where people are coming from, and you appreciate and understand their position. It's very important to be, if you're going to be

successful, I think you just can't draw rigid lines, you have to understand people and what motivates them, and why they take the positions they take. And I think if you can do that, you can be successful, and I think George appreciated that. He knew I was from Louisiana, he knew I was a conservative Democrat. Some things I could be for, I represent the oil and gas industry in Louisiana, and Maine was not, and he understood that and respected it, and didn't say, 'look Breaux, you've got to be against the oil and gas companies.' They were my constituents. And even though we had a different approach on some of these things, it was never a problem.

BW: You were also called a deal maker and bridge builder, and I don't think I've read about anyone who has more names attributed to his qualities, which probably is a great testimony to your effectiveness. But how did that play out for you?

JB: Well I think that's what government is about, is putting people together and putting differing approaches together to come up [] for the common good. I've always felt that the problem with government now is that people, like I said, they think of it as a sporting event where one team has to win, another team has to lose, and if there's a tie you have a play-off until one team wins, another team loses. I think in government there's nothing wrong with having both parties get credit for getting something done by meeting in the middle. They can both take credit for it, they can both argue, look what we did, no, look what we did, but at least they're arguing about success as opposed to blaming each other for failure.

And I think that's what government in a democracy is all about. Neither party has a monopoly on good ideas; I mean both parties have good ideas. And you see that reflected in the growing number of independents in the country, where the people think neither party works very well. So the idea – Russell Long was a big deal maker – but being able to get a deal on prescription drugs, or a deal on environmental matters or whatever, I think, is the essence of what government should be about. Unless you're in a dictatorship and you can have it all one way.

BW: And did George Mitchell sometimes send you on missions of bridge building?

JB: Yeah, to talk to other people, sure. Tom Daschle did that a lot, I was sort of a go-between [with] Trent Lott, for instance, when they got off track. And I always thought that we could be helpful in that regard; did the same thing with Clinton.

BW: What about issues, what stands out in your mind with George Mitchell and policy matters?

JB: No, I don't really have any single issue that strikes me right now as something we did. We did a lot of tax work. We weren't involved in the big health care debates that we're in today, back then, were basically just doing Medicare and Social Security and keeping them viable. I'm trying to think of any big issues. Anything stands out, I can tell you what I was involved in, that he did?

BW: Well, you both were on Environment and Public Works.

JB: Well, we did the Clean Air Act together, we did the Clean Air Act, and George was sort of I guess, was he chairman of Environment and Public Works? What was he? No?

BW: No, he wasn't.

JB: He was I guess maybe the leader, because we'd go to conference and he was very much involved with the White House and to see Boyden Gray, and he was a strong pusher to keep that thing going. I remember many, many meetings we had on the Clean Air Act when we were regulating sulphur dioxide emissions, SO2 emissions, in the Clean Air Bill, and Boyden Gray was calling for less and less regulation, and really George was very, very strong and very good in helping to keep that deal together. Had it not been for him it would have fallen apart, because we had the majority and the White House was Bush, and trying to negotiate a Clean Air Act between the two, had it not been for Mitchell, it would not have happened. And I think that's reflective in what he's doing now. I mean he's been the envoy in Ireland, he's now in the Middle East, he did that, he brought those same skills to that job that he exhibited when he was majority leader.

BW: In '89 the Exxon Valdez occurred.

JB: Yeah, he did the double-hull thing. I was against him on that. I think he led, partially led the effort on requiring double hull tankers, and the argument I made was that double hulls would be more dangerous than a single hull, for a number of scientific type of reasons, but he was a big leader on that, and all of those laws were passed because of his leadership.

BW: Then you were also both on Finance.

JB: Yes.

BW: And any recollections about the big reconciliation bill of 1990 and the retreat to Andrews Air Force Base and all of that?

JB: I didn't go to that, I think the leadership, Mitchell, Dole and, just the leadership was involved in that so we didn't go to that. But that was an example of what they don't do today, I mean you had to have two willing leaders to do it, and a president that wants them to do it, said all right, get off campus and go figure it out, and they did. We need more of that. I mean those George Mitchell days of yore are sort of gone now.

BW: And then there was the ADA in 1990 as well.

JB: Disability Act? That would be more Tom Harkin's involvement, I guess.

BW: And then in 1993, the Clinton administration wanted to pass this stimulus, and you came up with a compromise there. Where was George Mitchell on all of that, do you recall?

JB: No, I don't remember George's involvement. I know he was, but I don't remember any particulars of it.

BW: And then what about health care, in '93-'94?

JB: Well, we did welfare reform under Clinton, and that was a very touchy and delicate situation. I think George was more concerned about some of the things that Clinton was trying to push on work and the work requirements and everything else, but I think that it was an example of two philosophies, which were Clinton being more conservative in what he wanted and George being more liberal to moderate I think, and yet ultimately being able to cut a deal and get something passed, after several efforts with the Republicans.

But I don't remember health care being any of the big crisis issues that we have now. No one was trying to drastically reform the health care system like Obama was trying to do. But welfare reform was a big, big battle for Clinton in '93.

BW: Well, David Broder and Haynes Johnson wrote a whole book on the health care battles of the Clinton administration.

JB: Well it was, and Moynihan was mostly active in that, because Pat was chairman of the committee. And the big mistake they made was doing it all in the White House. I think there was a lot of resentment from Patrick, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and George and everybody, that we weren't involved in it, and they were cutting Congress out and it was just going to be sent over as a *fait accompli*: here, take it and pass it. Obama did just the opposite, Obama said, Congress, go write it and then I'll sign it. Clinton, with Hillary, said we'll write it and send it to you. And it was two absolutely opposite approaches, and neither one of them worked, which argues for something in the middle again; you have to have a proposal from this president, but you also have active involvement from the beginning with Congress. And in those days it was all the White House. I mean, time and months and months passed before we ever got their proposal, and Moynihan was particularly agitated about that, and didn't want to trash the new president, and Mitchell neither, but I think there was a lot of feeling that this was not a good approach, it cut out the Congress.

BW: Do you think at any point that the Republicans would have gone along with a health care plan?

JB: More likely then than now, because of Dole and Mitchell's relationship. I think had they been involved in the beginning, it would have been easier. But in the way it was structured, time passed and tempers became agitated about the White House doing it all, and so we ended up not doing much of anything. But I think it would have been easier for them to pass something then had it been through the normal channels, than it would have been today. Because I think a lot of, there's a lot of Republicans just don't want, today, they don't want to get anything done.

BW: You played quite a heroic role during that period though, because you were part of the mainstream -?

JB: Mainstream caucus. We put together a package with Jim Cooper from the House, a Cooper-Breaux proposal, and Moynihan called a debt and I said, “No,” I said “look, Jim Cooper did most of the technical work, I just lent him a lot of encouragement.” And so Moynihan used to say, “Cooper-Cooper-Cooper-Breaux, that’s the way we got to go,” which was a much more moderate type of proposal than the White House had prepared and really was sort of reflective more of where Pat Moynihan would like to have been. But the White House proposal was not that at all. I forgot I was that much involved in that, I really was.

BW: Were you surprised when George Mitchell decided to retire?

JB: Yup. I thought about running. Daschle called me as soon as the word came out that he was retiring, I had some people in the caucus try to get me to run. But I felt that I was too conservative for the caucus. Everybody said, “Why didn’t you ever run for president?” I said, “Well, I never could have got the nomination.” I could run in a general election maybe, but I could never have gotten a nomination, because I was from where I was from and more conservative than a lot of the members of the caucus. But I was totally surprised he decided. It wasn’t health, obviously, I mean he’s still strong as a horse. I don’t know what really motivated him, it would be an interesting part of the work that you’re doing. Has anything come out publicly as to why he retired? I mean, it wasn’t any scandals, it wasn’t his health, it was just I guess he was still young. It was very unusual for a majority leader who has the support of the caucus. No one was ever going to run against him. And in Maine I think he was as solid as could be, wasn’t going to have a losing election in Maine. Why did he step aside? Because he’s still in public service. Maybe he just felt that there was other ways to provide public service.

BW: Do you think maybe the health care debacle had an influence?

JB: I don’t think so. That was just one little bump in the road, I mean that’s part of the legislative process, you win some, lose some. He had the strong support of the caucus. You can say, well I’m not going to do this because I’ve got a lot of people in the caucus that are unhappy with me. I never got that impression at all; I think he would never have been challenged in the Democratic caucus that I can think.

BW: And you don’t think he saw the ‘94 Republican revolution coming on.

JB: No, oh no.

BW: That surprised all of you.

JB: Yeah, surprised Bill Clinton.

BW: With Mitchell going, did that leave a power vacuum, or not?

JB: Well yeah, sure, I mean there was, let's see, Daschle and Jim Sasser, and I guess Daschle won by only one vote.

BW: Actually, I think Sasser lost his reelection, so it was Dodd who stepped in.

JB: It was Chris Dodd by one vote, yeah. So the answer is yes, there was no clear successor, so was there a power vacuum left, yeah, because I mean had it not been, somebody would have been the natural heir apparent. There was not an heir apparent. And so it was Chris and Tom, and the argument is that Tom got it by putting what's her name from Chicago on the Finance Committee and giving her his seat, and that was the one-vote difference, which I thought was just a great political move. But it was a one-vote margin. Yeah, Sasser had lost his seat. But Sasser had run against George, right, for leader?

BW: No.

JB: Sasser ran, or tried to run for leader. When was that? Anyway -

BW: I don't recall that. So was there a Mitchell legacy in the Senate after he departed, or -?

JB: Well, certainly not like a Lyndon Johnson, I mean some of those big people were bigger than life and were there for a long period of time. I think George was a person who made the trains run on time, he had some good successes in Clean Air and some of the things he did on the tax code, he ran a good leader's office, he was well respected I think and well liked. You know, he was invited back a lot when he first left, to come to our annual retreats that we would do, he'd come back and talk to us, and that was a sign of respect. I think had people not respected him, he never would have been invited back, but I remember him coming back after he had left, to functions we had at the Library of Congress, where he would sort of give us encouragement and give us thoughts and suggestions on what to do and how to do it. And so that was a sign of, I think, respect after he left. It's one thing for people to respect you when he's a leader, because they got the fear of not respecting you, but to invite you back after you're no longer the leader is a real sign of the fact that there was genuine affection for George Mitchell.

BW: I was interviewing a former staffer the other day and heard for the first time that a lot of Mitchell's staff people, in 1992, hoped that he would run for president.

JB: Yeah, I think there was some talk about it.

BW: What about among the senators?

JB: I think, from my perspective, I just heard some talk about him wanting to do it, but was never asked to consult with him or anything. I guess they probably pretty much knew I was with Bill Clinton. But the conversation was out there. And he would have been a very respectable and good candidate.

BW: How do you think he would have handled the government shutdown of '95?

JB: Oh, who knows, I think he would have been a strong opponent of it, I mean he was a believer that government was there to do good things and to function, and to shut it down was a disgraceful act. I think he would have been very strongly involved in saying how bad that was.

BW: One of your reactions to that was probably the Centrist Coalition, is that -?

JB: Yeah, yeah.

BW: You created that, and that was with John Chafee.

JB: John Chafee, yeah, it was Chafee-Breaux, yeah.

BW: Say a few words about John Chafee.

JB: Great, wonderful guy. Thoughtful, pragmatic, realistic, sort of a liberal Republican I guess, and wanted to get things done. I mean, here he was doing a deal with some relatively new member of Congress, after he'd been former secretary of the navy I guess, and the Chafee-Breaux Coalition probably had about twelve or thirteen folks in it, Democrats and Republicans, and tried to put things together. And he was an able ally with me, and we came close to passing a budget one time that we had put together, and only lost by a few votes. But he was a great person to work with.

BW: Looking back on your colleagues, who were some of the monumental personalities?

JB: Moynihan, obviously, I was always impressed with how smart he was. I remember him on the, chairman of Public Works Committee, I didn't think that this esoteric, sophisticated man would know anything about roads and bridges and highways, but goddamn it he did, and I was really impressed with that, that guy really knows this stuff, it's pretty mundane stuff that you'd expect me to know something about, but not this well educated super guy, and he really did, so I was really very impressed with him. Lloyd Bentsen was another one, as chairman of the committee, he was someone who sort of instilled fear and respect at the same time. And he was a real mentor. And let's see, I would put George Mitchell in that category, just for being someone who was focused, he was very focused on what he was trying to do.

BW: Where's Kennedy in your thinking?

JB: Great guy, great deal maker. I was impressed with Kennedy, he would always come to my office to talk about health care, he'd call up and want to meet with me, I said, yeah, when do you want, I'm coming over when you want me, no-no, I'm coming over. I said, no, you're a senior senator, a legend in your time, and coming over to sit in my office and talk to me as a new member about health care and things. He was also very pragmatic, and he played – didn't play

it, but I mean he understood the Senate as a place where you could have these great battles and still be friends, and we've lost a little bit of that. He and Orrin Hatch used to holler at each other on the floor and then go talk in the Cloakroom together and still be friends.

He was really liked. He had great staff, very loyal and very smart, and he was a real deal maker. We would not have passed prescription drugs had it not been for Kennedy, because we had my proposal, which was a bipartisan proposal, and he saved it in the Democratic caucus by saying, "Look, I've been fighting for this all my life and you can't kill it now because it's not a hundred percent of what you want. It's the first time we're going to guarantee access to prescription drugs under Medicare for seniors, and it ain't perfect, but it's better than we have now which is nothing." And [he] prevented it from being killed by the Democrats. So he was a real, he was a deal maker. The argument is that this health care thing could have passed had he still been there, and I think there's a lot of truth to that.

BW: Because it would have been a different bill?

JB: Yeah, he would have been able to bring more Republicans on board; it wouldn't have been a sixty-vote effort only by Democrats.

BW: What motivated you to retire in '04?

JB: I figured if you ever wanted to have another career, you had to pick the right time to do it. And I didn't want to be there so long till I didn't know where I was anymore, be another Strom Thurmond, 'where am I, who am I.' And I just wanted to be able to retire and have an opportunity to do other things. I've been in government for so long, my life, I was elected to Congress when I was twenty-eight, and I was here before that on a staff. So I gave over thirty-four years and I figured it was the right time, if you want to do something else, to do it when you still have enough time left.

BW: Were you expecting the first Republican to be elected as a senator from Louisiana in 133 years?

JB: No, I wouldn't have retired had I known that.

BW: Is that right?

JB: Hmm-hmm.

BW: Your own career, what do you consider your highlights?

JB: Things I've done in wetland areas, the Breaux Act and the Wallop-Breaux legislation. The biggest thing I think was the prescription drug, Medicare Part D, which I was one of the authors of and which was important. I loved working on health care stuff. But environment, wetlands, and prescription drugs are some of the things that I think were important that we were

involved in.

BW: As history looks back on Mitchell, how do you think he should be remembered?

JB: As an effective, smart, focused leader, who was able to work in a bipartisan fashion to get things done. And well respected would be part of that.

BW: Any final thoughts or things we haven't covered?

JB: No, he's still there, I mean god you can't, it's hard to write because his career is still there, even at the ripe old age of what he is. But he's still out there and doing things and contributing. And the interesting thing about him, it's a very varied career. Was he a prosecutor at one time, or just a federal judge? He was a federal judge, I know, and then a member of Congress, then a majority leader of the Senate, and then envoy to Ireland, and now a special envoy to the Middle East, I mean this is a widely varied career, but the constant thread that unites it all is that he's a person that can work with people, of both sides. He worked with Republicans, he worked with Irish and IRA, both sides in a terrible conflict, now he's working with the Palestinians and the Israelis, and he worked with Democrats and Republicans.

I think he would have liked to have been commissioner of baseball, then he had sixteen teams or whatever it is that he had to negotiate, so he'd have been perfect for that. So everything that he's done is sort of, like the chairman of the Conflict Resolutions Commission would be a good position for him, because he's always trying to resolve conflicts, in between countries, between renegade groups, between two political parties, or on the bench, arguing between the defendant and the plaintiff. I mean it's been a consistent thread; this is a guy that can bring people together to resolve conflicts. Conflict solver.

BW: Good, thank you very much.

JB: Sure, stay in touch.

End of Interview