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Interview with Paul Brontas (2) by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Paul P. Brontas

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Paul P. Brontas (2)

(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

GMOH# 207

April 12, 2010

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is April 12, 2010. I am at the Bay Colony Corporate Center in Waltham, Mass. Today, I'm interviewing Paul Brontas, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. And Paul, before we begin I just want to note that there is a first interview with you that you did for this project, and we're in the process of paring that down significantly, which contains your background information, growing up, and such. And so today we're going to focus solely on when you first met George Mitchell as a student at Bowdoin College, and go forward from there chronologically in terms of the different connections that you had with him over the years.

PB: Fine, fine. I'm not sure exactly when we first met, but I think we probably met very early on as freshmen, because they have these freshmen get-togethers at Bowdoin, initially. And the one thing that I had learned after talking to him and the two of his friends in the freshman class was, that he was a very, very good basketball player at his high school, and that I had recalled the Mitchell brothers—when I was a youngster—going down to the Boston finals for the New England championship, and realized after talking to him and others that his three brothers were all part of that great team, that not only won the Maine state championship but won the New England, which had never happened before. So I thought that this guy would probably be a great jock, but not necessarily a great student. But he was both. He was both, as it turned out.

Bowdoin at that time was somewhat complicated because we still had a lot of people coming back from the war [World War II], and so there were a lot of older people in the junior and senior classes at Bowdoin at that time, who had served in the military and were back at school. And the system as we all know it—Bowdoin—the whole living facilities was based upon fraternities. Freshmen lived in the dormitories, so this gave all the freshmen an opportunity to meet each other, but were soon pledged to fraternities and then had their meals at the fraternities and most of their social relationships with fraternities. So despite the fact that it was small, it seemed to me that we became quite limited very quickly to the people that we knew, that we had lunch with and dinner with in the fraternities.

And I recall being in a class and meeting George in one of the classes—I've forgotten which one it was—and talking to him, particularly questioning him about his brothers and how they managed to do all that. And I said, "Well, you must be a great basketball player too." He said, "Well, people *think* I am, but I'm nowhere near the stars that my brothers are. But I like to take credit for it anyhow, because it's a Mitchell"—and you could see that he was being very honest about it. He wanted people to know that he didn't want to take credit for being one of the - But

he was actually a great athlete. As a freshman he developed very nicely. And I used to go to the games. He was excellent.

I think we only had one class together—I can't recall. But one problem with the fraternity system at Bowdoin at that time was that you lived in the fraternity after your freshman year. As a freshman you ate in the fraternities, your social life was always in the fraternities, and you didn't have the kind of relationships broadly, except -

AL: Like a common ground.

PB: You didn't have a common ground. You lived in the dormitory your first year, so the people that were in your dormitory, you got to know them well. And then you might strike a relationship in a class with somebody that you liked, but it wasn't quite as congenial as I thought it should be for a small college. And it got worse as you went on, because sophomore year you could maybe live in the fraternity if you wanted to. [] My sophomore year I had an apartment with two older members of the fraternity, and they were both from Bangor, Maine—people that I knew—so we were kind of segregated in that apartment. It was in, the head of the music department at Bowdoin [Frederic Tillotson], his house. It was right by the railroad tracks, and we called it "Rickety." Every time a train went by the whole house shook. We always knew it was on time, because one of the members of our group, his father was a conductor—go right by the house and blow the horn. [] It was great.

But you didn't, for a small college, have quite the relationship with your classmates that you thought you would have; [] it was somewhat restricted. But as you got into your sophomore and junior year, you started to meet other people, and you'd see them in class and then you'd go out and have a beer with them and this sort of thing. The freshman year was tough, because many of the upper classmates were back from the service. I'll never forget, I don't think that I ever had a beer until I went to Bowdoin College, and after I pledged at the Alpha Delta Phi House, a couple of the seniors asked me to go down to have a beer in town. First of all, I wasn't eighteen years old at that time, so I was afraid of that, and secondly, I didn't think I ever had a beer before. So we sat there and we had one beer, and I said, "Oh boy, thank God, I got through that" – they ordered another round! And it was interesting because [of] the age difference between the veterans and young freshmen.

It was a good system, but we didn't get to know each other right in the class until probably sophomore and junior years, and that's when I saw George, and obviously admired him because he was very good on the basketball court and he soon became one of the stars on the team. We may have been in a class together, but I don't recall frankly whether we did or not, but it was small enough to know sort of who was respected and who wasn't, and George was. He was a student athlete, I mean he was a student *and* athlete, which was I think what Bowdoin generally tried to. They weren't just hiring athletes, they wanted somebody that's going to do well academically. So George was good academically and a great basketball player.

But I really didn't get to know him until after graduation. I guess we all went into the army

afterwards at some point. And then [] my first time [] back with George was when I volunteered to serve on the Muskie team when he was running for vice president. And that's an interesting story, because I was sitting there watching what was happening when the Humphrey-Muskie team was put together in Chicago. It was – as you recall – it was a terrible scene, when the riots broke out and the students were gassed by the police and they were beaten and imprisoned, because they were, I guess, rowdy. And I was shocked by what was happening, and it was discouraging. And I said to Lynn – I said to my wife at the time, “I just can't stand here and listen to this. I mean, I've got to do something.” I was only practicing for about a year at that time. And she said, “What do you want to do?” I said, “Well I, you know, I like what Muskie is saying, and I think the Democratic Party has got to get back on track here, and I've got to do something.” “What do you want to do?” I said, “I'd like to volunteer, Lynn.” She said, “Well, you know, if you really want to do it, do it.” I said, “Well, I don't know what the firm will say, you know—‘if you go you don't come back,’ or whatever.” She said, “Do it.”

So, a great credit to her. I don't think she was too happy about that. In any event, that next day I wrote a letter to Senator Muskie: I'm Paul Brountas, I grew up in Bangor, Maine.... And I gave him a brief history, which was very brief, for obvious reasons, but I said: [] “I just finished Bowdoin and I started practicing in Boston, but I'm willing to take a leave of absence from the firm and join the campaign as a free worker. You don't have to pay me, because I feel very strongly about what's happening, and I'd like to see us win and do it right.” So then I said to Lynn afterwards, “You know, there must be five hundred thousand people writing the same letters, so don't worry about it, I'm not going anywhere.”

Two days later, I got a call from George Mitchell. George called—he was down there, obviously, like they all were, and going through the mail. I figured there'd be a thousand people writing that day, George called me up that day, he said, “Paul, I got your letter. [] Come on down.” “George, I'd love to come down. What am I going to do? He said, “How the hell do I know. [] Come down and talk to the Senator.” So I told Lynn, and I flew down to Washington, and I saw George. He introduced me to the senator and I went in. I sat down with the senator, and we talked for quite a while, and he seemed interested and I was very interested. I think I made the stupid mistake: I said, “Well I think it's great and I'd love to help, but what will I do, Senator?” He said, “Paul, I've never run for vice president before, how the hell do I know?” Which I thought was a wonderful. Wonderful. I mean, I liked it. I liked the honesty, the way he came out with it.

So he said, “Look, I've looked over your background and record; [] I think what I'd like to have you do is come on the airplane with us. My top guy is Don Nicoll, and there are speeches to be made, there are arrangements to be made, we're going to have press on the plane, we have to treat them right, and you'll do a lot of things, and let's try that.” I said, “Well that sounds great.” Then I met Don Nicoll, and I said, “Oh boy, this is going to be interesting,” because he was really into it. He was saying, “Look, there are certain things I can use you for. I know you haven't had any experience in it, but I'll teach you some of this stuff. But I'm going to need help on that plane. I mean, I not only have to do a lot of the writing of speeches, planning and strategic stuff, but [] there are press people there that have to be satisfied, so I'm going to need

help on the plane.”

So I, cold—I didn’t know what the heck I was going to do—I went on the plane. And the beauty of it was that working with Don was such an education for me. It was thrilling for a young kid to be on a presidential campaign and working with a top aide, and actually working with the senator as well, and learning a lot.

AL: What were some of the things he taught you?

PB: Researching. You were doing something for a speech (“Well I need some help on this”), so I’d do some research, I’d give him a memo on it and so forth. From time to time, talking to some of the members of the press. [He] wanted to talk to people, and he’d give me the message of the day, and as long as I didn’t screw it up he’d allow me to do that. It ranged from some really interesting stuff to some stuff that had to be done by somebody, and since I was the lowest member of the staff at the time - But [] it was the beginning of an understanding of American politics, and the incredible demands on the candidates and their staff by the press. They all want news, they want something that nobody else has written about, and they poke around, they’re looking for mistakes: you know, ‘the campaign screwed up today,’ and this sort of thing. So I learned very early that you had to be very careful of what you said to anybody on the plane. And I’d check with Don, who was a great mentor, I mean, and a wonderful writer. If anything, I learned more about writing concisely, and he could say it so beautifully, and so many of the words that you heard from Muskie were written by Don, and Muskie could deliver them beautifully. So it was really exciting, I mean, I must say it was far better than I ever expected, and it was a thrilling experience.

I remember that, when we lost, [] we were all up in Maine, and Muskie gave one of the greatest speeches I’ve ever heard in my life. In fact, I was interviewed for this by somebody in the press, and they wanted a copy of his speech and I managed to get it (and I’ve forgotten where it is now), and they read it, and it was great. It was essentially: don’t be down; I want to know – and it was filled with a lot of young people, it was a great lesson for young people – I want to know where you’re going to be next year, and five years from now; we lost, but don’t stop here, this isn’t a one-night stand; this is something that you’ve got to stay with, if you’re going to work on this you have to work on it diligently and don’t give up; and one loss doesn’t mean you’re going to have another one, you got to keep going.

It was so inspirational, and a lot of tears—you don’t like to lose. And I’ll never forget that. I told a couple of people who were doing a history of Muskie about this, and I gave them copies of those remarks—I think I had a copy of them—and they really thought it was absolutely wonderful in terms of a defeated candidate coming back and saying, “No, we didn’t win it, but that doesn’t mean it’s the end.”

AL: And what do you remember of George Mitchell on the airplane?

PB: Well, George was a breath of fresh air. First of all, he had an ‘up’ attitude, he was very

positive. You know, so many people who campaign are dreary. I mean, “The world’s going to hell, and we’re young, we made a mistake today.” George would come and it was - First, [] he’d come with the news from Washington: what’s going on, how are they evaluating the campaign, and what are they saying about the staff, and this sort of thing. He’d be very frank and tell us. But he also, as I say, he sort of brought joy to the place, and he would fill us in on what’s happening in Washington and what they needed from the campaign. He was coordinating and making sure that we were working together rather than in opposite directions.

But he was always positive and up and supportive. Because after a while, it’s not exciting to be on an airplane, flying around, day and night, and there’s always a crisis: we don’t have that speech ready yet; we’ve got a crowd there; or, we don’t have a crowd there. But he also brought important [news]: what was happening in Washington; obviously, talking to Muskie of what’s happening in the Senate, that sort of thing. And he was a good liaison, and he got along so well with Don Nicoll. I think he was a mentor to George, and George really respected him, as everybody did. So it was the kind of coordination you needed. Because if you’re off flying around and don’t have the ‘what’s happening in Washington,’ you’re obviously going to conflict and have a disaster. So it was very important.

And as I say, he was an up person. A lot of people in campaigns are down. Every day they wake up and say, “Oh my God, I don’t want to talk to him today.” Because there are always difficult days.

AL: Do you recall if there were ever times when he had sort of campaign stories to tell everybody when he got on the plane? Did he have a sense of humor?

PB: Oh, George had a wonderful sense of humor. He could have you in tears from laughter, over what’s happening back in Washington and the foul-ups or whatever. Oh yeah, he was very open, and I think he knew what was expected of him, too. Because when you’re on a plane and you’re focused solely on every next event, you kind of lose sight of the overall effort. So that was important, to know what was happening and what the impact was in Washington. And he was always encouraging. He wouldn’t come in and start criticizing. It’s easy to criticize a campaign team because they’re going to screw up. There’s always a mistake.

But he knew that, because when he was working in Maine and Muskie would come up for something, he used to tell us stories of how Muskie would blow up at him because he’d lose his sense of direction—he was supposed to go north and he went south—and the stories of George: “Where are you going?” Driving the senator around. So he was very sympathetic and very helpful, yeah, and he was stimulating. He was always fun. It was always, ‘George is coming, that’s great.’ And he always was uplifting, very supportive.

And smart, I mean having known him in college—when we all get out of college we think we know something, but he learned fast. He learned fast. I think you do when you get on a staff in Washington, on a senator’s staff, and particularly one who’s prominent and has ideas and is willing to express them, and expresses them very well, you become knowledgeable in many

ways, not only about the issues but the style in which you [are] successful. So he was great, it was great seeing him.

And he had a very good relationship with Don Nicoll, and Don was the key person in the campaign at that time. So it turned out to be a far more exciting, and far more fun, than I ever anticipated. I mean, I thought after the first few days, “This is going to be terrible, I don’t know what I’m going to be doing, this is something I’ve never done before.” But you learn fast. “Paul, we need some research on this, I’m writing a speech on this,” Don would say, “and we need to do some research.” And then he’d say, “Well write it up.” Okay, so I’d write it up, put it in, I’d find some of it in the speech, that sort of thing. That made me feel good.

And the staff also had to make sure that the press was happy on the plane, but you also had to be sure that when you talked to the press you didn’t say anything stupid, which is easy to do when you’re a rookie. So I got good advice on how to be discreet, and how to be pleasant and how to be cooperative, but not to try to show that I knew what was going on, because I didn’t.

But as I say, it was a trait that I didn’t see in college necessarily. [While] he was doing serious work, [] he also always was [positive and] cheerful. You know, the worst thing in the world is to have somebody come on a plane and be depressed. Because you’re flying around, you don’t get any sleep, and the candidates get pretty upset from time to time and they’re ranting. But he would be uplifting, that’s the thing that I remember most. It was a delight having him [on the plane], and everybody welcomed him. So that relationship was I think very, very important and helpful to those on the staff that had to be on the plane.

AL: And so many years later now, as you look back on that, was it worth to you to leave your firm for that time?

PB: It was absolutely worth it. I think there were two things that - One of the things that I thought I might do is practice law for a few years and go back to Maine, and I remember talking to my wife about this afterwards. And she said, “Are you sure you want to do that? What about you? If you want to do it, Paul, we’ll go back to Bangor.” She grew up in New Jersey but also lived down in South America where her father was the head of Price Waterhouse, [] in Caracas, Venezuela, where all the oil people were. So she was far more sophisticated than I was to the world. And of course she said to me, not in a demeaning manner, she said, “But okay, Paul, if you want to go back to Bangor and run for Congress, that’s great—but what are you going to do when you lose?” And I said, “Wow, she’s got a lot of confidence in me!” So I thought about it for a while, and I thought about it that night, and next morning I said, “Maybe that’s not such a good idea.” And she said, “Well, what’s making you [reluctant]?” I said, “You know, I don’t think I’m going to want to go back and run for Congress []. I [believe] it takes a few efforts if I’m going to be realistic, and I really like what I’m doing here, and maybe I can get involved here.”

And that’s what happened. My good friend Mike Dukakis decided he was going to run for governor [of Massachusetts], so I became the chairman of his gubernatorial campaign, and a

fund raiser. A significant fund raiser—I spent a lot of time raising money. And an advisor. He and I became very close friends when we were at law school. One of the most interesting parts about that relationship was that when we finished at Harvard Law School, we decided to—before we went to work in the fall—to take a trip out west. When I was in the army I was stationed in France, and I had a little Karmann Ghia, which looked like a Porsche but didn't run like a Porsche. It was a cheap car, but it got us around. It was a two-seater. And we headed out across the United States, stopping at various places and seeing what the world was like, and sleeping out with sleeping bags from time to time. And the thing that I remember vividly was that we stopped in – where are all the great gambling casinos?

AL: Las Vegas?

PB: Yeah, Las Vegas. And one of the reasons we stopped there was that we understood that if you went to the gambling casinos, they had free food—I mean a big section where you could eat—because they want the gamblers not to go anywhere else to eat, they want them to gamble. So for a dollar, you could have this fantastic meal [p/o]. So we went in there and we ate very handsomely. I had about five dollars' worth of quarters and I went and I played the slot machines, and I didn't [win] anything. And I said, "Michael, for God's sakes, here you are in this great gambling [casino]. We just had food for nothing, so go on [and try your luck]." He was a spendthrift, he wouldn't do – oh, no, no – so he [eventually gave] in and he got a dollar's worth of quarters. He put the [first] quarter in the machine, he pulled the one-armed bandit, and he hit a jackpot, I think he got twenty dollars out of it. He took it all and he put it in his pocket. "Aren't you going to play anymore?" "No, no, are you crazy?"

So anyhow, we didn't have a hotel that night, so we parked the car somewhere and we saw a field. We had sleeping bags, and I think we had a couple of drinks too at that, and we went to sleep. And at about five o'clock in the morning a whistle was blowing, and all of a sudden we heard this rumble. We [apparently] went to sleep in a Boy Scout encampment—there was a Boy Scout troop, [with] all their blankets and tents, and we were right in the middle of it. I thought it was the police warning, and all of a sudden I saw this Scout master come out. "What are you guys doing here?" "Oh, are we in your territory?" So we were quite embarrassed and moved on. I'll never forget that night.

But we traveled all across [the country], we stopped along the way, saw the United States. I'd never been out west. And then we wound up in California, [at a Democratic] convention where John Kennedy was nominated, and that was very exciting. Michael was involved in local politics in Brookline. He's always been active in politics, and he knew people who were at the Democratic convention. So we were able to [obtain] tickets for the whole procedure. It was great, it was exciting—first time I'd ever been to a Democratic convention where the vice president and the president were being nominated. And he knew people, and so we managed to get invited to a few of these sessions and see what was happening.

AL: Now, what year was this?

PB: This was, when was it, Humphrey and—well it was 1960 I guess. Yeah, was that '60?

AL: 'Eighty?

PB: Where John Kennedy -

AL: No, '60. '60, yeah.

PB: Yeah, '60, wasn't it John Kennedy? Yeah, I think it was '60. Yeah, it must have been because it was right after law school. I got out in '60.

AL: Sorry, yes; sorry to interrupt.

PB: No, that's fine. And anyhow, he knew people there because of his involvement in local politics in Brookline and in Massachusetts, so we were able to get invitations to see certain [events and meetings]. But it was very exciting. [p/o] Well, [Kennedy] obviously made a great impression and he won the nomination.

So I went out to smoke. I never smoked very much but I was tired, and I went out near the end of the first night (the victory session). And I couldn't get back in to the convention hall, I didn't have my credentials. And so Michael was in there, and I couldn't [get in]. I said, "But I just went out to" "No, no, sorry." Couldn't get in. So I remember, all of a sudden Bobby Kennedy and all the other Kennedys came up, their whole crew, and then there were younger people too [], and they all got permission to walk in, and then they shut the door. When they first arrived they knocked on the door and nobody let them in, Bobby Kennedy said, "Goddam it, open the door, I'm a Kennedy." So they opened the door and let them in, okay, and then the whole family came in. So I saw that, and I was there alone because Mike was inside, so I walked up and I knocked on the door. He said, "You got your ticket?" I said, "No." I then said, "but I'm a Kennedy." He looked at me, he laughed at me. So I didn't know what the heck to do.

I [learned] that there was going to be a reception in a hotel downtown, so I went back and I put my shirt and tie on and my suit, and I went over to the reception. And they had this wonderful layout of food. I hadn't eaten. I don't know where Dukakis was at that time, and I had a ball there. I met all these people, eating and chatting, as if I belonged there. So I arrived back at the hotel room at one a.m. and Dukakis said, "I thought something had happened to you—what happened?" I said, "I couldn't get back in the convention hall, so I came back, I changed, and I went to the party." He said, "What party?" I said, "Well, they had a big party, I had a great meal, wine and all that." But then I told him [how] I tried to get in [by] saying I was a Kennedy and they laughed at me. So that was a very exciting event that day.

[Next], we were heading down to Mexico, Acapulco actually. We decided we needed to rest after all of this. And so we arrived and we found a hotel for one dollar a night, a [really] cheap hotel. We always stayed with cheaper hotels. But I knew a young lady that I had dated at Wellesley College, when I was at Bowdoin. She was there with her roommate, and they were

staying in a nice fancy hotel, and she indicated that she was going to be there. So I called her and said, "I'm here, Mike and I are here." So we went up [to her hotel], and we spent the next two or three days by the pool at this luxurious hotel.

The second day there, we were sitting there and reading the paper, and all of a sudden Lyndon Johnson's team [arrived]. And the manager of the campaign was sitting next to me by the pool, and I said I had been to the convention and how exciting it was and what a great lesson it was. And then I [told] him, "You probably won't like this remark, but I'm surprised that Lyndon Johnson accepted, or sought, the vice presidency. Because I had the impression, I think most people had the impression, that it's not a position of a guy of his stature and he's not going anywhere with it, and that he doesn't like Kennedy." "Oh, now that's not true, Paul," he said, "but you know what happens when the president dies? The vice president becomes president. You know how Lyndon Johnson became a congressman? A congressman died in office, and he took his place. You know he became a senator? He succeeded a senator that died. You know what happens when the president dies?" Well, on the day that Kennedy was assassinated, I was in my office and Michael was in his, and honestly, within seconds of each other, we were calling each other. "Paul," or "Michael" "Do you remember that conversation in Acapulco? That a vice president takes over if Kennedy dies?" It was so eerie, it was so unbelievable. You know, it just struck me as, I mean it was just [weird]—both of us were stunned by it.

AL: Yeah, and it was both of your first thoughts.

PB: First thoughts, absolutely, yeah, yeah. And the interesting thing was that after Lyndon Johnson died, during the [Dukakis] campaign, that Michael and I went to Lyndon Johnson's home, his farm and so forth, and he's buried on the grounds, and we had dinner with Mrs. Johnson and the family, because Michael was a presidential nominee at that time. And it was kind of interesting seeing his home and his family and so forth, and it was kind of a different Lyndon Johnson that you thought of at time, because he was a pretty wise and experienced politician. But I'll never forget that. I mean, can you imagine sitting there and saying to his chairman, why did he do it, and then he said, "Well, if the guy dies" But that was a startling experience.

The trip was really very, very, informative and educational. The campaign itself and then traveling around the United States to various parts of the country we'd never seen before, and I think it was one of the best – we talked a lot about our future and what he was going to do and what I was going to do, and I still had in mind that I might go back to Maine and run for Congress someday (if I could persuade my wife). But I had given up that idea when I found that I really liked practicing law. It was a surprise, because I didn't like law school at all. Couldn't stand law school. Bowdoin was stimulating, Oxford was stimulating. Harvard Law School was not stimulating. The professors were purposely mean. Maybe they thought that this was the way you trained young lawyers.

I remember one of the professors that taught me corporate law, very smart, but terrible to the students. He embarrassed them, he was mean, and subsequently, when I was practicing as a

young lawyer, I [served] on a committee with him. We were [involved in reviewing some changes] in the law and this sort of [thing], and I said to him, “Professor, why were you such an s.o.b. in class? Did you think that that helped you teach these people, you were trying to intimidate them?” I said, “You know, it was really depressing, because you’re such a smart guy, and you didn’t need to do that.” He said, “Oh Paul, I wasn’t like that, was I?” “Yes, you were—talk to my classmates.”

AL: So he didn’t realize it?

PB: Well, he didn’t realize it. He thought that’s the way he should act, I guess. I mean, there were some professors like that. On the other hand, there were other professors that were not like that at all, and they got the best out of their students. I learned what not to do as a lawyer when dealing with young associates, instead of trying to say how smart I am and how stupid you are, how to help them. And if they made mistakes—I made mistakes—I expect others are going to make them. But I’ll never forget that, so I didn’t like Harvard Law School at all, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to practice law.

So when Michael thought of getting involved in politics and running, I became chairman of his campaign for governor, and all of his subsequent campaigns, and that was very stimulating and a lot of fun. And I learned a lot, the firm was very good in terms – but in those days I was working fifteen hours a day, because associates were expected to work that long, you know, and not complain about it. But when it came time that I wanted to leave, or take time off to help the campaign, they were very, very thoughtful and said, “Fine, just make sure you come back.”

That whole period was really an interesting [time] for us, to see a presidential campaign, and to see what happens when catastrophe occurs and how other people can step in and do well or not do well, and the need for good government and good people running.

AL: Now, talk to me about other times over the years that you’ve been in touch with George Mitchell, or had commonality in some respect, and seen him develop and observed him and possibly interacted with him.

PB: Well I think, after that campaign we didn’t have as much interaction. We had a lot during the campaign. You know, you’re always surprised by the people you knew in college, and you didn’t know where we were all going. But he had an incredible personality, [] he was smart, he knew how to handle people, he was very effective the way he did this. He had a sense of humor, he could laugh at himself, he could take criticism and not respond angrily like many people do. Because I know he learned so much from Muskie, despite the screaming and yelling, how he used to get Muskie lost up in Presque Isle or somewhere, take the wrong road. But he had a great sense of humor, and never thought of himself as being sort of special in any way, and he made people feel good when they were around him.

But we, throughout these campaigns, there’s one thing that really - I’ll never forget what he did. When I went to Washington, when Dukakis got the nomination and I was going to be responsible

for helping pick the vice president—well, let me tell you a story about that. It was clear that we were going to win, and the problem was that everybody on the plane—this is the Dukakis run for president—were talking about “who are you going to pick for vice president, who are you going to pick for vice president?” So one night we were having dinner and he [i.e. Dukakis] said, “Paul, you’ve got to put a stop to this. We can’t be talking about who’s going to be vice president. We haven’t gotten it yet. We’ve got to win, and then we discuss it,” he said, “and I want you to put that out throughout the whole campaign, I want you to enforce it, I don’t want to have to do that, spend my time doing that, okay?” I said okay.

So I did that, I said, “No more talk.” The press are always, they’re always: “who’s he going to select for vice president, because we know he’s going to win.” So we stopped all talk on the plane on that. And then I thought to myself—and I did a little research on the subject—I thought to myself, “You can’t wait until you win the last primary; you have to prepare for it.” So I went out and I did a study, as much as I could, of other vice presidential processes, and then I assembled some documents and I talked to some people in Washington I knew that had done some of this and got some of their materials. And during the course of the campaign, on the plane, I drafted, I worked [late into] the night, I worked on it, and I prepared about a thirty-five page memorandum on the process. And we stopped all talk about it, because Dukakis insisted on it.

So we’re in California, the last [competitor] is Jesse Jackson. It was clear that we were going to win, and so I went up to his [i.e. Dukakis’s] suite after dinner, about eight o’clock, and I handed him about a fifty page memorandum on the selection process: the problems, the traps and everything else. He said, “What the hell is this?” I said, “It’s a memo. Tomorrow morning, there are going to be fifty members of the press down there, and they’re going to be asking you about your plans for vice president, what you’re doing and so forth, and you’ve got to be prepared, and these are some of the mistakes that people have made, this is the process that people have followed, this is my recommendation on how you handle it.” “Oh Paul, I told you not ...” “Come on, Michael, be realistic,” and I walked out. I was upset with the response, okay?

So the next morning, sure enough, the place is packed, okay, now he’s the nominee. All the questions: “vice president, vice president.” After about four or five questions he says, “I want to stop this discussion right now, and I want to make an announcement, that I’ve selected Paul Brontas as a committee of one to run my vice presidential selection process.” Which made me feel a lot better, because he read the material. He came back later on – he’s not very good at compliments – he said, “That’s a great piece of work.” I said, “I didn’t do anything, I just collected all the things that had been written, the mistakes other people have made, so we don’t make them,” and so forth. All of a sudden I was now popular among the people in the press, because I’m running around, you know, that’s all they can write about now, Dukakis’ nominee, and I was very discreet and so forth. But it was a very different assignment.

The one thing that I recall was, when I went to Washington I had to interview most of the senators and a few congressmen—these key people—and I didn’t quite know how to approach it.

Some of these guys were very cooperative and some of them weren't, but I had a set of questions: what do you expect, what are you looking for in terms of vice president, and so forth. And a lot of them would recommend people that were terrible, and some of them recommended themselves. And there were two things that happened: number one, George Mitchell took me around, introduced me to a few people, but he had, I don't know, maybe it was an exterior office, an interior office. Well, in the exterior office he had a table set up for lunch for him and me. So people would walk by and see George serving me lunch, of course, and we're talking about old times and so forth. So all of a sudden, "who the hell is this guy Brontas, I mean what's he doing there with Mitchell?"

The other thing that I did was, when I went in to talk to each of the senators, and a few congressmen that I talked to (I talked to almost all the Democratic senators), I said to the chief of staff (which you don't say but I said it), I said, "I'd like to speak to the Senator alone. Senator, is that all right with you?" "Yeah, yeah, that's okay, Paul." And (*unintelligible*). Next day, I've forgotten the name of the writer for the *Washington Post*, but he liked me, he took me out to dinner a couple of times and we talked, and because I was new at it I wasn't stuck with the old stuff, probably naive, but he said, "Who the hell is this guy Brontas, he comes down to Washington, and he tells the chief of staff of these senators to get out because he wants to talk to these alone. You don't *do* that." (*laughter*)

And then of course Mitchell was popular at that time, and he's having lunch at his little table, okay, he and Brontas are having lunch there. So all of a sudden, you know, I came out of this whole process as, "who the hell is Brontas." And it was very interesting, I would ask questions and stuff, and so, "Oh God, what do you think of that guy?" And I had thought of, from a strategic point of view, for Dukakis to pick somebody not from the northeast, but somebody from somewhere else, and maybe less, I mean more conservative than he. Because he was very liberal, maybe he could balance the ticket. And somebody who was older. And I interviewed several of the senators, and one of the things I was interviewing, asking questions about, how good they would be and so forth.

End of Side A
Side B

AL: We are now on Side B. And how good they would be?

PB: Yeah, how good they would be. So I was interviewing Lloyd Bentsen, and I had done some research on him and I liked him. He was more conservative than Dukakis, he was obviously a very experienced senator, he was highly respected. And so I went on and we talked about people and I said, "Who would you suggest," and so forth, and "what about so-and-so?" "Well Paul, let me tell you what's wrong with that guy," and so forth. And then finally I said, "Senator Bentsen, what about you?" He looked at me. "What about you? [] I know it sounds strange. You come from a conservative area, Texas; they're not for Dukakis, and Dukakis is considered a liberal, but I think you could really help this campaign." And he sat there for a minute. "You know, Paul, I'm glad you asked that question, let's talk about it." So I had this

wonderful conversation with him: “let me tell you how I can help you and Dukakis.” And it made so much sense.

So I came back to Dukakis that night and I said, “You’re going to be very surprised, but I would pick Bentsen if I were you.” “Why?” And then I told him about the conversation, how he could help the ticket. I said, “Let’s set up a meeting with him. I think you’ll get along with him. I didn’t know what kind of person he’d be because I [believe that] Texans don’t like Massachusetts politicians. But he’s a real gentleman, and I think he could help you in so many ways.” They had this conversation, they hit it off just like that, so he became the nominee. And so I had a lot dealing with him as well, because I was the contact between him and Michael.

AL: Was George Mitchell ever considered?

PB: Not at that time, not at that time.

AL: They were both northeasters, so geographically it wouldn’t have been [advisable].

PB: That was the key, is when, you know, how to balance the ticket, because Dukakis was perceived to be so liberal that maybe, well this is a guy that picks somebody who isn’t that liberal, and so he’s comfortable with Bentsen. Bentsen was highly respected in the Senate, and it was very favorably received by the party and by the press, because he was respected. And of course he turned out to be a terrific vice presidential candidate when he took on the vice presidential candidate with Bush.

AL: Dan Quayle?

PB: Oh, my God, yeah, oh boy, did he let him have it that night. He was better in the debate than Dukakis was. “I live with him, I know him, I worked with him, and you’re no ...,” (he [i.e. Quayle] was talking about Kennedy, he was trying to make himself Kennedy) “you’re no John Kennedy.” So that was a very [] good choice and he was great. The one thing I remember, *Time* magazine always does something about the campaign, and they interviewed Bentsen about it and he said, “Well, you know, what did you like best about the” (I shouldn’t say this) “what’d you like best about the Dukakis campaign?” And he said, “Paul Brontas.” Of course that’s because of the relationship that I had with him and so forth. But he was great, he was very good with Dukakis, he kept Dukakis informed on some areas where: “Michael, you don’t have to take this position, you can still do this, but there’s a different way of framing it,” and so forth. And he gave him a view that would make people more comfortable with him, because he was perceived as a flaming liberal. He wasn’t really, but that was the way they pictured him and the way the Bush campaign did. But that was a very, very exciting time, I must say. The worst problem I had was Jesse Jackson, who insisted that he was going to be the vice presidential candidate.

AL: Oh, so there were some negotiations.

PB: Well, there wasn’t any negotiations, but he was -

AL: I mean on his part.

PB: Oh, he was impossible. He insisted on, just before the process ended, on meeting with me. And I not only interviewed all the candidates that we were thinking about, I had to interview him. I didn't think he ... – but I did, it was necessary to interview him. But I interviewed the wives of the candidates, of the potential candidates, because that's part of the process. And I shouldn't say this, but Jesse Jackson said, "You're not going to interview my wife, she's not going to approve that." So, okay. But anyhow, he set me up. I was in Washington and we had already made our decision, we were planning, I mean I had to go back to Boston and do this and so forth, and he insisted on a meeting. He came in with his crew and we talked, and he was making a pitch for vice presidency. And so I said, "Well, we're still in the process, we're going to be making a decision tonight," and so forth. And then we went out, and he took me ... "Go through here," and he had fifteen members of the press there. I said, "What is this?" He said, "Well, the press is interested in what you're doing about the vice presidency." And he set it up. I was furious, I spoke to them briefly and left, I was so upset. Can you imagine that?

So anyhow, he said, "Are you going to let me know in advance? I mean I don't want to be surprised," and so forth. I said, "We'll let you know." So I told the chief of staff, chief of the campaign (what's her name, I've forgotten now), but I said, "Look ..." – we all went back and sat that night in Michael Dukakis' kitchen, the campaign manager and a couple of key staffers, and we went through the process and decided it was going to be Bentsen. So I called Bentsen around ten o'clock at night and told him, and said that we'd have a plane in Washington, it would bring him and his wife up to Boston in the morning, for a big rally at eleven o'clock in the morning, Faneuil Hall, in downtown Boston. And I told the campaign chairman, "Make sure and call Jesse and tell him that he's not going to be on the list," and so forth. She didn't do it, and he was furious at me. Jackson, you know: "You promised me ...," and it was in the paper the next day.

But Bentsen came up with his wife. I went down on the plane with them to bring him back. And his wife was a wonderful woman, too, and they were holding hands as they went off the plane. He said, "You know, my wife was once in a near accident" – and the plane wasn't a big plane, it was a five-seater or something like that. And we talked, and I felt so comfortable with him, because they were such different personalities. But both of them got along beautifully, and I attribute that to Bentsen's ability and Michael's ability both to work together. And we had a great rally, a few thousand people down next to Faneuil Hall, down in the marketplace, and it was a great event. But that was a very trying time, as you can imagine, because everybody's giving you advice. And Bentsen was a great help to the campaign, I thought. But not enough.

AL: And then in years after that, in what respects did you have contact with Senator Mitchell?

PB: He would call me from time to time and say, "Paul ...," make suggestions, I mean during the campaign.

AL: Oh, during the campaign. This is in '88.

PB: Yeah, in '88. After that, he came to Boston a few times, I think to raise money. And he was hilarious, I mean he was so good at those fund raisers. He was sort of self deprecating, he was very good at that, and he'd tell funny stories about himself. And I was amazed how good he was at that. He was endearing, I mean in terms of people really liked him. And I'd say, "Where did he get all these stories?" He collected them and he told them beautifully. And none of them were about how great he was, but how he got through this problem, how he got through that problem. And I said, "Boy, he has really, really improved that style." And people like that. They don't like a cocky person coming in and that sort of thing.

And he was a listener, he was a great listener. I used to tell all the young attorneys who worked for me: [] "Don't go in a meeting and do all the talking to the client. [] I have a favorite phrase that I keep telling myself, that I've never learned anything new by listening to myself talk. Remember that phrase, okay? You learn by listening to other people talk, because you already knew what you were talking about." And that passed around the firm for a long time, that Brontas never learned anything new by listening to himself talk. And George was great about that, I mean he was always listening. He was talking, but he was bringing other people into the conversation.

And the jokes he told were the same, often on himself. He didn't show any ego at all in those terms, and he just was a delight to be with. Where he did fund-raising, he did it very effectively, I mean people loved him. I think that he was, I don't know, somewhere along the line, he just learned how to be a really good politician and a good senator. And that's not easy, I mean there's so many people giving you advice, but I mean, he came from Maine, right? You come from Maine, you grow up in Maine, you're different from the people that grew up in New York City or who are involved in all these high level politics.

But we didn't have a lot of contact after that. I saw him at Bowdoin at a couple reunions. We kept in touch from time to time, though, I must say, and I followed his career. I knew he was smart, and I knew he was a good politician, but I didn't realize how good he was. How year after year, and then to rise in the level that he's risen to, I mean a senator from Maine being looked upon for advice and help. And that's because he never let his ego get in the way. He was always willing to [say]: "Gee, I don't really know about it; you tell me." He's another person I think believes what my favorite saying is: that I never learn anything by listening to myself talk. He legitimately wanted to hear, because "I want to know. I don't know about this, you do; tell me." Many politicians and lawyers, and many people we know, don't want to do that, they don't want to admit that they don't know. That's how he grew.

When I read [a recent] interview that he had with Charlie Rose, it's exceptional – the comments – I mean Rose is really drilling him: "well, what about the Jews doing this and this and this." And he came back one after another; I mean, some of this stuff is just terrific. As I read it I said, "Wow, this ought to be put in a textbook." And this is in a tough interview, with a tough

situation, after the Northern Ireland situation – you know, you put that thing together – his ability to bring people who are hostile together and sit down and try to come up with a resolution that probably neither of them are wholly satisfied with, but enough to compromise or whatever. That's the problem with the one he's facing now in Israel, and Hamas, it's, they won't negotiate. And he's got to get them to negotiate; otherwise nothing's going to happen except maybe more of the same, which is not very encouraging.

But I must say, he has that ability now. And his responses, this is really not only good politics, but it's just sound judgment. And this is the way a really good lawyer would approach these horrible situations where you have conflict, this is the way to solve the problem. If you're willing, at some point one party's going to give. When it happens we don't know, but you still have to work on the hope that it will give and that you're not going to go on fighting each other and killing each other and all this. His answers were really great, and his responses, because Rose is a very tough interviewer, and he was asking some really tough questions. George handled him beautifully.

AL: And I wonder, because you're a lawyer and George Mitchell also went to law school after Bowdoin, and so you can see the legal thinking within the way he phrases his answers?

PB: Absolutely, yeah.

AL: And from someone who isn't a lawyer, what is it you see, is it the way he organizes his answers, or is it the way he argues the answer, the argument he uses to answer the question?

PB: The way he rationalizes his answers. You'll often say, "Well why don't they do this?" Well, you put yourself in that position: what would you do in that situation? would you give in on that? what would be the consequences of your giving in on that – you'd be thrown out of office? There are so many considerations, and you have to think about every aspect of yielding on a subject. Or if you don't yield at some point, what are the consequences of it? It's thinking the whole thing through and – see, what often happens with lawyers, and other people, once you get a position, you can't move from it. George says, "Well you're right on this. But you have to consider that, this factor," and this sort of thing. And he does it beautifully here. And he's the same sort of person, he's a perfect example of: I never learn anything new by listening to myself talk, you let me know. I think that's been a great asset to him, because he's a good listener. Most politicians don't like to listen. They know it all.

AL: Is there anything I haven't asked you about George Mitchell or memories you have that you'd like to add before we end?

PB: No, I think that's probably it. I've followed him throughout his career, in connection with this and with the prior interviews. I read far more than I had ever read about him, and he has not only distinguished himself, but it's amazing what he's done. When you look at the history of this last few years of what he's headed up, and the solutions that he's proposed and the results that he's gotten, he's one of the top leaders of this country – and for decades. The

answers to these questions, which are difficult, very complicated questions – and he’s [i.e. Rose] criticizing him for not getting the Arabs and the Jews together. I don’t know if anybody can do it because of the animosity. [] He [i.e. Mitchell] says, “I believe a strong feeling that a time has come for negotiations to begin. We’re getting a lot of encouragement in that regard. What we want from them is to build on the Arab peace initiative proposed by the king of Saudi Arabia in 2002, supported by all the Arabs, and indeed the Muslims, non-Arab Muslim countries, and to engage with Israel in a way that moves toward full normalization. We don’t ask for full normalization now, and I’ll give you specific examples.” And then he goes on to say, “What we want is a parallel process as the Israelis and the Palestinians talk in negotiation. Israel and Palestine and all of the surrounding countries, would meet to deal with regional issues – energy, water, trade, communications, transport – all of which have been discussed in the past, haven’t been brought to full fruition, and we think the way to move forward is an Israeli-Palestinian agreement: Israeli and Syria, Israel and Lebanon, and full implementation of the Arab peace initiative. That’s the comprehensive peace in the region that is the objective set forth by the president and the secretary of state.” And in essence what he’s saying is that he wants diplomacy to be applied, and solid reasoning and not animosity and fighting (who’s going to win the battle). Which means give and take. And he’s absolutely right. And whether they’re ultimately able to do that, but at least he’s sending the right message.

AL: Thank you so much, Paul.

End of Interview