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### Interview with Sheila Burke by Brien Williams

Sheila P. Burke

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

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**Sheila Burke**  
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

**GMOH# 095**  
May 6, 2009

**Brien Williams:** This is an oral history interview with Sheila Burke for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. We're in Miss Burke's home in McLean, Virginia, today is Wednesday May 6, 2009, and I am Brien Williams. Let's start out, I guess my first question to most people is, when did you first become aware of George Mitchell?

**Sheila Burke:** Gosh, I'm sure it was in the '80s – I wish I were better at dates – and it would have been in the context of his membership on the Senate Finance Committee, [on] which Dole was obviously a very active member, so I think it was certainly in that context.

**BW:** You came to the Finance Committee in 1979, I believe.

**SB:** Correct, correct.

**BW:** And what brought you there?

**SB:** Senator Dole went, remarkably, from being a relatively junior member of the Finance Committee to the ranking Republican because of two retirements, Cliff Hanson and Carl Curtis, and Dole became ranking. [ ] I [was working on] his staff [and he] moved a number of us or hired a number of folks to go to the Finance Committee staff, and so I was hired to work on the Finance Committee and handle all the health issues.

**BW:** I didn't realize you'd been on his staff prior to going -

**SB:** I did, I joined his staff in May of '77.

**BW:** And how did that, how did you connect with Senator Dole?

**SB:** A third party. Senator Dole was looking for someone to handle health issues – there were a series of things that were occurring. It was early in Jimmy Carter's administration, he decided that he was going to take on the issue of hospital cost containment and Medicare costs. Senator Dole was anxious to have somebody on the staff who'd actually taken care of patients, and a colleague that I'd come to know recommended that [I] interview. I didn't know who Senator Dole was; I was a Democrat, relatively liberal, from California. Dole's view was, he cared less about my politics than he did about the fact that I'd done patient care, and so we interviewed. I thought it would be an interesting thing to do, and so I started Memorial Day

weekend of 1977, the week before we began hearings on hospital cost containment.

**BW:** It's interesting that he appreciated the direct experience with patients, because he'd been a patient so much himself.

**SB:** Well, that's exactly why; it's exactly why. He had a sense of what occurred in hospitals, who took care of people, what those relationships were like. There was a physician on the committee staff at the time, actually, who became a good friend, Jim Mongan, who is about to step down from running Mass General [ ], but Jim was on the committee staff on the Democratic side, worked for Russell Long, and I think Dole saw that that input on the Democratic side was quite useful, and I think he was interested in having that on the Republican side as well.

**BW:** Did you have to do any twists and turns to work for Republicans, as a Democrat?

**SB:** Well, I was always sensitive to it, and I was sensitive about making sure that I provided Senator Dole with the information he needed to make a good decision, and that I wasn't trying to influence him in a way that was inconsistent with his views. [ ] Early in our relationship [he] suggested that if I had a question, the person that I ought to call was a fellow by the name of Art Glenn. And this was to test out whether my instincts as a kid who had been raised in California and practiced nursing in California and New York, whether my sense of what would occur [ ] would sell in Russell, Kansas, or rural Kansas [ ]; and Art Glenn was his mother's optometrist in Russell. And I would call Art Glenn and [ask], "How does this sell in rural America?"

So I was sensitive to the responsibilities placed on me to be sure that I was balanced, and there were clearly areas upon which we disagreed, some fairly fundamental, reproductive rights being one of those. But he was alert and aware of that, I was alert and aware of that, and again, I think I had such respect for him and the quality of his mind and his decision making in the things he cared about, whether it was children, whether it was the nutrition programs, whether it was the disabled, whether it was fundamental health care issues, that I was comfortable with him as an individual. Would I have gone to work for any Republican? No, I can't imagine that I would have, but I came to appreciate how remarkable he was.

And we were surrounded by remarkable people – John Chaffee, Jack Heinz, Jack Danforth – I mean just remarkable individuals, particularly on the Finance Committee. [ ] It became unique because Dole and Mitchell obviously both became leaders, both had been on the Finance Committee, both had been very active. But the committee was a remarkable group of individuals – I mean Abe Ribicoff, Pat Moynihan – just towering figures in the Senate. So it was a wonderful, wonderful opportunity.

**BW:** Ed Muskie goes to State Department in 1980, and the state of Maine [Governor Joseph Brennan] appoints George Mitchell. He arrives in the Senate – what were some of your first observations of him on the committee?

**SB:** Extraordinary insight, I mean just a sense of his surroundings. Very patient, he was

someone who was, I think it was his background, certainly his judicial background that gave him the capacity both to be very patient but to be very focused on the issues at hand. Very detailed oriented, and unlike Senator Dole's humor which is in constant display in one way or another, Senator Mitchell's was a little more subtle, but just a remarkable colleague, someone I think people came to respect very quickly.

**BW:** Now, he describes himself in those first two years before he was elected to the Senate as being a senator with an asterisk after his name, and of course that would be true. But did he strike you at the time as being intimidated?

**SB:** No, he didn't. In fact, that's a term I can't imagine applying to Senator Mitchell. He may well not have been immersed in the history of the Senate as an institution as a participant, but he was someone who was remarkably gifted in his own right and I think brought all of the skills that he had used in his prior experience to the Senate. I don't ever remember thinking of him as intimidated, by the issues or by the company he kept.

**BW:** That was my next question. Did someone form sort of a mentor for him on Finance?

**SB:** Don't know; don't know the answer to that question. I would well imagine someone might have on the Democratic side. The Senate is such a clubby institution, and the relationships are so remarkable that are formed between strange bedfellows at times. I've got to believe someone did. I don't know who it might have been, but it's hard to imagine that he wouldn't have had someone with whom he spoke.

**BW:** And from the start, did he have a staff person that was his Finance -?

**SB:** He had a variety of folks. The person that I came to know best, and I don't know when she joined his staff so I don't know if this was early on, was Martha Pope. And Martha and I became very good friends and had similar positions, chiefs of staff in the respective leaders' offices. But he certainly had people on the Finance Committee beat, but how early and who they were I don't recall.

**BW:** Did you notice any change in his behavior after he did win the election in '82?

**SB:** No, but I'm not sure that I would have been observing him closely enough to determine that. Dole was obviously a very active member of the committee, and then very quickly became ranking and then chair, so I was more focused I think on our side of the aisle.

**BW:** Right. Now from '80 on of course, there were some big battles.

**SB:** Yes, huge, huge battles, in the context of, certainly in the Finance Committee, around issues around tax. We had a whole series of measures early on in the Reagan administration that were quite pitched in terms of the battles, and Finance was in the middle of a lot of those, whether it was TEFRA or DEFRA or OBRA or COBRA, I mean, we had a whole series of them.

It was a very busy legislative time frame.

**BW:** And what kind of a path did George Mitchell steer through those issues?

**SB:** Well, I think he was certainly a strong proponent of his points of view, he was certainly somebody who would be consistent with an East Coast - ; northern liberal in a lot of these issues, but mindful of where he was from. I mean there's a difference between Maine and Massachusetts. So very deliberate in his views, but clearly had strong views, clearly about the role of government, the role of taxes, those kinds of things, no question.

And he was someone, again who, very much like Senator Dole, was at the heart, interestingly enough, a legislator. I mean someone who, I always had the impression, given a problem, he wanted to find a solution. And it was less about the battle than it was about finding the answer, and I think they were both remarkable in that respect in that at the end of the day they really wanted to come to closure, rather than simply have votes to have votes and to essentially pitch parties. Now, he could be partisan, as could Senator Dole, they could both be very partisan, but they were both – and this certainly came to light when the two of them were leaders, when Senator Mitchell replaced Senator Byrd, they were remarkably alike in that respect, that they could have a wonderful relationship and a very direct and honest one, but could be bitterly partisan on the floor. But [they] could step back from that and move on, and I don't think that ever altered their friendship. They both knew their respective roles for their parties, but were unbelievably and consistently honest and direct with one another. Quite remarkable.

**BW:** From the perspective of the committee as a whole, how was – I'm thinking particularly of ERDA, the first tax bill, and the David Stockman woodshed and all of that supply side – how was the committee handling all of that?

**SB:** Boy, the person you need to talk to is Rod DeArment. Rod was much more involved in ERDA because of the tax side than I was. I'm not the right person to ask.

**BW:** And then in '85 you moved from Finance to -?

**SB:** Leader's office, correct.

**BW:** Right, and what's the background on that shift?

**SB:** Again, Dole won the leader's position, replacing Senator Baker. He did so after a number of ballots – none of us were certain it would occur, I mean those are sort of a Masonic mystery, but he did win. And he chose a couple of us to go from the committee to leader's office. I went over as deputy chief of staff, the person who had been chief of staff on the Senate Finance Committee, Rod DeArment, moved over as chief of staff, and Rod and I had been chief and deputy on Finance, so we moved over in those roles, and the other person we took with us was the tax counsel, Rich Bayles.

He didn't take the whole committee. He took I think the people he thought could help build a staff over there around a much broader set of issues, with a somewhat different skill set. And so Rod and I then went about building the [leader's staff, some] old staff [ ], but mostly new people to come in and handle the broader range of issues that, we were going from worrying about tax policy to defense policy. He'd had some of those people on his personal staff, but [ ] in most instances went outside and brought in people who were subject matter experts in the areas where we thought he would certainly need to be engaged. Rod stayed for a year, slightly less, and then went back to Covington, where he had been a partner, and I took over as chief of staff and then remained there with Senator Dole until he left.

*Pause in taping.*

**BW:** Just briefly, describe the relationship between the leader's office and his Senate office, and was it Hart, where he was? What were the relationships like?

**SB:** Well interesting, challenging at times. We had the benefit of having him with us all the time, and his consuming activity and interest at the time was the floor and all the things that occurred on the floor. And I think for a personal staff, and I suspect Senator Mitchell's staff may have experienced this, I don't know it, but for a personal staff, it's challenging. Your boss is – we had a little bit of the same tension when he was chairman of the Senate Finance Committee – the personal staff handles issues that are very important, they are the issues that are the bedrock, which is your constituent interests, but they are in some respects a little less visible, a little less dramatic, a little [lower] profile. Except when, you know, Agriculture was up or something of that nature.

And so I think there was some tension. We were, in the leader's office, sensitive about managing his relationship with the state of Kansas which, at the end of that day those are the folks that were bringing him home. But our day-to-day responsibilities were worrying about what the other members of the caucus were doing and how that role, I mean it related with the White House, we had that unique set of issues and relationships to try and manage, and so I think the personal staff often felt that they were sort of second tier.

I don't think he ever viewed Kansas as being anything less than critical to him; he is a son of the plains. But there is no question that the staff I think felt some, a little bit of envy. We were on television, we were floating around on the floor, we had relationships with the other members of the Senate that were unique because of our standing in the Capitol, in Senator Dole's office and with his role as leader. I was constantly interacting with other members on his behalf, and that's a different set of relationships.

**BW:** I just want to step back because there was one other question I wanted to ask you about during your time on Finance, and that was, were there any memorable interactions that you observed between Dole and Mitchell on that committee?

**SB:** Before they were leaders?

**BW:** Hmm-hmm.

**SB:** No, none that I can recall before they were leaders. What I recall most distinctly was when the two of them essentially were leaders, there were constant conversations that would occur where they would literally roll their chairs back behind the chairman, behind Packwood and Moynihan, and have a conversation, some of which related to the committee, some of which related to whatever the hell was going on, on the floor. So the two of them had sort of this relationship where they often used that time together when they were sitting there to sort of have a conversation. But I don't remember anything unique prior to that, off the top of my head.

**BW:** When did you get the sense that George Mitchell's career might take off in a big way?

**SB:** I don't know that I ever had a particular sense of that. In part because I wasn't particularly focused on the Democrats individually, nor that particular northeastern corridor; I was much more sensitive to some of the others who were playing major roles on particular issues. So I don't know that I really focused on it. I think we were all surprised when he got elected leader, but not surprised because he wasn't remarkable at that particular task, but he wasn't one of the high profile, bigger-than-life kind of characters.

**BW:** Did Dole ever share with you some thoughts about the transition from Byrd to Mitchell, and to Mitchell's becoming the leader?

**SB:** Only in the following respect: Senator Dole and Senator Byrd also had a remarkable relationship, in part because of Senator Byrd's unique characteristics and style, and a very formal, disciplined man who had a very strong point of view about the leadership and about the Senate. And I think Dole came to respect that, Dole came to have a wonderful relationship with him. But – I don't mean to be pejorative – but he was quirky. He would go into his office and close the door and play his violin, or his fiddle, for hours at a time.

Now, Senator Dole has the patience of Job, and so Dole would ride through that, but it wasn't the normal kind of discourse where you can just pick up the phone and say, "George" – it was a different kind of relationship. And in my conversations with him about the transition to Senator Mitchell, it was a much more predictable, much freer relationship, and his sense, and he would talk about this, that – and they would wander down the hall to one another. It was not unusual for us to rumble down the hall, nor for Mitchell to rumble down the hall.

In fact, I remember when we flipped back to the majority, the night of the elections, Dole wanted to go see Mitchell, and we wandered down the hall. That would never have occurred in a Byrd environment. And Martha [Pope] and I also uniquely had a relationship with one another, and with each other's bosses. I could easily go and see Senator Mitchell, I could talk with him on the floor, I could go see him in his office. In turn, Martha [and] Senator Dole [were] quite comfortable. And so Senator Dole's sense of Senator Mitchell was, it was a much more traditional kind of give-and-take, a freer give-and-take.

And he would talk about and commented on the fact that he and Senator Mitchell decided very early on, there would be no surprises, that they would be very direct with one another, and while bitterly fighting over a particular issue on the floor, they would never surprise one another. And Senator Dole will comment on that, and will say that he and Mitchell had that conversation, and I can recall numerous events where we literally would have conversations that our caucuses would never have wanted to have occurred, where the two of them were unbelievably frank.

We often, very often went down to Senator Mitchell's office, in his little conference room, the four of us, Senator Mitchell and Dole and Martha and I would sit there, and the two of them would rail about some member of their individual caucuses who was just out of control, or just, "George, I can't get this guy to clear that hold," whatever it happened to be. And they were able to do that, and they never exposed one another. Quite remarkable.

**BW:** At the beginning, when Mitchell was first starting out as majority leader, did he seek Dole's advice, or was there some sort of -?

**SB:** No, I don't know that I would say he sought his advice as much as I would say they had enormous respect for one another. And I don't know that I would describe it as advice, as much as there was a free give and take about how are we going to get the job done, how are we going to get the business of the Senate done. So much of what occurs in the Senate is done by consent. The bulk of what we do, as compared to your impression that everything is combat, huge amounts of work are done simply because the two leaders can sit down and work out a consent agreement, or get through a series of issues.

And so they early on talked about how to have the process and the business of the Senate get done, but I don't know that Dole would describe it as having given advice, I don't think he would be that presumptuous. But it was clear that they were respectful of each other's skills.

**BW:** Is there any ceremony they go through, as one -?

**SB:** They're sworn in by their caucuses, but no, there's no, no.

**BW:** During their time together as leaders, were there particular ups and downs or highs and lows that come to mind?

**SB:** [Yes], I certainly remember health care as being uniquely challenging during the Clinton administration, and the unique position the two of them were in with Mitchell trying to represent the administration, having to deal with [Senator Moynihan], the chairman of the Finance Committee who was somewhat less enthusiastic [ ]. Dole had his own caucus issues; Mitchell took it very seriously, his responsibility to try and move the administration's bill along. So I think that was a challenging period of time. There were certainly budget negotiations that were difficult. What year did Mitchell become leader?

**BW:** '89.

**SB:** So we had gone through the Gingrich era, or at least that first set of some of those issues. But those budget discussions were certainly challenging. I'm trying to remember the year we shut the government down.

**BW:** It was '95.

**SB:** '95, so the Andrews Air Force Base and the Contract with America, that's right, it was '95, so that was a challenging time, when the House wouldn't do the CR as we shut the government down. No question that it was tense during those periods of time.

And it was interesting. I mean the relationship between the Senate and the House was challenging, and certainly on our side of the aisle, uniquely challenging because of Gingrich and the Contract with America. And the Senate in a lot of ways is kind of the cooling, sort of calms things down, and Dole took that responsibility seriously, but he was also looking at his own potential run through that period of time, and how much distance could he establish between himself and the conservatives, between [him] and Gingrich and the Gingrich crowd. And I think that was difficult for him, and it made the relationship difficult because he was having to deal with those issues.

And you had the mid-terms after the failure of health insurance, where the pendulum swung back in our direction. You also had this unique set of circumstances around catastrophic health insurance, where Dole and Mitchell kind of hung in there and took on John McCain, who essentially ultimately succeeded in getting a repeal of a bill that the two of them as part of the Finance Committee and its leaders had helped move along, where the two of them kind of held hands and jumped over the cliff together. So there were ups and downs, no question about it. But again, through it all, they were lucky in having the relationship they had with one another.

*Pause in taping.*

**BW:** I sort of have the impression that Dole was, I would describe among many things as kind of a fiscal man.

**SB:** Yes.

**BW:** And that Mitchell was kind of an environmental man.

**SB:** Yes.

**BW:** And so where did they dovetail in terms of issues?

**SB:** Well they dovetailed to a certain extent on health care issues. And I'm not entirely sure that they necessarily fundamentally disagreed – well, that's not true. I mean, there's no question

around the environmental issues and Clean Air Act and things of that nature, they would have had substantially different views, and certainly around a lot of the tax measures in terms of the tax breaks, the tax reductions, clearly they had strong differences.

But I don't think of Senator Mitchell as someone who's hostile to business, nor necessarily hostile to agriculture, although some of the environmental issues were certainly challenging in that respect. But they are not unlike what you would imagine from an east coast northern liberal and a plains conservative Republican. I mean they would disagree on social issues, certainly. But I think there are issues, you know, the role of government. Dole is a fiscal conservative, but he also has a keen appreciation for the importance of government, and he is not crazed on no government, contract it all out, and so the two of them have an appreciation for that, for the rule of law, for the role of the military.

So there were a lot of things around which, while there are aspects to it where they might disagree on particular approaches, but I think fundamentally they are not in disagreement over some of the basic principles.

**BW:** When the leadership went down to the White House, did you go along on those meetings, or were those -?

**SB:** Some yes, some no. As a general matter, [ ] staff tended not to go when it was the joint leadership. When it was a unique set of issues, health care, Clinton had us down for dinner one evening, and I think Mitchell, I can't remember who was at the table, Moynihan might have been, Dole certainly was, I certainly was. When the caucus would go down, when they would invite the Republicans, [staff] would go down. It varied, but as a general matter, no, there were the White House staff but not the Hill staff.

**BW:** How would you characterize – this is sort of connected to what I just asked you – how would you characterize Mitchell's relationship, or as leader, during George Herbert Walker Bush's administration?

**SB:** I think there were fairly fundamental disagreements on policy, and it was a much more pitched kind of partisanship in some respects. What his personal relationship was like with President Bush I don't know, in terms of whether they personally got along well. [President Bush] didn't spend time on the Hill, and so we didn't – it's not like we saw a lot of him. [Vice President] Quayle did, but wasn't really a player in terms of our guys. And so Mitchell and Dole certainly were able to talk with one another about issues in that context, but I don't know what his relationship was like with Bush.

**BW:** What about the same question regarding Clinton?

**SB:** Well, I don't know what Senator Mitchell's relationship was like. He obviously had the responsibility as the head of his party on the Hill to represent the president, and he did so very aggressively. His staff certainly spent a lot of time with their folks. Dole's relationship with

Clinton was complicated, as you can well imagine, although certainly friendly; but they fundamentally disagreed on a variety of issues. And Clinton's lack of discipline, personal discipline, was something Dole could never get comfortable with, and I suspect that would be true of Mitchell. I certainly don't know that for a fact, but [ ] everything about Mitchell would suggest that he would find that difficult to tolerate.

And so certainly Dole, interestingly enough, this was true with Bush One, where Dole took seriously his responsibilities, I mean he lost to Bush, he got beyond it and became a very aggressive spokesperson for Bush on the Hill, he had remarkable respect for the office, so that his relationship with Clinton was tempered by the fact that he had a remarkable respect for the office of the presidency.

In fact I've always remembered this, we had a meeting at the White House – this was during the course of the budget debacle – and we were all in the Cabinet Room, and I had to present that day, surprisingly, on a bunch of issues. And the Clinton staff, Stephanopoulos and a bunch of the others, would wander in and out of the Oval Office and wander out and say something to Clinton, then wander back in and kind of stand in the Oval Office and talk to each other, often without ties on. Dole was so offended that they seemed to have so little respect for the institution. I mean it was a style that Clinton obviously encouraged, but it drove Dole crazy, just drove him crazy. And Dole sort of commented to me at the time, you know, "Never," he said, "this would never have occurred in a Bush White House, it won't ever occur in mine" – this was when he was still looking to run. But that whole thing, I think, really troubled him.

So again, how Senator Mitchell would have reacted, I don't know, but certainly they were both very effective spokespeople for their respective presidents, very aggressive on the Hill, very aggressive in pressing their agendas. And they both respected that of one another, I mean they knew that. Dole had a very difficult time during the budget shutdown, in part because he thought there was little understanding, [primarily in the House leadership rather] than the White House, but little understanding of the impact those decisions made on people's lives.

I remember him telling me one day that, one more time the House had said, 'we're not doing the CR', and Dole said, "You call Dick Army and you tell him, the next time, I'm not stopping it. These people are living from paycheck to paycheck. And these guys have never been hungry in their lives, they have no idea what the impact of that is." He was so angry. So again, they were wonderful spokespeople for the relevant parties, but I think had an appreciation for the role that each of them had to play, that sometimes it was not something that came too easily. And I suspect that was true of Mitchell on some issues – I don't know that.

**BW:** Do you think they shared frustrations regarding both presidents?

**SB:** Oh, no question, no question.

**BW:** I got the impression that when Bill Clinton came into office, Dole was pretty stubborn about, 'we're not going to let this guy get much done around here.'

**SB:** I think the caucus certainly felt that way. Again, I think Dole has this, I mean it's sort of this schizophrenic: a) he has enormous respect for the office of the presidency, and he has a point of view that presidents as a general matter, on their Cabinet selections, on their court selections, that the president should have the right to pick his own people, and so I think he takes that seriously, he wants to facilitate that. But [b)], he also wasn't about to hand Clinton the keys to the kingdom, and so he wanted to [play] what he believes is an important role, which is the loyal opposition. And I think that would have been true if it were Clinton or Carter or anybody else, that he felt seriously, that there was a role for the minority, there *were* different points of view, he did differ with Clinton on so many issues. So I think he felt that role strongly. I don't think it was particularly unique to Clinton, other than he felt strongly about some of those issues.

**BW:** How do you account for the hatred that some Republicans seemed to exhibit regarding Clinton? And I think, of course, of the impeachment, Whitewater, just constantly working these issues.

**SB:** Well, I think you've got the same, I mean you could ask the same question about Democrats and George Bush; there's a vitriol to George Bush that you hear from Pat Leahy, sort of the never ending. I think there are just people who tend to go to extremes. Dole – and I think part of this is his Kansas roots – Dole has a view that there is little in life that's black and white, and there are little circumstances where you should view somebody as other than, you know, an [opponent], they're not the enemy. And Dole will say that in speeches, he'll say, "He is not my enemy, he is my opponent, he is someone with whom I disagree."

Dole, whether it's going through what he went through after the war, Dole just approaches these things with a different sense. So it wouldn't be like him to have that kind of visceral reaction. There are things that he fundamentally disagrees with, there are things – and I suspect Senator Mitchell, my sense is, is just an unbelievably decent, honorable human being, and one who you can trust absolutely – I would just never question. They might disagree on an issue, but never question where he fundamentally starts, that there's a moral base upon which he builds, very much like Senator Dole.

And so it doesn't strike me that either of them would have that kind of visceral hate for somebody. But there are people who do, and you hear it about Clinton, because he was successful, and he [is] a very articulate, remarkably gifted, remarkably bright person. Dole was offended by his behavior, and would tell you that, but I don't think he would view him as an enemy. It's just not how Dole would approach things, in part because he's *seen* the enemy and he knows what they look like. I don't think he views it that way.

**BW:** Any observations on how George Mitchell handled the Republican, that strong opposition to Clinton?

**SB:** Well again, Mitchell was very skilled, very patient, and would bring to the floor the same kind of deliberate, very focused, very skilled – he could be biting in his criticism, and very

stern. And so he took seriously his responsibility as leader and as spokesperson for his party on the Hill and would do everything he could do. There was no reluctance on his part to press every point and to take every advantage; nor was there on Dole's.

Whether it was a parliamentary trick or whatever it happened to be, neither of them were shy about that, and both of them knew they could go to the floor as equals, both articulate, both, neither of them Hollywood. Neither of them had the skill that a Clinton has as a spokesperson, but both of them [were] gifted legislators, and you didn't ever question Mitchell's willingness to take on an issue and to be as bitterly partisan as he needed to be. But you never thought he would do so in a way that was dishonest; neither of them approached it that way.

**BW:** Can you cite any examples of his biting-ness?

**SB:** Well, certainly some of the issues around the impeachment, certainly some of the issues around health care when we clearly stepped away from the table and Senators Chafee and Bob Kerrey formed the Mainstream Coalition. Senator Mitchell could be quite clear in his views about what he thought was a failure of people to deal with an issue, no question.

**BW:** I guess health care was the big battle of Mitchell's term.

**SB:** Well, that and the budget, but yes.

**BW:** When you say budget, that was the Clinton first budget, is that correct?

**SB:** Yes, yes.

**BW:** I've read and taken notes on [David] Broder and [Haynes] Johnson's *The System*, and you're widely quoted in there and so forth. Was that an adequate account of the health care battle, would you say?

**SB:** I think they did a terrific job. I mean, nothing is ever as simple as one presents. You can list the things that went wrong: timing, complexity, toll-gating, the whole business. I think they did a remarkable job of chronicling the steps we went through and the barriers that were put up along the way. I think they had the players right, I think they identified – and Broder to this day would talk about having had confirmed what they believed at the time which is the delay in sending a bill to the floor, the failure to consult with people on the Hill, the decision to exclude the Republicans, the fact that they might have had Dole early on, although as we got closer to the mid terms and closer to the elections, Graham was clearly going to try and back Dole into a corner as being something other than true blue conservative, but I think they had it about right.

**BW:** And how, what's your observation on how Mitchell handled that issue?

**SB:** I think he did as well as he could possibly do, given the challenges he had with his leadership and with his, Senator Moynihan was no fan of President Clinton, and Moynihan was

distracting in some respects, this wasn't something he wanted to push through. You had to deal with the Finance Committee, I think that was very challenging. I thought – you also had NAFTA that was coming along, you had gays in the military, was sort of the first thing that came – so I think Mitchell tried to navigate as best he could, and tried to urge the committees of jurisdiction to move ahead.

The White House made it pretty tough, both in time, both in substance, both in failure to negotiate. And he had a chairman who was not there. And so I think he did everything he could possibly do to try and move this forward. Then he had, as I say, Bob Kerrey and the Mainstream crowd, but by then Clinton had given up a lot of chits and had a lot of other issues that they were confronting. And so I think he did what he had to do. He was throughout a consistent supporter, throughout, somebody who was an outspoken proponent -

*(Outside interruption.)*

**BW:** Are you picking up the train [of thought] here, or am I picking up the train at this point?

**SB:** I think that he was dealt a very difficult hand. He was handed a bill that was enormously complex, very late in the process, without the support in his own caucus, or the division in his own caucus that complicated things. So I think he did as much as he could possibly do.

**BW:** Did you ever see him vent his frustration at either the White House or Moynihan or -?

**SB:** Certainly no, nor would I have. My impression has always been that he is an intensely private human being, and remarkably, and decorum is important to him, so the thought of having a meltdown in public is not, I don't think of him in those terms.

**BW:** Ever.

**SB:** No.

**BW:** Because he did have quite an unusually difficult role to play, I would think.

**SB:** Yes, very difficult, very difficult. But again, I think [he] managed it unbelievably well.

**BW:** Did it seem reasonable, then, when he finally pulled the plug on health care?

**SB:** Yes, absolutely. And even then, having pulled it, there's no question that they suffered in those mid term elections, obviously.

**BW:** As a health care person yourself, at some point when this started, did you think that maybe some good outcomes *were* going to occur?

**SB:** Yes, I certainly did. And the conservatives are probably right in being critical of my role

as a general matter, in being in favor of some of these reforms, which they would find at odds with their points of view. But I think we all began the conversation, at least I certainly did and I think Senator Dole did, with a view that something could happen. I think Senator Dole was, early on in the process said to President Clinton, “I think we can work something out here.”

In fact, I remember being overseas, we went over for the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day, and we ran into Clinton, it was either in (*unintelligible*) or it may have been Normandy, and the two of them sort of having a conversation about, ‘let’s try and move this along.’ So there was an opportunity there, I think it was squandered.

**BW:** Now, of course you became a target of -

**SB:** Yes.

**BW:** And do you want to go into that and talk about it at all?

**SB:** We can. It is a circumstance that happens occasionally, where I think the frustration about a member is essentially taken out on the staff; that they use the staff as a foil rather than going after the member directly. And this erupted around welfare reform and it was an issue about which the conservatives felt very strongly, particularly the sort of family counsel kind of folks. And I was intemperate in a meeting; it led to an outcry about my views on these issues. It also, I think Dole was gearing up, I think the conservatives saw this as an opportunity, they saw me as a threat as someone who was sort of pushing him towards sort of moderate points of view, didn’t see me as a true believer, and I think they saw an opportunity to take a shot.

His campaign staff felt similarly. I think they wanted me out; they saw me as not being helpful to him, and so there was some quiet support of this attack. So I went through about six or eight months of almost daily stories – John Fund, Paul Wyrick, Bob Novak. It was one would write, the other would write about their having written, the other would write about their having written, having somebody comment. One of the things I found amazing throughout that whole period is, I have never to this day met or spoken to John Fund, I’ve never met or spoken to, about me or my role, to Bob Novak. I did on occasion see Paul Wyrick. But they wrote these vitriolic stories, never talking to me, which I always found kind of interesting.

I made a conscious decision sort of midway through all of this that I was going to allow myself to be interviewed. I’d had nineteen years of Dole, of being below the radar screen and never wanting any press, and I made a conscious decision that I would agree to an interview with someone who was going to write a story about this sort of process, this issue. And I made, it was a conscious decision, it was risky, I didn’t know what the outcome would be, it ended up being a bigger deal than I expected, it ended up being a cover story in the *New York Times* Sunday magazine. It was meant to be kind of an internal; it ended up being a much bigger deal. But I thought it was the only way to have that conversation. Jason DeParle wrote the piece and in retrospect I’m glad I did it. It probably, in the scheme of things, as a general matter I would not recommend staff talk to press, I don’t think they should.

And I also offered to resign, which Dole declined, and I think he declined for a variety of reasons, not the least of which it would have been more of an issue had he accepted. But I also think at the end of the day the accusations that I was misleading him or taking him down a path he didn't want to go, was so at odds with Dole. The thought anybody could persuade Bob Dole to do something he didn't want to do, it just flies in the face of reality.

He was surrounded by strong women: Elizabeth [Dole], Nancy Kassebaum, myself, Jo-Anne Coe, who was his sort of Kansas chief of staff and became secretary of the Senate, and the thought a woman could persuade him in ways that were inconsistent was just crazy.

But it was ugly, it was difficult. My kids were much younger, but the *New York Times* piece came out and they've got horns on my head, drawn onto my head, and my kids kind of said, "Why do they have horns on your head?" It was a headline in, I don't know, *Newsweek* or *Time* or one of those, it was "Bring Me the Head of Sheila Burke." Your kids read that and they don't get the context, so it was hard for my children. It was an ugly six, eight months.

**BW:** Did any Democrats during that period express sympathy?

**SB:** Yes, Byrd went to the floor, Moynihan, Mitchell were all remarkably kind and McCain went on record, very kind, very thoughtful, John Chafee went on record. But then so did "Lauch" [Duncan McLauchlin] Faircloth, so did Phil Graham, not so nice. So yes, I mean Byrd going to the floor was quite remarkable. He was offended. He was offended, interestingly enough – I mean, he was always very kind to me, but he was more offended by the thought that they would go after a staff person, when what they were really doing was going after a member. And his view was, staff were kind of a little army that rumbled along and that if you had a problem you'd go directly to the source, you don't go to the staff. So he was offended by them going after a staff person. But yes, they did, they did.

**BW:** Did you ever get a pat on the back specifically from Mitchell?

**SB:** I did, on a number of occasions. Actually, Mitchell was also, let's see, Mitchell became leader in -

**BW:** 'Eighty-nine.

**SB:** 'Eighty-nine. I started having children in '88, and had all of my kids while I was chief of staff, and I'd go home from work and I'd have a child, and then I'd reappear at some point. Mitchell was always remarkably funny about this, and I can remember we would laugh about it, because I would come to the floor and I would be quite large.

I also remember Mitchell being particularly kind; I think it was when Bob Packwood resigned. And Dole had me go over to Packwood's office to get his letter of resignation – and this is not defending Packwood for what was appalling behavior – but the sad thing is that he's a

remarkably bright man and remarkably gifted, and it was very sad. It was sad to see anyone's career sort of go to hell in a hand basket, you don't like to see that of anyone. And it was very sad, and we had to go to the floor and sort of deal with that, and I remember Mitchell being remarkably kind at the time when that occurred.

And I remember the day of Dole's final speech, Mitchell – and Carol Moseley-Braun, interestingly enough – coming up and hugging me on the floor. Again, Mitchell not being a person who I'd think of as particular emotive, it was out of character. We'd always had a wonderful relationship, I had just enormous respect for him, and he was always unbelievably kind, but it was kind of a remarkable thing that I remember to this day, that he understood it.

**BW:** How did you all react to his announcement of his retirement?

**SB:** I was very sad. Not surprised, but sad that the Senate would lose somebody with that remarkable set of skills. And I felt the same way when Warren Rudman decided, unilaterally decided to sort of step down and do something else with his life. And my sense was it was probably a great decision for Mitchell, but I felt terribly sad for the institution. He was just so gifted, and so much above a lot of what you see. But again, I wasn't terribly surprised.

**BW:** You moved then over to secretary of the Senate.

**SB:** I actually never moved; I did both jobs. I was chief of staff and secretary of the Senate, and it was simply because we had a period of time where we had, Jo-Anne Coe left to go to the campaign, and stepped down, and we were looking to hire someone, didn't find somebody at the very beginning of the Congress, and so I stepped in and did both jobs, both chief of staff and secretary of the Senate, until we hired somebody. Kelly Johnson, actually, we ultimately hired, so it was about eight months when I did both jobs.

**BW:** Just a few last questions here, and these are big questions, but looking back on your time with the Senate, what should we make of the [Bob] Dole-George Mitchell Senate era?

**SB:** Remarkably skilled legislators, remarkably civil in their discourse. I think we should think of it as a period of time where there was such a thing as loyal opposition, by people who were fundamentally respectful of one another and had enormous trust in one another's judgment and discretion. I don't know that we've seen that since. Both taciturn, neither of them emotional sort of histrionic kinds of people, remarkably taciturn, but very well matched. I don't know that I've seen that since, really.

**BW:** What about productivity, was that a productive era?

**SB:** I certainly, I haven't looked back to see the numbers as compared to prior or subsequent Congresses, but I certainly feel like we did a remarkable amount. Welfare reform, a series of legislative initiatives around the environment, certainly issues on the tax side – which might be viewed negatively or positively, we built towards the passage of the child health insurance

program, there were really a series of things that were quite remarkable.

**BW:** Bob Dole at times has described himself as an Eisenhower Republican. Where do Eisenhower Republicans go today?

**SB:** I don't know. I think we're kind of a man without a country at the moment. I think were you to ask him that, I think he would say that it's not clear where the leadership is going to come from. You certainly don't see it evident at the moment, and I think that maybe the governors who kind of bring the practical realities of governing. But it's not obvious.

**BW:** My typical last question is, how should George Mitchell be remembered, and you've basically said it but please say it again?

**SB:** As a remarkably dedicated, skilled, thoughtful legislator, one who holds his beliefs deeply, based on strong moral views of what, based on strong personal morals about the role of government, the role of the individual, just what you'd want to see in a modern day legislator.

**BW:** Good. Are we leaving anything unsaid?

**SB:** I don't think so. Certainly I don't have anything more to contribute, but I do think the fact that he went on to Ireland, has now gone on to the Middle East, I'm sorry he isn't coming back to health care. The four of them, Dole, Mitchell, Baker, and Daschle began a process of trying to come up with a bipartisan bill, or at least the framework for a bipartisan agreement; they need him back in the institution. They need the two of them back to help broker this, were one to be brokered in today's environment which is, at least appears to be, bitterly partisan. But I think it is that – his skill set, his fundamental skill set – that has allowed him to be sought out by subsequent presidents and brought into these, what would appear to be completely, issues that you can't imagine resolving, that's just exactly where George Mitchell belongs. But I hope for him that he gets to go to baseball sometime in his life.

**BW:** Do you have a favorite George Mitchell story?

**SB:** I wish I could remember more specifically some of the times when the four of us sat around the table. But I, personally, I think probably that his effort at comforting me during two very tough times, one certainly during that Packwood transition, just because it was a difficult time for the institution, but the other when Dole left. Well actually, was it when Dole left? When did Mitchell leave the Senate?

**BW:** Well actually he left in January of '95.

**SB:** He left before, it was before, so it wasn't Mitchell on the floor that day, it was actually Daschle. But I think those, some of them were just the sort of personal moments when I looked like the side of a barn, waddling onto the floor, that he was just unbelievably kind and gracious throughout all that. Quite remarkable.

**BW:** Good, thank you very much.

**SB:** You're welcome.

End of Interview