


5-4-2010

Interview with Barbara Mikulski by Brien Williams

Barbara A. Mikulski

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Recommended Citation

Mikulski, Barbara A., "Interview with Barbara Mikulski by Brien Williams" (2010). *George J. Mitchell Oral History Project*. 75.
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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Barbara Mikulski
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

GMOH# 215
May 4, 2010

Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College with Senator Barbara Mikulski. We are in her office in Washington, D.C., today is Tuesday, May 4, 2010, and I am Brien Williams. I thought we'd start going back to your run for the Senate in 1986, and at that time Senator Mitchell was chairman of the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee.

Barbara Mikulski: Senator Mitchell was chairman of the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee [when] I had a world class primary [with] a sitting governor, Howard Hughes, another congressperson Mike Barnes, and we also had a September primary. And the DSCC, as you know, does not get involved in primaries. Emily's List does, so Emily was my fairy godmother in my primary. But when I got to my general election and it was mid-September and won, the Republican nominee, Linda Chavez had no one oppose her. It was the first kind of woman-on-woman race, and I needed a breather to add money to go right on TV. Senator Mitchell came in, like the cavalry, and gave me one hundred thousand dollars, which enabled me to go right on TV in the Washington suburbs, where I was not well known, and had been Michael Barnes's primary base. And that one hundred thousand dollars was the bridge that enabled me to go on TV, not miss a beat or miss an opportunity, and raise then my own money to carry me forth. And that's how I got to be the first Democratic woman in the United States Senate's history. There had been other Democratic women, but none had been elected in their own right out of the box. So George's faith in me, and the desire to be sure I was there, really was a big help to me.

BW: Was that your initial contact with George Mitchell, or had you had any contact with him before that?

BM: I knew of Senator Mitchell because he was very close friends with [] who was soon to be the senior senator, Paul Sarbanes. Paul Sarbanes and George Mitchell were kind of pals together. Senator Sarbanes told me what a great guy George Mitchell was, and follow his career, et cetera, so I knew of him, but I didn't know him personally. Now, all of we wannabes, all we Senate candidates, or all those who wanted to be the nominees, would [go] to events. [So] I met him, but I didn't really know him until we got into the race, and of course he came to Maryland and he campaigned, so [I] knew him that way.

BW: So he took a real personal interest in your candidacy.

BM: He took a personal interest. I got him to come to one fund raiser where he danced. We had an event called BeBop for Barb. [p/o] Senator Mitchell is a man of many talents and he's swift on his feet, but one would not think of him as 'dancing with the stars.' And we had this great rock 'n' roll fund raiser []. All my fund raisers [were] like Bowling with Barb, BeBop for Barb. George came on a Sunday afternoon. You know how proper he is, buttoned down shirt and a tie. Everybody else [was] in casual clothes or sweaters or whatever. And literally, when they started to play the song, "Barbara, Barbara, Barbara Ann," Paul Sarbanes [was] down the hall, and I thought he was going to hide behind Christine, his wife. There was George Mitchell, I held out my hand and he said, "Like in everything else, you lead and I'll follow." And the crowd broke up, and we did a twirl or two around the dance floor. And that's like him, you know, he was there for his members, he campaigned for us, he believed in us, and he was really a good sport as well.

BW: How were you welcomed into the Senate as the first Democratic woman?

BM: Well, I was welcomed by many of the people who were there. Senator Paul Sarbanes really was a big help to me. He was so well known and so well respected, and he said, "Give her a chance here." And he showed me the ways of power and the corridors of power, [as did] Bob Byrd. [They] helped with [my] committee assignments. By this time Bob Byrd was the majority leader, but George was getting ready to make some of his moves. And there was a whole group that really welcomed me: George Mitchell was one, Ted Kennedy, Chris Dodd, the reformers were really delighted to see me. So if you were one of those squeaky clean, shiny bright, let's reform the world, you were very glad to see Barb Mikulski, and George Mitchell was in that category.

In my very first term there was an issue that brought us together in a very deep, emotional, and personal level, and that was the fact of when one spouse has to go into a nursing home, the cruel rules of government forced a family to spend down to the [point] that they only could keep a very spartan amount of money, enough just to cover very meager burial expenses. It was called 'spousal impoverishment' and it meant that for one person [to go into] a nursing home, the family [], could go near bankruptcy, and then they'd end up with a lien on the family farm or the home. And so I wanted to change that. My own father had died of Alzheimer's. George had been also, I think, deeply moved by a similar tragedy.

And we teamed up. He was on the Finance Committee and [] I was on the Kennedy committee, so I held some hearings. But it was the Finance Committee that held the power – Lloyd Bentsen was the chairman. And when it came time to move it on the floor, remember, Mitchell was Finance, so it was his right in many ways to be the person to take it to the floor, but he said, "This is your first bill and it means so much, and you've told me what it meant to you because of your father, why don't you just go ahead and take the lead." And he was right there, he helped me shepherd that amendment through, he always had my back, but once again, ever the really gracious person. So yes, it was Mikulski-Mitchell, but it really could have been Mitchell-Mikulski. But again, I wanted to [share] what a gracious kind of guy he was.

And we really have made a difference. AARP has told me that we've kept at least a million people out of poverty because of this amendment, where we didn't force them down and where they didn't have to lose their home or their farm. But again, that amendment, and the way we moved it was [a credit] to [] his advice, his technical assistance, his spot on the Finance Committee, and then his graciousness.

BW: Your initial committee assignments when you first got here, were you on Environment and Public Works?

BM: Yes, yes.

BW: Briefly.

BM: Yes, briefly, because they were so good, the reformers were so glad to see me, I had opportunities for committees. Now, the big enchilada, as I saw it, or the big prize, was to be on Appropriations in your first term, and that happened. But also then I was on Environment and Public Works [p/o]. In other words, in order to be conscientious and do the job on Appropriations as well as being on the Health and Education Committee, [], because I was the only woman, I was really stretched pretty thin. [So I] took myself off of [Environment and Public Works]. Otherwise, I'd be the chairman of that today instead of Barbara Boxer, but it was destined to be chaired by someone named Barbara.

Now, you know what's so great about the women in the Senate, when I came, I always said that though I was the first, I wanted to be the first of many. And now there are seventeen of us, thirteen Democratic women and four Republican women, and also these women are in major leadership positions. Patty Murray's part of the elective leadership, Boxer chairs the Environment and Public Works, Feinstein chairs the Intelligence Committee, Mary Landrieu Business, Blanche [Lincoln, D-AK] Agriculture, I know there are some others. And so we say, every issue is a women's issue, from economic security to national security, and George really helped lay the groundwork for that. He helped me break through, along with the way Emily's List helped in the primary. But now we have a women's Senate network, so that when women are running, we the women organize events for them. We have like our own little pot, it's [] part of the DSCC, and often provides some technical assistance and other [kinds of assistance]. But he really helped move that forward.

Now, nothing really happened – I was elected in '86 – until 1992, and that's when the Anita Hill debacle happened. [p/o] We really pulled out all the stops, and that's when Feinstein and Boxer and Patty Murray, Carol Moseley-Braun and so on came. It was pretty big, and we've been on a roll ever since.

BW: When you got here, it was Paula Hawkins and Nancy Kassebaum.

BM: No, Paula had just left. When I arrived it was just Senator Nancy Kassebaum and myself. [Senator Kassebaum is] a very dear lady, truly an exceptional person. It was the way we

could work together. Remember, look how Bill Cohen and George Mitchell worked together. It's the stuff of legends. And now it's the stuff of almost ancient history, regrettably, but the way those two really worked together.

BW: Did you and Nancy Kassebaum create a little caucus of your own?

BM: We don't have a caucus, because we differ on so many views. Some of us are pro-choice, some are not. We'll take the issue of drilling, for example: Lisa Murkowski would want to drill in ANWAR, Maria Cantwell, Barbara Boxer, and most of us would say no, and so we don't. But we get together once a month for dinner, and we have three rules: no memos, no staff, and no leaks; and we get together for friendship. In fact, we're having a dinner tonight. We just have drinks and talk about life and times. But where we did find we could come together was on this whole issue of women's health. Nancy and I worked on a women's health agenda when I first came. Women were not included in the protocols at NIH, the famous study, 'take an aspirin a day, keep the doctor, you know, a heart attack away.' It was done on ten thousand male medical students. Can you believe that? I mean this was twenty years ago, it wasn't two hundred years ago, it wasn't before World War II.

And so we say we're not a caucus, but we say we're a force. So when we do come together we really are able to move things, and in some instances it's been on a bipartisan basis. There were times, though, when the women came together on a partisan basis. [When we stopped] the privatization of Social Security during George Bush, we linked arms. [During] the passage of the Lilly Ledbetter [Fair Pay Act], equal pay for equal work, the women led that fight. And on the most recent battles on [] health insurance reform, the women led the battle to end gender discrimination by the insurance companies [where] women paid more and got less of a benefit, and also the whole issue of prevention. So when they wanted to take our mammograms away from us, we took to the barricades and we organized ourselves [with] wonderful support of the men. And see, that's the way it's been. Whether it was me, Nancy and I, the women now, it's not us versus the guys, and that's never been so.

And in fact, in many instances [], we'll take a lead because we say that they like to work on the macro picture, we're macaroni and cheese. But we will take it and then, particularly in the area of health or women's health, and then the guys will just want to be with us. And an example is when we were moving our preventive amendments to ensure preventive services in the health insurance bill, and it was going to be not only for women but for men as well. So we told the guys what we were doing, and I said at the caucus, "We're going to wear pink," [] like the common foundations, but it's not going to be only about breast cancer, and we'd like you to be on the floor and speak with us, and why don't you wear [] pink shirts or pink ties. Well that day, it was just phenomenal on the floor, everybody was out there and [] we were all suited up. And I said, in our own way today we race for the cure []. So those were some of the things.

BW: What words would come to mind in describing the nature of George Mitchell's leadership?

BM: Integrity, consensus builder, clarity about an agenda, firmness, and I think always trying to find a common ground within the caucus []. But again, I would say he was like Clark Kent sometimes with his horn rimmed glasses and his very quiet manner. People say, well, he's just a quiet leader, but then he emerges as super hero and begins to move this legislation. He led by example. People had so much respect for him. They wanted to cooperate with him. I think that's a hallmark of a very good leader.

BW: Was he your candidate when he ran for leadership in '88?

BM: Yes. I was trying to remember who those candidates were.

BW: It was, Inouye and Bennett Johnston were the others.

BM: Yes.

BW: Was George Mitchell particularly good for Maryland?

BM: Well, I think he was good for Maryland in the sense that he helped me get elected. It doesn't get any better than that from here on. And he helped Paul Sarbanes get reelected several times. But we coastal senators have an understanding with each other [p/o]. First of all those, a kind of bedrock values around hard work and a belief in education, and so much came out of his own immigrant aspiration family. But the coastal centers, we knew, whether it was his lobstermen or our watermen for crabs, [] what the water meant, and the ability to earn a living [on the water]. And then also we both saw the decline of manufacturing and [what it meant for] jobs. And of course you know his great passion for education and [making sure] people have an opportunity. Of course that's what came out of the George Mitchell Institute and his scholarships in those high schools.

BW: Did you and he, what were your positions on NAFTA?

BM: I don't remember what his position was.

BW: What was yours?

BM: I was opposed to it, because I just believed with Perot there'd be a giant sucking sound, and it wouldn't be a kiss.

BW: And it's turned out that way?

BM: In my state we've lost jobs to NAFTA, we did not gain jobs from NAFTA. But I think it's very difficult when your state is right up against the northern border, you do see things differently. When I've been to Maine, I've gone up to campaign for him, I've done things for his party, I've been up to the George Mitchell Institute. When I was at Acadia Park I've been to his home with him and Heather. And when you're up in Maine, there is Canada, I mean it's looking

right at you; it's a different viewpoint. [] Again, it goes to the manufacturing jobs that were heading south – I didn't know how we were going to get jobs out of NAFTA, but I tend to be suspicious of these things, like NAFTAs and WTOs and so on.

BW: Any comment to make on how George Mitchell related to women, both on staffers and his colleagues, anything?

BM: Well, I think he believed in promoting women. I'm trying to remember, it's been a while, the women that worked for him, and as soon as you would say their names I would immediately -

BW: Martha Pope.

BM: Martha Pope, of course. She herself is a legend within the institution, and he was enormously supportive. And me and the women candidates. The answer was, I would say that in some ways he's kind of an old fashioned guy, in terms of these basic values, but he was a very modern person, encouraging, he was not only accepting but he was actually encouraging. And when we moved on [] some of these women's health initiatives, he was actually very supportive.

BW: What was your reaction when he announced his retirement?

BM: I couldn't believe it. He was a very good leader, and we were more than satisfied with his leadership. And I know the guys were jealous, because we knew he had a new friend, Heather. We heard that there were rumors that he was going to be the baseball commissioner, and there was this teasing of him, that he was going to ride around in a limo. The men never said this around me, but they were overheard in the locker room: this spectacular woman, and a little bit younger, and then being baseball commissioner. They thought it was going to be a dream job.

Well, actually what turned out to be the dream was Heather, and it's just wonderful to see them together and their devotion to each other. I don't know how the guys watched it, but I just saw this relationship grow, and this wonderful smart, savvy gal, who first of all understands the life that George lives. This stuff that he's done, like [in] Northern Ireland [], the sacrifice of being an envoy, which is enormously tedious, it's very tedious diplomacy, and it's very incremental, the support that she gave him to do that. And now this special envoy status that he has for the Middle East. So I think it was pretty good. I thought it was pretty wonderful actually.

BW: It sounds like you have had a social relationship with them, is that correct?

BM: Well, just a little bit. So I don't mean to, I think Paul Sarbanes and his wife Christine socialized with them more than I did, but we all hung out, or we saw each other in groups.

BW: Do you sense that there was a Mitchell legacy in the Senate after he left?

BM: I think the legacy was set because the way George Mitchell was the leader enabled Tom

Daschle to be the leader he is. It carried on the spirit of integrity and of reform, of also working both with committee chairmen but bringing in the newer members to be able to have a voice and a say and participate in the deliberations, to always look at a modern way of doing it. George introduced the idea that we'd go on a retreat [and] to really regularize caucuses. He's the one who had I think Daschle become the Democratic Policy Committee chairman, so I think it lived through with Tom. I think when we lost in '94 and we went into the Diaspora, Tom did a very good job of carrying that for the Democrats, but it's very different when you have the power of the majority leader. So I think, though, with that whole sense of integrity and a lot of things that have been going on, the shared leadership rather than the titular head.

(Aside: I'm going to have to really, because there's a briefing on the Louisiana situation. Is there one or two others that are must-do on your list?)

BW: No, I think the last one here is final thoughts, and I think you've just expressed them maybe.

BM: So, I think George Mitchell was the right guy for the right time, and many people will note his spectacular foreign policy accomplishments, both in and out of office. I think all would note his devotion to Maine; that was number one. The fact he did work in a bipartisan basis with Bill Cohen. And for me, he helped the first Democratic woman get elected. I mean he really helped make that happen. And then when you look at the things that we actually did together, like this anti-spousal impoverishment, keeping a million people out of poverty, when one spouse has Alzheimer's or Parkinson's or a terrible neurological impediment, I think that's pretty spectacular. And so if you said, "Well, what did George Mitchell do?" You can say, "Well, he worked with Barb Mikulski and kept a million people out of losing their home or their family farm." I think that's a pretty good legacy, and I was glad that I could be part of it.

BW: Good, thank you very much.

End of Interview