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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Harry Reid
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

GMOH# 032
July 24, 2010

Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College with Senate Majority Leader Senator Harry Reid of Nevada. We are in the majority leader's office in the U.S. Capitol building, today is July 23, 2010 and I am Brien Williams. Senator, I thought I'd ask you to start just, what thoughts come to mind when you approach the subject of George Mitchell.

Harry Reid: George Mitchell was a terrific extemporaneous speaker, and now having had his job, I understand how the asset he had was so important, because we're always asked on a minute's notice to start saying something. He was very good, the best I've seen here in the leadership.

BW: Was he in any way a mentor of yours, or did you have anything ---?

HR: No, I don't think so. I had great respect and admiration for him, but I wasn't one of his pals. Toward the end of his leadership it became pretty clear that he depended on me and Tom Daschle a lot, Daschle to a larger extent than me, we did some stuff for him. Like that vote we had in 1993 or '94 where we couldn't get Bob Kerrey, he assigned Tom and I to see if we could get Bob Kerrey to come along with us, and we did that. That was hard. So a mentor, no, I don't think that's, I mean I admired him, I watched what he did, and I think some of the things that I do has been based on what I observed from him. But he had people in the Senate closer to him than me.

BW: He was the chairman of the DSCC in '86.

HR: Yes, and he campaigned for me really hard, that's where he showed his ability to speak. He was a great storyteller, and he was good.

BW: So he came to Nevada and campaigned.

HR: More than once, yes.

BW: And did you go through a vetting process with the committee prior to your nomination for Senate? Some people have described to me that was one of the things that the DSCC did.

HR: I just ran. Didn't have anybody better than me, so -

BW: Now, in '88, when he ran for the leadership, were you in favor of his candidacy?

HR: No, he was my third choice. I supported first Dan Inouye, second was Bennett Johnston, and third was Mitchell.

BW: Any particular reason for that?

HR: I just thought they were more experienced, I'd worked with them more closely, they were both appropriators [and] I served on the Appropriations Committee.

BW: You also served with Senator Mitchell on the Environment and Public Works.

HR: And he was also there very effective.

BW: In what ways?

HR: He was someone who was a staunch environmentalist and he advocated as well as anyone could.

BW: Did you and he agree on most issues that came before that committee?

HR: Yes, we sure did.

BW: You say that he relied on Tom Daschle and yourself, so he must have -

HR: Tom to more extent than me.

BW: Was there any particular reason that you know why he selected you to be -?

HR: Well, Daschle was one of his big sponsors to help him get the job, and I was just kind of a pal of Daschle's, and so that's how it worked out.

BW: How would you describe Mitchell's leadership style?

HR: He was not like me; he was more a loner, an individualist. Me, I kind of build consensus, I have meetings every Monday night, every Tuesday morning before my caucus. He didn't do that kind of stuff. If he did, I certainly wasn't aware of it. He was a good leader, people admired him, but that was his style, at least as I remembered, he was kind of a loner. Not in the sense of being somebody that didn't want to talk to anyone, but that was just his style. He'd been a judge, he'd been a U.S. attorney, and I think that kind of developed that, him doing things alone.

BW: One other thing I've heard people say is that he was able to devote so much time to the

office because at that time he had no particular family life.

HR: Yes, but he dated, don't worry about that.

BW: Do you have anything further to say on that topic?

HR: No.

BW: How about you, how have you been able to keep family and politics in balance? Or maybe you haven't?

HR: I don't have much of a social life because I don't want one. My social endeavors basically relate to my family, so I don't do parades and banquets unless I have to, I don't go to cocktail parties, I don't go to dinners unless I have to. So, I'm kind of devoted to my work here.

BW: How has the leadership changed from Mitchell's day to yours?

HR: Well, when George was here he had some Republicans he could work with. I don't have any; I have just two from Maine, that's it, no one else. When he was here, we had Danforth and we had Heinz, we had a lot of moderate Republican senators. They don't exist any more, except for two from Maine.

BW: How did Mitchell operate in the caucus?

HR: He did some different things. He activated the Democratic Policy Committee, he put Daschle in charge of that, that was good for the caucus. Some of this is only speculation, because I wasn't part of the inner circle so I really don't know how, I don't know who he depended on. As I indicated, I would get assignments from him, he was good to me, he put me on the MIA-POW Committee, I couldn't ask for more support as a young senator than I got from him. But as far as how he operated, other than what I've told you I really don't know. I was a new senator, and so I wasn't, we didn't go to lunch with him all the time, that kind of thing.

BW: Did you pal around with him at all?

HR: I don't pal around with anybody, so -

BW: You mentioned the Kerrey issue, when you and Daschle worked on Senator Kerrey; what was the issue there? That wasn't health care, or was it?

HR: That was budget.

BW: Just in terms of being in front of the caucus on your Tuesday meetings, how did he run the caucus?

HR: Well, I know how Senator Byrd ran the caucus. He had Cranston and Inouye, who were the whip and the secretary, up front with him. I don't remember what Mitchell did. Daschle didn't do that. I think, as I recall, Mitchell was less formal than Byrd had been, but I don't remember anything unusual about the caucuses with Mitchell.

BW: Since my last interview before this, I read Barbara Boxer's, one of her books, and she gives quite a bit of space to a '91 episode where several women – she was then in the House – came over here during the caucus when the Clarence Thomas hearings were going on.

HR: I remember that, yes.

BW: And I just thought I'd like to ask a senator who was in the room where they were trying to gain access to talk to you all, what observations you have on that -?

HR: I don't remember. Actually, I have none. I remember the incident, but I don't remember much about it.

BW: If George Mitchell has a legacy, is someone carrying that on in the Senate today, or not?

HR: George Mitchell I don't think, in my mind, had a legacy. It's not like Lyndon Johnson. George Mitchell was just a good guy, he worked hard, he spoke extremely well, and people liked him, and he quit when he wanted to. He and I have talked many times, and we joke about health care. He knows how hard it was for me, I know a little bit how hard it was for him, but he at least had some Republicans who would try to help a little bit. I haven't had any. But as far as a legacy, I just think he was somebody who I looked to as being an extremely intellectually honest person who did his best to keep the caucus happy.

BW: How would you describe him as a Democrat?

HR: Well, he was a liberal Democrat.

BW: And is that breed still alive and well in the Senate today?

HR: Oh, sure, there are lots of liberal Democrats.

BW: You said in your book, *The Good Fight*, that the Senate is not always efficient, but it's ultimately effective. That, I guess, was true in Mitchell's day?

HR: Yes, it's always been the case that I know.

BW: And it is also true since you wrote that sentence today.

HR: Yes, as dysfunctional as the Senate, because of our antiquated rules, might appear to people, we've had, as Norm Ornstein said, the most productive Congress in the history of the

country.

BW: Any thoughts about George Mitchell's relationship with the Clinton White House? Did you see him working with them, or not?

HR: Yes, especially with health care. I remember when George Bush, the first, was president, I can remember George called me, I was in Nevada, and he said he needed a vote against that resolution. I said, "No, I can't do that." I think that surprised him.

BW: What was the issue?

HR: To go to war with Iraq the first time.

BW: In '91. What about your relationship with the Obama White House, do you think it's an easier working relationship than Mitchell had with Clinton, or about the same?

HR: I don't know, because the relationship the leader has with the president is a very personal one, and so I don't know anything about their relationship.

BW: As majority leader, is it easier or harder to have a member of the same party in the White House?

HR: Oh, much easier. And I've done both.

BW: I know, that's why I'm asking the question. Talk about your contacts with Mitchell since he left the Senate in '95.

HR: We talk, especially since I've become the leader. For example, I saw him recently on an airplane we rode back from New York, spent an hour together. He's a charming, just charming, wonderful man, I enjoyed my time with him, and that's how I've always felt about him.

BW: And have you sought his advice at times?

HR: No, not really. Not that I can recall, I don't recall that.

BW: How do you think he ought to be remembered as time goes on?

HR: From my perspective, I think the way that I would remember him is just as I started the interview, just as a very articulate, very positive example of what somebody in politics should be. He was truly a public servant. He had been a U.S. attorney, he had been a judge – those are difficult jobs. So I just think that that's how he should be remembered. I'm sure he's one of Maine's best, and they've had some good ones, Muskie and all that, but he is top of the line.

BW: Any sort of vivid memories you have of interactions with him over time?

HR: The most vivid memory I have is the budget vote. Trying to fine down that eccentric Bob Kerrey. The meeting that we had, Bob Kerrey decided to go to a movie instead. It was daytime. And so we had a great time with that, and finally Kerrey said he would vote with us, vote with George Mitchell, but under the condition that he could give the first speech. And he did, and just kicked the crap out of Clinton. But he voted with us.

BW: Any final thoughts?

HR: No, I just like George Mitchell a great deal; I think he's a fine, good human being. The thing that is missing in this interview is a real closeness with him, and that isn't something that I had, that wasn't there. I was a young senator. He had other people he was closer to than me.

BW: I hear you saying that he was effective as a kind of public figure, and the job of leadership is sort of two roles that you play, isn't it? One is strategically within the caucus and within the Senate, scheduling and things of that sort, and then you also have to fill the role of being the public spokesperson for the Democrats. How do you feel about those two roles?

HR: Just do the best I can.

BW: Right. Thank you Senator.

HR: That's so nice of you; bet you do a great job.

End of Interview