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Interview with Steven Symms by Brien Williams

Steven S. Symms

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Steven D. Symms
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

GMOH# 128
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Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College with former Senator Steven Symms. We are in Senator Symms' office in the Washington, D.C., government relations firm of Parry, Romani, DeConcini & Symms. Today is Tuesday, August 11, 2009, and I am Brien Williams. I'm going to start this interview by just alerting folks to the fact that there's some construction going on, on the roads around us here, and so we may hear some low rumbles and various other construction noise during, in the background of this interview. I thought we'd start, Senator Symms, what was your reaction when you got the letter from Bowdoin College saying we would like to interview you, what thoughts went through your mind?

Senator Symms: Well, my first thought was that I'd be very happy to do it. I always considered George a friend. Now, to put it in proper context, George was one of the more liberal Democratic members of the Senate, and I was one of the more conservative Republican members of the Senate, and our time in the Senate pretty much overlapped. He came to the Senate maybe a year before I did, I believe – you probably have the numbers – but he replaced Ed Muskie, and he was the first, to my knowledge, federal judge that resigned a federal judgeship to become a U.S. senator, came to the Senate. And then in 1980 I was elected to the Senate in the Reagan landslide, and went into the Senate and was on two committees immediately with Senator Mitchell. He was on EPW, Environment and Public Works, and he was on the Senate Finance Committee, so that we spent a lot of time working in committees together and so forth. I always had a great deal of respect for him, he was always well prepared, very intelligent, and I think he had a lot of respect for me, because we worked, although not together but occasionally we would have issues that we'd work together, and he helped me one time on a amendment I had for a high-speed rail tax, a bill that would allow them to sell municipal bonds to build high-speed rail track, and George supported that, for example, and so forth.

BW: Any other cooperations that come to your mind?

SS: Well the other, see, Boise Cascade Corporation, which was based in Boise, Idaho, was a big constituent of mine. They have thousands of employees in the state of Idaho, they had a substantial operation in Maine, and I know we had, I offered an amendment in the Finance Committee once on the co-generation plant on a, it was a tax benefit that Boise Cascade would get in a transition rule, which amounted to a substantial amount of money for the company, to transition the change in the tax law we were putting in. And I had a lot of fun with George on that, because he wanted to be careful that he wasn't appearing to be in there helping some big,

'greedy,' quote/unquote, corporation, so I really had fun in the committee, and he just looked over at me and smiled, because I'd say, "I know my friend from Maine will want to support this because he's got all those employees up there that are depending on this, too." And he said, "You son-of-a-gun," you know, we laughed. But we always had a lot of fun together.

One of the things that happened, when he was starting to run for leader I was kidding him on the floor one day, I went over to him and I said, "Now George, I'm going to blow the whistle on you unless you" – because see, we came out of another era, George Mitchell and I both, he's a little bit older than me but not much, so he was in college in the '50s, or late '40s, early '50s, I was in college all through the '50s, and we both happened to be Sigma Nu's, as was Lloyd Bentsen and Jim McClure, there was nine Sigma Nu's in the Senate at one time, as a matter of fact.

So I went over and I told him, I said, "I want to get an assurance from you that you're going to take good care of me, if something happens that I'm out in Idaho and I need you to protect me on a vote or something, that you'll do that, or else I'm going to blow the whistle." And I was just kidding him, and he said, "Well what are you talking about?" I said, "Well you remember, George, when we were kids, they had this big controversy in the Sigma Nu fraternity about the clause of what you had to be to be a member of the house, and it's been changed since but when you and I were members they still had the old Southern clause in there, and you had to be Christian," I think the words were, you had to have a Christian (?) free ancestry or something because this was a fraternity that was founded in Lexington, Virginia. Of course in the '50s we never thought anything about it, and if you're from Maine and Idaho, it was kind of a non-issue. And I said, "I'll blow the whistle on you if you don't." He said, "Oh, you wouldn't do that." I said, "No, I know I won't have to because you'll take care of me."

And he laughed, he laughed so hard, because it's just one of those things, when you think back about how things were in the '40s and '50s; it's a different life in the '80s and '90s that we all live in today. And that's when I was in the Senate, was all through the '80s and the early '90s. George was in the Senate the last two years I think of the '70s, all through the '80s, and then I think he didn't run in '94, does that sound right?

BW: He came in in May of '80.

SS: May of '80, okay, well, so he'd been in the Senate then for only eight or nine months before I got there. I know one time we had to go, when I first got to know him, he and I both went downtown to give a speech to some business group, and he as the Democrat and me as the Republican on the Finance Committee. And he told the story about how, when he first got to the Senate, people said, "Well you must be crazy, having resigned being a federal judge to become a U.S. senator," and he didn't think so. Then they had a night where they were going to have a filibuster so they brought the cots out and they put the cots in the Cloakroom there, in the back where the senators can go and read and so forth. And he said he woke up in the middle of the night and he looked over, in the cot sleeping next to him was John Warner, and at that time John was married to Elizabeth Taylor. He told this story to this group, and he said, "And then I looked at that and I thought John Warner could be sleeping with Elizabeth Taylor, he's over here

in the cot, there must be something about this place,” and this crowd just broke up.

Because he had a great sense of humor, and he always had the ability to accept somebody that didn't agree with him, and that's why, I think, why he and I got along so well, because there's a lot of things that maybe in a committee you would be in agreement on or not, but you wouldn't really have made your disagreements. It's not quite like it looks to the public of everything is completely black and white, because it isn't, because of different constituencies.

For example, on highway programs, George and I worked together very closely. He was on the Environment Committee, I was chairman of the Transportation Committee, and then ranking member of that, so we were doing the highway programs and he was always a big help and a big support to me in all that work.

BW: Now, can you think of some, you've mentioned now a number of things where you worked together, and I'll want to ask you in a moment where you really parted company, but -

SS: Well, I suppose where we parted was, we were trying to cut the capital gains tax, after the '86 tax reform bill had passed, which both George and I had supported it, and Bob Packwood was chairman of the committee when that passed. And then we came to the next year, and I believe George became majority leader in, was it 1990?

BW: 'Eighty-nine.

SS: 'Eighty-nine, okay, it was during that time, '89 to, well at any rate, there was a Thanksgiving where he was, he literally stopped the effort, the president was pushing reducing the capital gains rate, because it was at twenty-eight percent after the '86 tax reform bill, and he was trying, and we were trying to reduce it back down to twenty percent, where it had been prior to the passage of the '86 tax reform bill. And Senator Mitchell was able to mobilize enough people that we couldn't get enough votes to pass it. And I can still remember the Republicans on the Finance Committee were meeting up over in the Capitol, or in the back, in the Finance, I forget which room but in a closed meeting, and Dick Darman was there representing President Reagan, he was urging us to stay over the holidays and, over Thanksgiving and through Christmas if need be, to force this issue, to get it passed. And Senator Mitchell had done a good enough job of organizing the opposition that he won that fight.

Now, I was on the opposite side of him on that, and I think that's what slowed down the recovery. So then it made it more difficult for George Bush, Herbert Walker Bush, to get reelected president. Later, when we had a conference on the highway bill, it was a Sunday and it was the big ISTEA bill that, by then Pat Moynihan was chairman and I was ranking Republican of the Transportation Committee, but George was a conferee. So he and I were over in the Rayburn Building waiting for the House conferees to come back in to tell us what they would do, and he was anxious because he was going to the Redskins game that day, I was not going to the game that day, but I was anxious because I wanted to get back out to the house and watch the game.

And so we were sitting there talking and I said to him, I said, “George, you’ve been here in the Senate now,” – and I had already announced that I was not going to run for reelection, or I had already made up my mind, I don’t know whether I’d announced it yet, but I told him – I said, “why aren’t you running for president?” I said, “You have led the Democrats, you deserve to be their nominee,” and I said, “I think probably a Democrat may win the election next year.” This was ‘92. But, I said, “Even if you didn’t win, what a great way to go out for your career, you’ve been a great senator, you’ve been a federal judge, and then you can go off in the private sector and do something else, but you will have been the leader of your party, you deserve it, you should be running for president.”

And he said, “Well, is that an endorsement, Steve?” I said, “No, it’s not an endorsement, it’s just a friend telling you that it’s wide open for you to take it, why don’t you just announce, you’ll get it.” He says, oh, he said, “Bush is going to win this,” he said, “he’s going to win.” He said, “Look at him in the polls, he’s ninety-,” because it was right after the first Gulf War so it must have been in ‘91 when this was going on, it was the fall of ‘91, that’s when it was. And I said, “By the time the election comes around, Saddam Hussein will be standing over there thumbing his nose at us, and people will have forgotten all about the great heroism of the Gulf War, and the great victory, and if the economy’s not real good, George Bush is going to be in trouble, and you guys have finessed him on tax increases and so,” because I was opposed to tax increase too. And I said, you will have won the, you know, somebody will win the election, possibly. It’s not a cinch, but it’s possible.

And so the moral of the story, the history of that is that Bill Clinton became president, and George Mitchell could have had that nomination. And in my opinion, he would have been a very good president, because he knew how to run things in Washington, and he knew how to work, he realized who the players were on the Republican side who he needed to work with, and he would have been fine as a president.

He’s a smart guy, and very capable; got a great sense of humor. He’s partisan, I’ll give him that, but on the other side of that he also – see, Bob Dole’s a partisan, too, but Bob Dole knows how to play. Ronald Reagan was a partisan, of all the presidents that I worked with here, he was probably the best at getting what he wanted from the Democrats of all of them, and working with them. And Reagan used to always say, “Well boys,” he said, “if we can get half a loaf, let’s take it.” And that’s the way politics works.

But that’s one issue where we parted ways. I was thinking, one time there were some guys raising heck with George, and he was majority leader then, and he got up and really, a couple of my Republican colleagues, and was really giving them heck on the floor. And then afterwards he came over and said, talked to me and he said, “Steve,” he said, “I wasn’t talking to you,” he said, “I just want you to know that, I wasn’t talking to you.” I said, “Well, I didn’t take it personally, so don’t worry about it.” And he said, “I didn’t mean,” he says, “these other two guys, they’re way too partisan.”

I was always conservative but never really necessarily a partisan. One time where he really helped me was, and Bob Dole did too, when I went to Dole and Mitchell and got them to, because Morrison-Knudsen was trying to build a high-speed rail in Texas, from San Antonio to Houston to Dallas, and it was the technology that's used in France, the TGF or whatever it is, it's a 200-mile an hour train, it's wonderful equipment. And that trackage and everything would only have taken up the same amount of space that the Dallas-Fort Worth airport uses, that's all the square footage it would have taken to run that track from those three cities. And then the plan would have been that once people saw how good it was, that you could run a line from Houston then up to New Orleans and just come on up the east coast, have a spur line down to Miami or go all the way to Boston eventually.

And we really should have it in the United States, but the tax laws in the United States always favored building airports as opposed to railroads, and that's part of why we still don't have passenger rail trackage. But anyway, so Morrison-Knudsen was buying this, and I'm the senator from Idaho and on the Finance Committee, so it came to me, they asked me if I'd offer this amendment. And I said, "Yes, I will," because I really agree with getting the tax code equalized, and I think that high-speed rail really would be a real asset, particularly for the eastern part of the United States and then along the west coast. So what you got to do is be able to sell municipal bonds to help build the track.

So Lloyd Bentsen was chairman of the Senate Finance Committee then. Of course he's a big buddy of Southwest Airlines – Herb Kelleher I think is the guy's name. Nice guy but obviously Southwest Airlines didn't want a high-speed rail in Texas to compete with Southwest Airlines if they could keep it. So they went out and got the Farm Bureau and the environmentalists all in the same camp, telling how this is going to be devastating to wildlife and livestock and blah-blah-blah, which is not true, but anyway that was their story. It made a good story.

And so Lloyd didn't think that I had enough horsepower to be able to pass this amendment, so he didn't do anything to oppose it. But he was the chairman and he was pretty much of a patrician from Texas and everything, and he just didn't think that he had to really do anything about this. He didn't know that I had gone to Dole and gotten his pledge of support, and gone to George and gotten his pledge of support, to support my amendment. And I said, that's all I'm asking, I'm not asking you to get really crossways with the chairman, but I'm asking you to support my amendment, and if anybody asks you how you're going to vote, tell them you're going to vote for it.

So I made the case for the amendment on the floor, and two or three other people spoke for it. Bentsen didn't even speak against it, he just got up and said the committee opposes the amendment, and so I asked for a record vote because I knew that the chair would, because the Democrats were in the majority, they would just rule that, the ayes and nays and they'd say, 'well the nays have it.' So I asked for a record vote, got the record vote. Lloyd still thought he had the vote. He was really chagrined, because when Mitchell and Dole came onto the floor, the Republican and Democratic leaders, boom, they're voting for it, and I had like sixty votes or something, and Lloyd Bentsen was really upset.

Of course, you know what happened. It goes to conference, and Rostenkowski was chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, so the way that they ran a conference in those days, those two guys had the real clout in the conference. So I went over and lobbied a lot of the guys on the House [side] and Bill Archer, who was the ranking Republican, and he told me, he said, "Steve, unless you can get Danny to support you, you're not going to get it." Now Bill Archer probably had misgivings about it, being a Texan, and also a good friend of the lobby that was down there against it from Texas, so I don't know what happened in there but I went to Danny and talked to him and everything, and he says, "I don't think I'm going to be able to help you on this, Steve." And so in the conference I lost the amendment.

Well then, I didn't run for the Senate in '92. In '93, when the Democrats came up with their tax bill, exact language that was passed by the Senate, that was my amendment, was put in the 1993 Tax Bill and passed and became law. But since, the whole thing kind of blew up so nobody's really used that part of the Tax Code now. In other words, nobody's building a high-speed rail – maybe there's a few places where they may be using that part of the Tax Code, I shouldn't really say that, I'd have to check on that to see if it ever has. But now, at least if you want to build a high-speed rail train, you can do it, and sell municipal bonds to fund the track, which is a good thing I think.

BW: Do you recall George Mitchell's efforts to get Amtrak extended back up to Portland from Boston, as a transportation issue that came up in your subcommittee, or not?

SS: I don't know, that wouldn't have been in our subcommittee, because we were highways. That would have been in the Commerce Committee, but I can understand why he'd do that. See, I supported building the Big Dig in Boston, and most of the conservatives, they actually filibustered against it. And the men I'm talking about, some of my good friends like Jesse Helms and all these guys, they opposed, they really played a lot of politics about the Big Dig in Boston. I'm sure you heard about it.

The truth was that when we built the Interstate Highway system, a lot of the highest priced projects were left till last, just because the way the system works, you could build more miles of road out here on, like in Massachusetts they got as much road as they could get built, and they had this last little part to finish. And it ended up, the price with inflation and the cost of construction and everything had gone up, it got really out of whack of how much it really cost to complete it. But when Reagan was president, Ray Barnhart was chairman of the Federal Highway Administration, he was a Texan, and he got me to go up to Massachusetts with him and we negotiated with the state of Massachusetts and they agreed what they'd pay for, and then we'd put the money in for the federal part, and we had to pass it then through the House and Senate. We didn't have any trouble getting it through the House, because Tip O'Neill was still in his heyday then and the momentum was there to pass it in the House.

But in the Senate it was a real problem, and we got it passed. And I used to make the case that this is not just for Boston, you're talking about all of New England, you've got all the states up

in the New England corridor up there, they all use that road and that's their way to get up to New Hampshire, Maine, and so on and so forth, and we just need to do it. And those guys, the conservative guys, gave me heck about that, but I just laughed at them.

They also thought that, because George and I agreed on the other thing, remember Ronald Reagan in 1982, right after his big tax cut, came back and said he wanted a nickel a gallon gas tax? And I supported that, and that was *not* popular anywhere, the truckers, and Idaho's a big trucking state, they were very unhappy about that. But the fact of the matter is that, when I look back at things, and I don't know what George would say about this but he'd probably agree with me, where we made our mistake was, since those of us that supported it, and there was a filibuster on that and we had to go on right up to Christmas Eve before we could get it, get these guys to stop and stop arguing about it. That was clear back in early '80s, it was probably '81 or '82, I forget which year.

And the mistake we made was, since we took all the flak over raising it a nickel, we should have raised it a dime, because you needed the money for the roads. And secondly, we should have indexed it so that you don't have to do it again, so there's whatever the percentage of the gas tax goes into the highway fund, because right now this country's got a huge infrastructure problem because we've underfunded the highways in the country. And we argued that, and that's one thing George and I always agreed on. I agreed with that even then, I said, "You show me a place that doesn't have a good road and I'll show a business that's going broke."

And particularly in a state like Idaho that's true, where we have a single railroad that goes through, the Union Pacific serves all of the Snake River Valley in Idaho, and then Burlington Northern up north. It's really kind of a single railroad community in both north and south Idaho, and so you have to have the other transportation. Because like our produce people in western Idaho, and I'm sure it's a little bit of the same problem for the Maine potato guys, the produce guys in western Idaho, if you're loading onions and apples and so forth over in the Boise Valley, Union Pacific, they'll give you these piggy-backs to load them on the trains to take them to the east coast but a lot of times they want you to take them over to Oregon, to Portland or somewhere to put them on a train, and then they come right back through Idaho.

So, it's gotten a little better, now they've got a loading station up somewhere closer to Wallowa or somewhere like that, but still it's three or four hundred miles that you have to haul them to get them on a train, and then they come right back through, so it's crazy. And that's because they don't have to, they don't have any competition except trucks.

BW: One of the pieces of legislation that Mitchell was most honored for was the Clean Air Act, and where did you and he stand on that?

SS: I didn't support that. I never felt like that, I thought what we needed to do at that point in time was just try to encourage the people to get more money so they could buy new cars, and that would serve. Because see, the force behind the Clean Air Act was basically for acid rain, and I don't think that it's ever really been established whether it's changed anything with acid

rain. But I didn't support it, and I had a lot of fun on the floor raising a ruckus about it.

And the other one was the tax increase of 19[90], whenever they went up to Andrews Air Force Base, and George Bush signed onto it.

BW: 'Nineteen-ninety.

SS: 'Nineteen-ninety, and George Mitchell won those fights. And he was very effective in the Clean Air Act, and I've been trying to now tell these guys that are working on the cap and trade bill that they ought to take the old Clean Air Act and use that formula if they want to apply it to the situation today on carbon, and have credits, carbon credits, but don't get into this tax thing or you'll never pass it. The Clean Air Act, for whatever anybody thinks about it, you can buy and sell these credits, and there is a market determination and so from that standpoint it's not all bad, and I respect those guys for that.

BW: What was your reaction, individually and then as Republicans, when George Mitchell was selected as majority leader?

SS: Oh, I thought he would be majority leader when they started the race, because he's just so effective. And he's well liked. George was not, I mean as far as I was concerned, I was glad to have him as a majority leader. I mean, I'd of rather had a Republican, but of the Democrats, he was fine with me.

BW: Explain yourself.

SS: Well, because of the fact that he respected other people even though they might not agree with him. He didn't have an attitude of personal- There was no personal animosity from him just because you didn't agree with him. I always got along fine with him. In fact, he used to kid me, because he was a Senate Campaign chairman in 1986, and I had the governor of the state running against me, and he was a very popular governor. He had sixty-five percent approval rating, he'd been elected three times statewide, once as lieutenant governor and twice as governor, so everybody had written me off, said Symms's going to get beat, you know, no way, because '86 was a bad year for Republicans.

The Republicans over there still always preach to the young guys that are running for reelection, the Symms rule, is you go home and campaign and don't worry about what's going on in Washington, because there's nobody in Washington that votes for you, it's all the people in Idaho or Maine or wherever you're from.

So George was trying to engineer a campaign to beat me, and so I'd see him in the committees all the time, we'd kid back and forth about it, and he went out to Idaho and spoke in Pocatello with Governor Evans. At the same time, Pete Domenici was in, no, George was in Boise and Pete was in Pocatello, Idaho, eastern Idaho with me, Pete Domenici. And so Pete Domenici made the case that if we want to keep the Senate in Republican hands, we got to elect Symms.

And I made that case all year long. Rollie Evans came out and followed me around, he said, "You're the only one of your colleagues that's making the case of the importance of each one of these Senate races for who's going to stay chairman."

And I had been making the case that if the Democrats took the Senate, the power was going to flip back to the east and the south, and in the west we were going to lose, because Hatfield, Packwood, McClure, they're not going to be chairmen anymore, and Domenici, I said, "We got four or five of these chairmen out here from the west, they're going to all be kicked out of their chairmanships." So I made that case all the time, Pete made that case, so when the press clippings came out, George had gone to Boise and he made the case: there's no way the Democrats can take the Senate without electing John Evans, we've got to count on you down here, we've got to have John. So I got those press clippings and I gave them to George, I said, "George, I think I won this fight this weekend," and I said, "you just read this."

And so the story was the same, it was that Domenici says that Symms has to win in order to keep the Senate in Republican hands. Mitchell says, "Symms has to lose for the Democrats to take the Senate," and it didn't help him because the state at that point was trending, even though we had a Democratic governor, it was trending towards the Republicans more, because of Reagan and just what had happened. And then it really went Republican in '94, but up until then Idaho had been a pretty bipartisan state. But it was very interesting, so I was kidding him about it, I said, "I think I won that fight on the weekend press clippings." And he says, "How do you figure?" I said, "Just read it, you'll see," I said, "that's the case I'm making."

And Rollie Evans told me that, he said, "Nobody else is making that case." He said, "I don't quite understand why these guys don't make the case," like Jeremiah Denton and Mack Mattingly and Jim Abner; they come from states where being a Republican isn't necessarily a bad thing. You don't have to apologize to be a Republican if you come from Maine or Idaho or South Dakota or someplace like that, you can be bipartisan, but I mean you can. And so anyway-

So then after the election I came back and I won. It was considered an upset but I actually won pretty handily with John, because I really worked hard, I mean I campaigned. I figured out that I had campaigned at least twenty-one more days than all my other colleagues, because they all came back after the Fourth of July, I stayed in Idaho for ten more days, didn't come back, they weren't doing anything important here, [and] campaigned. And then I left and told the guys in the Senate Conference, I said, "I'm leaving this week and I'm going home to campaign and you guys just have to cover me on the committees or I won't be back, because if I don't stay out there and campaign, I won't be back anyway." And I was behind in the polls, but I pulled it out and won.

Well, George had all these guys from Maine, and we all ended up then getting on the elevator over at the Capitol, he had some of his good friends and constituents, and so he introduced me to everybody. He said, "Now folks, we did everything we could do to beat this guy, we threw the kitchen sink at him, we did everything, and we just couldn't get the job done," he said, "but we

tried like heck,” and we just laughed. And see, but he actually liked me, you know what I mean, I honestly believe George always liked me, and I always liked him.

But we spent a lot of time together in those committees. And we didn't always disagree, I mean most of the time if there's a partisan vote, well he'd vote Democrat and I'd vote Republican, but not always. There were some of those issues that I crossed the line and voted with the Democrats, and vice versa, like I always supported Pat Moynihan's amendments on payroll taxes, and much to the chagrin of the Republicans on the committee, because I wouldn't vote with them. They always wanted to not lower the payroll tax, and Moynihan always did, because we had more money going into Social Security than we needed. So then we put it in there and then spent it on other things, so the accounting was always askewed. I always voted with Pat Moynihan on that, and George and all these guys. But the Republicans and the hard – I guess you'd have to ask Senator Mitchell how he voted on it, I think he would have voted with Moynihan, but maybe he didn't either, because he was always part of the leadership.

See, these guys all had these big leadership things, like at Andrews Air Force Base, so you had Dole and Mitchell and all that crowd there. And same thing like on Social Security reform, you had Dole and Moynihan, and I don't think Mitchell was on the Greenspan Commission, and the Greenspan Commission did the overhaul of Social Security, and I don't know where Senator Mitchell was on that issue. But I offered the amendment with Congressman Pickle from Texas, called the Pickle-Symms Amendment, was to raise the retirement age one month every year starting in 1984, and the Greenspan Commission came out with that starting in 2004. Well, if you go back and look at those numbers, I mean Social Security would be way, way, way better off today if we'd have taken our amendment.

Well Dole and Moynihan both spoke favorably to my amendment on the Senate floor, but said that they couldn't vote for it because they'd taken the oath to stick with the Greenspan Commission. And that's what often happens in these big deals, the leadership gets wrapped up, they take the oath that they're going to fight off all amendments, no matter what, and they won't accept any changes. And as a result, we're in a mess with Social Security and Medicare today. See, if you had to be sixty-seven today to get on Social Security, it would make a heck of a lot of difference, a lot more people would be working, and people would probably live longer, too.

BW: That was one year, one year additional each year for how many years?

SS: One month additional.

BW: I see.

SS: Well, for thirty-six years, and see, that's the way it is now, it's for thirty-six years. And so Moynihan asked the question in the committee, he said, “How high would the senator from Idaho like to have it go?” because these guys were always jamming me because I was such a libertarian. I said, “Well, to be honest with you,” I said, “I just put thirty-six years on there hoping I could get a few of you to vote for it, but if I could have it the way I wanted, I'd just do it

indefinitely, just raise it one month every year, starting in 1984, and by the year 2040 or something, there would be very few people old enough to get Social Security and it would help the budget a lot.”

BW: I’m going to pause for a moment here.

(Taping paused)

BW: You served under four majority leaders, and I’d just like you to sort of characterize what it was like -

SS: Okay, there’s Baker, Dole, Byrd, and Mitchell; yes, that’s it. Well, I guess they all had their strengths and they’re all outstanding people and great senators. Baker was wonderful. Of course he was the first majority leader that I served under, and I think Howard really had a real rapport with senators on both sides of the aisle and got along well, did well. Dole was probably a little more partisan. Dole was always focused totally on the legislation that was going on on the floor, and not ever very much on the Senate itself. So if I had any criticism of Dole’s leadership, I don’t think he necessarily placed the strongest people sometimes in the offices to actually take care of the Senate in a generic sense, like secretary and the sergeant-at-arms and those, because those are important, those are infrastructure jobs that really are not partisan, but I noticed that when he was there, the people who were in those spots for him were a little more partisan. And I don’t think that’s a plus. Baker’s people were very good.

Byrd I think was good too, because he had made a deal with Danny Inouye to have Henry [K.] Giugni be sergeant-at-arms.

BW: For who?

SS: Henry Giugni to be sergeant-at-arms, and Henry was well liked by everybody and Henry tried to treat, he really took care of all the senators very well. And then George did, too, and so I think George was very good in that respect, of trying to upgrade the Senate a little bit.

It really got better, notably when, just as an observer of it, they got more professional around the Senate when Lott became the majority leader. See, I’m confused here. Dole was the majority leader after ‘94, wasn’t he, again? Yes, then he left in ‘96, and then Trent Lott became majority leader, and I think that Trent actually started the Senate being a little more professional, in the operation of the Senate. Now, a lot of this has happened because of Homeland Security and 9/11 and they’ve probably gone overboard now on their complete lack of appreciation for the elective process and just everything is like they’re all policemen, you know what I mean, all the sergeant-at-arms people and everything. Just from my observation of it now.

But I think all those leaders were good leaders. Of course Byrd is an icon in the Senate, knows the rules, very strict. But Byrd and Dole had a lot in common, they didn’t really ever care whether the Senate stayed in twelve hours a day, sixteen hours a day, twenty-four hours a day,

seven days a week. They're whole life was around the Senate. And Baker always kind of respected the fact that people had lives and people wanted to get home for the weekend and different things, and so he was more careful about that. And I think Mitchell was, too. You know, George was, it was nicer to be in the Senate when you had a leader that actually realized that some people had other things in their life they wanted to do.

But I would say Byrd and Dole, I mean they couldn't imagine anybody wanting to go anywhere when they could be over here at this Capitol, but I really respect both of them, don't get me wrong. Byrd and Dole are both, were great senators, and Byrd of course is still over there. I don't know whether he's still a great senator, but he was when I was there. I think it's unfortunate that his health is the way it is now, but you know, what can you say?

BW: You mentioned your come-from-behind I guess victory over Governor Evans. You of course in '80 took on what of – talk about icons in the Senate – Frank Church had a pretty big shadow.

SS: Yes, he did.

BW: And you were able to beat him. How do you account for your being a David against these Goliaths?

SS: Well, the one thing about politics is there's, I always enjoyed the campaign and the competition and I like people, and so I was a natural born campaigner. I could go out and campaign right now, I could go out and run for office right now, and I don't think anybody could beat me. And I felt that way when I left, that even though people were talking about (*unintelligible*), I don't think anybody could have beaten me.

But the way I beat Frank Church, it was pretty humbling for me because, see, I thought I would win much bigger than that. And we had all these pollsters and stuff by then. When I started running for office, there wasn't any pollsters. The House voted without machines, I knew every member of the House personally, I knew all 435 members. Now every congressman can't say that, but I actually knew every single member, could recognize them, call them by name, and made a point to meet them and so they knew me and I knew them.

But you could do that easier if you were willing to work at it, because they voted on the floor and you stood around on the floor, it would take forty-five minutes to run one of these roll calls, and if they were having another one, well then these guys would be standing around on the floor for an hour or so to run through the roll call, so you could work at it. Now they vote with these little cards, and they go and vote, and boom, they're gone. In the Senate it's easier to know people.

But what happened in the Church race was, Ronald Reagan was running for president, and Jimmy Carter was extremely unpopular by the fall of 1980, and so Reagan was a tremendous draw on the ticket. Well, I thought that I was going to win by a bigger margin. I only got 49.6 percent of the vote, Frank Church got 49.2 percent of the vote, and the third party candidate got

the rest of it, so it was very close. And I remember that one of the guys that was very active in my campaign, his first cousin, he was like his brother, they were very close, was the head of the AFL-CIO in Idaho, Jim Kerns, and Jim told Gary, Gary Lloyd's this guy's name, he says, "Gary," he said, "if Steve can't win by fifteen thousand votes he's going to lose, because we've got fifteen thousand votes were going to get cast."

And I don't know how these guys do this, but there were precincts up all through north Idaho where they voted more votes than they've ever voted before or since. There were more votes cast in the Church-Symms race than there was the Reagan-Carter race in Idaho. Which is really unusual, it's very unusual. It was a really hotly contested race. And everything was going my way in 1980, the tide was rolling for the Republicans, and that's how all these guys won these Senate races. And I had worked and worked and worked, and we had done everything we could do.

But by the time I was running for the Senate, then things were starting to change in politics, so we had a pollster and all this, and I'd go in and listen to these guys and they'd give us the pitch and they'd say, "Now Steve, if you just keep working hard like you are, you can still win this race." And I can still remember, I said to Lance Tarrance, the pollster, he was a well known Republican pollster in those days, I said, Lance, and to [Phil] Reberger, the guy who was my campaign manager, I said, "Are we paying these guys to tell us this?" I said, "What are you guys talking about?" I said, "You must be polling different people," I said, "we're going to win this race running away."

Well, we didn't win it running away, so it was a humbling thing for me. And a lot of people say, 'well how could you feel that,' I said, because I was actually surprised of how close it was. But Frank was very well thought of in Idaho, and nobody ever ran against him, it was like a no-no. He got a test in 1974, which was a real pro-Democrat year, if you remember, and the guy that ran against him happened to have been my administrative assistant, who was a brilliant man, a wonderful speaker, and if he'd have had any money I think he'd have beaten him. Because if you remember, Malcolm Wallop upset Gale McGee in Wyoming in 1974, and I believe that Bob Smith would have upset Frank Church in Idaho if we would have been able to raise the money.

But at that point, the business community in Boise, they were saying, we got Frank on the Democratic side, and we got Jim McClure on the Republican side, let's don't rock the boat. And so the word was kind of out, you're not going to upset the apple cart. But by 1980 the tide had kind of turned and people were more willing to get in, and we really went in and for the first time Frank really had somebody step in and we were able to raise enough money to make a case, and then I survived the debates, and actually the debates actually helped me a lot because they elevated me up to the level where people said, "He could be a senator."

Because, see, up until that point I was this kind of libertarian renegade congressman pulling pins and throwing grenades and raising hell with, trying to stop the avalanche that was going on in Washington. It was a defensive game, is what I'm saying, in the House, in Republicans, from 1975 on, because we lost every, we lost fifty-some seats when I was a freshman congressman.

And then Church wanted to get me knocked out, so he put a really good opponent running against me in '78, a guy named Roy Truby, who was a state superintendent of schools, a really good guy. In fact, I tried to help him, and I think I did help him, get the job as being the superintendent of schools in West Virginia, because Governor Rockefeller then, I called him and recommended him. They were looking for a superintendent of schools, because the governor names the superintendent of schools in West Virginia, they don't run and get elected, and so Roy ended up down there.

I don't know where he is now, but he was a good guy, and he gave me a good run, though we were getting tooled up to run for the Senate by '78 so my campaign, we really did beat him pretty well. It was my biggest win ever in politics; I think I got more than sixty percent of the vote. Most of the time my races were always closer.

End of CD One
CD Two

BW: What was your thinking about going from House to Senate then?

SS: Well, my thinking was that the Republicans were in the minority in the House, and as time had gone on it got so you were less and less able to participate. See, when I first was in the House, I was on the Forestry Subcommittee, John Melcher was chairman and I was the ranking Republican, and we were the two guys from the House that did the Forest Management Planning Act for the U.S. Forest Service, reformed it and all that, and I was involved in everything. And you would go to conference, you're a conferee and the same thing on the BLM Organic Act, the Pacific Northwest Power Act, I mean Republicans were involved in all this stuff. But gradually we were getting less and less involved, because the Democrats were getting a little more powerful in terms of this trend had started a more partisan attitude and I thought, well, this is a good time for me to run.

And I can still remember Nancy Reynolds, who was Bethine Church's first cousin, like a sister to her, Nancy was Nancy Reagan's press secretary here in the White House, and she'd worked for Governor Reagan in California, that's Nancy Clark-Reynolds, so her father and Chase Clark, who was a federal judge from Idaho, who was Bethine's father were, they were a very prominent family in Boise, and then Frank married the Clark girl, Bethine.

So anyway, I just thought, well, either he's right or I'm right, we're not both right, that's what I said to people, so I'm going to run for the Senate. And if I don't win I'll go back home and grow apples, it's that simple. And so [] Nancy came to me and she said, "Oh Steve," she said, "you can't run for the Senate," she said, "don't do this." She said, "You know I really love you, but you just can't," she said, "Frank and Bethine, they're my best friends" – they owned property together and all this. She said, "Don't put me in that position." I said, "There's no hard feelings, Nancy," I said, "don't worry about it." I said, "If he wins, fine. What I need to do is run for the Senate," I said, "if I don't win, I'm just going back to Idaho, I don't care." And I knew that that was going to get back to Frank, so I'd say things like that. And I said, "So I just need to do this

and I'll just let the chips fall where they are, people in Idaho can decide what they want. And if they want Frank to stay in the Senate, no hard feelings, because it's not going to be the end of the world for me."

I was forty-one years old, or forty years old then, I was forty-two when I got sworn in the Senate. And it was so funny, and other guys would come around and talk to me like that and try to give me that pitch. I'd give them the same pitch, because I knew it was all going back to Frank. So it really bothered him, because here you are, you've been in the Senate twenty-four years, you made a real positive showing when you ran for president – he'd won like six primaries, when he ran for president – your position of prominence is growing nationally, fifty-six years old, and you got this guy running against you, he's just totally, he's got nothing to lose, and I've got everything to lose. You see what I mean?

And so I can still remember, we had our first debate and I honestly, I thought I'd lost it. And when everybody came up to me afterwards and congratulated - Because it was in - The League of Women Voters has it and you're confined in a little room, and you go by Robert's Rules of Order, as you know, this guy speaks for so long, and this one, it's just not designed for me, where Frank was this articulate national debate champion from when he was in Boise High School or something, and all this stuff, and Stanford University graduate and everything, and so he was the prominent speaker. I wasn't.

But even the press said that the debate was a tie. And I thought I'd lost it. But I found out that I had done a lot better than I had thought, it was just I felt confined, and a little nervous and so forth. So the next debate was under my rules, you know what I mean, my kind of a place. We had a big crowd, a couple thousand people, one moderator asking the questions, and we went back and forth between the two of us and the crowd was kind of involved, and it was an equally divided crowd so the crowd had to be polite and all that. But I felt like if I could do well and tie him, I'll kill him out here on this stage.

I'll never forget, I went in there to the debate, it was on a Saturday night, or a Friday or, I don't remember when it was, but it was like seven or eight more days till the election. And it really got big billing in Idaho that this was going to be the big debate. Carter debated Reagan at eight o'clock, and then Church debated Symms at nine o'clock, or something like that, so we followed on TV in Idaho, and this was covered statewide in Idaho. So I walked over to Frank, and all I had done that day, I had run ten miles that day, I got up in the morning, I ran five miles, because I was all humped up, came back and we fooled around a little bit and made a couple of appearances somewhere, then I went and ran five more miles, got all cleaned up, squared away, nice clean shirt and tie and everything, ready to go for the debate. Oh, I took a blank yellow pad out there and put it on there with a pencil, that's all I had, no notes, nothing. Go over to Frank, he's all disheveled and he's got all these notes and stuff, because he was all concerned because it had been written that he hadn't done as well in the other debate.

So I go over and grab him by the hand, shaking his hand, I just get a steel grip on, I said, "Frank, I just want to say to you if I don't, may not get another chance until after the election, but how

much I've enjoyed being in the delegation with you, how much I have enjoyed this race." I said, "My only regret about this race is" – and I'm squeezing his hand – "is that it's going to be over next Tuesday," I said, "I hate it, it's the most fun I've ever had, I wish it could on for six more weeks, six more months." And I could just see the color coming out of him. And so I go back on the stage, and the debate, just everything went perfect for me.

McClure called me and he said, "Steve, I don't want to give you a big head but," he said, "you literally did a better job of selling our point of view, the Republican position, you did a better job than Governor Reagan did against Carter." And I said, "Well I thought Reagan did great." He said, "You did spectacular," he said, "you couldn't have done better." And I won the election, and the press people all said, Church's people, they were so demoralized after that, I mean that's what we were told by people that were in there that were friendly with our people, said they were just down in the dump and demoralized. But we barely won even at that. See, I thought, after that I thought, well this thing's over, I'm going to win. But he had a lot of support out there.

BW: Just briefly, have you had contact with him much since?

SS: Well he died, unfortunately, and Bethine doesn't like me at all, so - You see, she kind of blamed me for his demise and all that. So that's been kind of sad, she actually wrote some stuff in her book that wasn't even true about me, with Frank, you know. And I felt bad about that, because our delegation got along well all the time up until I decided to become a candidate for the Senate, and then it - People always ask me, "How did your delegation get along then?" I say, "We got along fine until I announced for the Senate and that kind of ruined everything." But you know, if I had never run for the Senate, I probably could have had a good working relationship with his office over the years, but I just was too ambitious at the time to not.

BW: Talk about the transition from House to Senate, what did it feel like coming into the Senate, what were the differences?

SS: Well the differences, the big difference, number one, was we went from being in the minority to the majority. And when you're a conservative Republican who's used to opposing things, it's a big transition to come in and find out that you have to be responsible to see that you get the train to run on time. And one of the first big votes we had was raising the debt ceiling, and Senator Byrd knew that a lot of guys had campaigned about the national debt, like Chuck [Charles Ernest] Grassley and I and Quayle and these guys that were in the House, had raised hell about the debt ceiling, giving speeches on the House floor, had commercials that this debt, you know, how these guys have been voting to raise this debt twenty times or something. So Robert Byrd set it up so that when we came to the floor we had to have a vote on the debts and he wouldn't let them raise it more than just enough to get by the next three or four or six months or something, and then we had to do it again, and it was really a tough vote.

I can remember John Tower came over to me and sat down right in front of my desk, he said, "Now Symms," he said, "all these conservatives that are here in the Senate, they're watching you, and if you vote against this, this thing won't pass." And then he said, "I don't know what

we're going to do, and how we're going to do it." And then Reagan called me up and said, "Now Steve," he said, "I hear that you're not going to allow me to turn the lights on, you're not going to turn the lights on so I can sweep out the closet." And so, what are you going to do, you know? I had to vote for it. And then we passed it by about one vote and I'm looking back at it, it seemed like a huge deal at the time but it wasn't all that big a deal when you think about it.

That was the big transition, was going from the minority to the majority, and that adjustment. And I was still amazed that some of the real conservative guys in the Senate, who I'll leave unnamed, they actually weren't all that upset when we lost the Senate. Well, one or two of them, they said, "Well we'll have more fun now because we don't have to worry about all this stuff, we can raise hell with these guys for what they're doing." And I said, "Well I just don't look at it that way." I mean, I was sick when we lost the Senate in '86, because I thought it was a much better arrangement for Reagan and everything to have the Republicans have the Senate.

We didn't have the House, and see, all the years I was in office in Idaho we never had a Republican governor, always had a Democratic governor. So it kind of keeps you on your guard, on your toes. Once I became a senator I realized then the relationship with the governor becomes much more important, because there's just more expected out of you as a senator. And I worked really hard when I was a congressman so I always thought, well the work won't be any harder, because you can only do so much. But it really was a lot more, to try to keep track of, it's a lot, with all the confirmations and the treaties. And you start adding all that to the regular legislative process, it's easy for me to see why, when you go into a conference, that the congressmen always seem to be better informed on the issue than the senators are, they've got their hand in ten other things, and they've got their staff telling them a lot of stuff, and some of them, it's hard to keep up with the detail. And some of these congressmen, if they're specializing in, say, on a certain little area, they know that area inside out and they can turn these guys loose in the conference. It's very interesting to watch that.

So it's a little bigger job but it's basically the same job. Now I think if you come from New York state or California, it's a little different than if you come from Idaho or Maine, say, where we have two congressmen in Idaho and two senators, so in the state, prestige wise, it's a little more prestigious I guess to be a senator but not that much. Like I know, when my old friend Al D'Amato, when he would fly into New York, NYPD would meet him at the airport, pick him up, grab his suitcases and everything, whisk him out of the airport, take him to wherever he was going. NYPD, not the federal government. This is just what they do for their senator, to keep him out of, be sure that nobody can lay a hand on him or anything.

Well see, you go to Boise, and you fly into the airport in Boise, and you've been flying all day long, you get out there at night, ten o'clock at night, you go to the baggage thing, get your suitcase, like everybody else, and roll down to Budget Rent-A-Car and rent a car and drive off on your own, there's nobody there giving you any fanfare, nobody expects, you don't get treated like you're some kind of a king or something. So the congressmen and senators get treated the same. I could have had staff come out there, but most of the time I didn't, I didn't expect them to come out and get me, I knew where I lived, I lived thirty-five miles from the airport, and I'd

just go get a car and drive out there.

BW: Did you run in '80 as, quote/unquote, a 'New Republican,' or did that term just sort of, when did that term get, start to be used?

SS: Well I don't know about the New Republican thing, but see what happened was, when I came to Washington, 1972 I got elected, they starting having these campaign schools. I never came back here, I didn't have anything to do with it. I was running against the Republican establishment in 1972. The Republican Party out there had picked out the guy that they wanted to run for the Congress, to replace Jim McClure who was running for the Senate. And I was the outsider running as a libertarian Republican, and my goal was to run an education campaign, that we're going to try to, because if you remember, Nixon had signed wage and price controls, and I just said that's the worst thing I've ever seen, anything done by a Republican.

Now, anybody that knows anything at all about the market economy and the history of America, that wage and price controls will only mess everything up, I mean they won't work. You're going to have rationing; you're going to have all these dislocations in the market. You got to let the market work, in America. If you've got a socialized country where you got a guy with a gun that can walk around and enforce everything you can make it work a little bit. But you can't, it just won't work in this country.

So I was having a fit about that, and that's how I ended up running, because people said, "Well you can't say all these [things] you're going to say and win." And I said, "Well, I don't care, I'll just run and we'll find out." So we ran an absolute zero budget campaign basically, but the ideas were so exciting for the general public, because I was running like - They said, "Well are you backing Richard Nixon?" I said, "After the primary, come back and ask me, but right now, no, I'm backing John [Milan] Ashbrook." I didn't know John Ashbrook from Adam's cat, but he was a conservative congressman from Ohio, and he was in the race running against Nixon, for basically the same reasons I was objecting to. And I said, "So I'm backing Ashbrook, I'm an Ashbrook Republican now." And then after the primary, well I'll support Nixon because I'm a Republican, but not now.

And so they thought I was some kind of a nut case. And so our commercials were very libertarian on different issues that we brought up, and so anti-government, smaller government, and I had an ad on family values, which was very interesting. It wasn't about family values, quote/unquote like, that you think about when you say 'family values' today. My family value issue was that taxes were so high that if we could get the government to cut back on its appetite and not spend so much, then people would have more money, then they could take better care of their families. And we had the numbers, like three thousand some dollars that every family's paying for taxes for the federal government and so forth, and if we could have half of that back, well they could do better taking care of their kids and wives and so forth.

But anyway, I got to Washington, and I was surprised that all these groups around here, like ACU and some of them, who I was on their board for years, later, they all claimed this is the new

right. That was before the big upheaval in the '80s and all the conservative (*unintelligible*), but these guys all claim, like Paul Wyrick and all these people, I didn't know any of these people, but they all acted like they had elected me to Congress. And I've always found that to be really interesting, that conservative groups and the liberal groups are both, they do the same thing. They make all their money on, like the best place to be a fund raiser right now is for a conservative, and when Bush was in office the best place to be a fund raiser was for the liberals, and for the liberal causes. But see, as soon as the Democrats took over, I'm sure these people are all hurting now, nobody will give them any money because they think, well we got Barack Obama in there, we got Harry Reid, we got Nancy Pelosi, what do we need to give money to these people for? You see what I mean? And that's exactly what happened with the Republicans, the conservatives. Once the Republicans took over, the conservative organizations really dried up, they couldn't get any money. Now they're making a comeback.

And so that was where that all came from, and then when I ran for the Senate, by then there were a lot more people running. But when I was first running, there was no Rush Limbaugh or any echo chamber out there for conservatives running. I was just railed as some kind of a right wing, Bircher, and all this stuff, which I wasn't. A Bircher, I was conservative, and I guess I probably was on the right hand side of the politics thing, but I mean you get branded. And Jim McClure used to laugh at me and kid me, he said, "Gosh, Steve, it's good to have you out here running now," he said, "they used to do this to me and now," he said, "they're all focused on you." He gets to kind of run under the radar screen.

But now it's a different world. You got all this 24/7 cable news, you got all this talk radio stuff, and so it's a lot easier I think for people to get people stirred up than it used to be. And it makes it harder for Congress to operate properly, because if you walk out of a committee room and you have made some really outrageous positions, like we used to do in the House Interior Committee, John Seiberling and Don Young and Sam Steiger and Moe Udall and myself and George Miller, and so we'd have these real feuds in there, the conservatives versus the liberals over, say, land use or something.

And then, after the meeting, we might end up over at the Democratic Club, or the Republican Club, talking it over and having a beer, and then come back and two or three days later they work out something and you pass a bill, and everybody's happy. Today you walk out of the committee room – well probably it's on TV anyway – or you walk out, they put a camera on you and a mic, and you say the same things you just said in the committee, because you're all fired up. It's a lot harder to go back and make a compromise, because people can't get out of the positions they've taken. And so they're going to have to learn in time how to deal with all this stuff, because there's so much more information out there, so much more news, and it makes it more difficult.

It was starting to change a lot, because we had TV in the House, TV in the Senate, and I don't know whether it's improved or hurt [] the House. I think it's probably okay because it expands the gallery, that's all it's really doing, to have it on TV. But in the committees it's harder to get business done than it used to be. It's no question to me, because it's just difficult.

BW: Interesting. What do you miss most about being out of the Senate?

SS: I suppose just your friends, the camaraderie, but I never really intended to make it a career in the first place. In fact, I wouldn't even be here now except for the fact that my wife was working in the Senate, she was the deputy sergeant-at-arms for about, she worked for Martha Pope, as a matter of fact. And did you interview Martha?

BW: Not yet.

SS: Martha's a great lady. Martha used to help me some on the Environment and Public Works Committee, because she is totally professional. So if I would signal her to come over and say, "Martha, what's going on here?" because you walk in the committee, you've been in the Finance Committee, come back in Environment and Public Works Committee and they've got a big thing. And so she'd come over there and go through the list real quick and she'd tell you, "Here's what they're trying to do," and she said, "Senator, I think here's probably what your guys are going to say, and I think this is what you would think," you know what I mean, very professional.

And we had a couple guys on the Republican side who were the same way, because they were, a lot of times they were much more environmentalists than I ever was, and they would be for some of these issues, like on the water or some of these bills, but then they'd go through it and say, "Here's probably what you-", you know, and I'd say oh yeah, yeah-yeah, you know, that I see it, you see. But see, I always thought Martha was very professional, and she became the sergeant-at-arms, and my wife was the Republican in the Sergeant-At-Arms Office. They always have one person from the other party, because they're supposed to treat all senators equally, doesn't matter who's in power, and so that's why you have that system, and it works pretty well. And then Martha realized what a manager my wife was, and so she had her run all the personnel of the service department.

BW: And your wife's name?

SS: Loretta, and her name was Loretta Fuller then, because we got married in 1992. So I got to watch that from the inside, and Martha and Loretta were good friends, I mean they worked together very well. And they both knew, Martha knew Loretta was a conservative Republican, and always got along fine and it didn't affect what they were doing over there. In fact, one of my wife's best friends is Jeri Thomson who worked for Daschle all those years. You know Jeri?

BW: No.

SS: And she's a real, I always kidded her that she's a flamer, you know, very liberal, but brilliant woman, very nice woman, very fair, and it's too bad there's not more people like that running the place now. The staffs are too big in the Senate now. If I had one criticism of the Senate I'd say if they cut out about two-thirds of the people that work over there, not that they're

not good people but just to force the senators to negotiate with each other instead of through staffs. Because see, the people, if you go over there and look at the age level of people on the Hill, most of these people that are in there, these young firebrands that come out of law school or college and they got a big idealistic cause that they're carrying, either conservative or liberal. They're the ones that are coming into their bosses offering all these amendments all the time, they keep polarizing everything.

Helms was a classic, he always had these young firebrands working for him, offering all these amendments, giving him amendments to offer, and of course he'd get a kick out of it so he'd offer all these amendments. But he'd constantly have people on the defense over some issue. And Howard Metzenbaum was the same way and he has all these firebrands over there. Actually, Metzenbaum and Helms actually had a lot of respect for each other, but they caused more grief in the Senate. If you're just trying to get through and get home, they'd keep things going for days.

And abortion was another issue. See, when I came to Congress, abortion was not an issue, didn't ever vote on it, it was a states rights issue. And after *Roe v. Wade*, it took maybe a couple more years after that passed, the ruling, maybe two or three years, that was '73 when that ruling took place, by '75, '76, people were then getting sensitive about abortion, so then at that point you had to decide whether you were going to vote pro-life or pro-choice or pro-abortion, you didn't have a choice. And like all my kitchen cabinet out in Idaho, they were always giving me hell about it, my brother for example, and say, "Why the hell are you voting for this pro-life position?" I said, "Dick, it's easy for you out here under an apple tree to be a philosopher king," I said, "if you have to decide whether you're pro-life or pro-abortion and you have to vote on it, it's a little different. And I'm having a hard time squaring, I understand what you're saying, and I understand the argument but," I said, "this should have never been put in the Congress in the first place, it should have always been left out in the states."

You'd have fifty laws on abortion in this country. They wouldn't all be the same, wouldn't all be right, wouldn't be perfect, but it wouldn't be the mess that we've had and this national fight going on all the time. I get sick of it. And they *still* have it. And it won't change until the court either does something about it – the court could go back and say that, if the court would go in and rule that life doesn't begin till forty-five days after conception, if they'd done something like that, or sixty days after conception, it might not have ever been an issue, but where it got to be an issue was over the late-term abortions. And Pat Moynihan and I used to talk about that, he said, "This isn't abortion, this is genocide." And he would give the, he fought this vehemently, Pat was pro-choice, but he was not that much pro-choice. Because he was a very good Catholic, and he really had trouble with that thing, it was a real problem. And they've just gotten in a mess and there's really no easy answer to it. I find the best answer to abortion was just: don't argue with anybody about it.

BW: Did you ever discuss it very much with George Mitchell?

SS: I don't remember ever discussing it with George. I discussed it with John Warner, I

think you said you interviewed John, and I always told John, I said, “John, you handled that issue better than anybody I’ve ever seen.” He said, “What do you mean, Symms?” I said, “I just was never able to do it, I ended up, now I’m viewed as Mr. Pro-Life.” I don’t have the thing, but I said, I never sponsored a bill that was for a national amendment to the Constitution. I supported the bill that said that abortion is handled in the states. Warner, he would get up before a group and say, if it was a group of women he’d say, “I am pro-choice with limitations, but I am pro-life with exceptions.” And if he’s with a bunch of men who would be pro-life he’d say, “I’m pro-life but with some exceptions, I’m pro-life with some exceptions,” then he’d have some things. And he handled that, he never seemed to have any controversy about his position on abortion, and everybody else that I ever knew, one way or the other they caught hell about it because, but Warner always skirted right through it and never had a problem. And if you looked, went and looked at his voting record you’d say, well this guy’s clearly pro-life, but he didn’t ever seem to alienate all the women by being viewed as so strongly pro-life. Maybe he had a few votes somewhere where he hadn’t voted the line with the pro-lifers, but gee, there isn’t much wiggle room when you have a vote.

I remember when I was in the House they had a vote on whether or not a female soldier could get an abortion from the Army doctor or something, and it bothered me and I said, so I went to Henry Hyde and I said, “Well Henry, do we have to vote on this issue?” I said, “What if this soldier’s out in the field somewhere?” He said, “No Steve, it’s real simple,” he said, “maybe you’re really not pro-life.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “It’s very simple, you’re either pro-life or pro-abortion.” He said, “If you’re pro-life you don’t want them to be doing these abortions on taxpayers’ money in the Army; if you’re pro-choice, or pro-abortion, then you don’t have any problem with it.” “So,” he said, “you got to decide that.” Forget about all the circumstances around here. And I thought about that, and it really bothered me for a while, it was hard.

Like Rudy Boschwitz really had a struggle with it, and then he went to Mayo Clinic and spent two days at the Mayo Clinic, went through the whole process, and he came out of Mayo Clinic very pro-life. And he said he was comfortable with it, and he never backed away from it, after he had done that. But he did that very thorough study, because Rudy hadn’t thought about it, he was a businessman, he never had any confrontation about it, and if you don’t have some reason why you’ve been confronted with abortion you don’t think about it, until you have to start voting on it. But I don’t think it helps the process, though, here.

BW: As we wind down here, any other stories about George Mitchell that come to mind. Do any travel with him, or?

SS: Well, I told you the one about me wanting him to run for president, didn’t I?

BW: Right.

SS: Yes, and – I never did travel with George, now that I think about it. I traveled with Dole and Warner, Bumpers, Chafee, but I don’t recall ever being on a CODEL with George Mitchell.

BW: And did you ever go up to Maine and take in the scene and see him up there?

SS: I never saw George up in Maine. I went up to Maine, to York, Maine, spent a weekend up there at that lighthouse and everything, and I came back to the floor and I told George I was up in York over the weekend, just up with friends, Loretta and I went up with another couple and stayed, this lady had a house up there, and she actually worked in the Sergeant-at-Arms Office, and we went up and stayed up in her place, and it was fun. And it's beautiful, but I haven't spent a lot of time in Maine. Of course I've known Bill Cohen forever, he and I came to the House in the same class, he was elected in '72 also. In fact, I just talked with Bill last week. But he and George were really a good pair of senators from Maine; Maine had very good senators. Well actually, I like the senators they've got now, I like them both. I think they're both really fine people.

BW: How do you think George Mitchell should be remembered?

SS: I think he should be remembered as really a strong senator and a good leader. He was a player, and he still is, look what he's done since he left the Senate. He's been involved in some very big issues.

BW: Good.

SS: My daughter would probably challenge him a little bit on his latest, the deal about the baseball players. She's a diehard New York Yankee fan. She said to me, "Oh Dad," she said, "your friend George Mitchell," she said, "after all, look at him, he's on the board of directors for the Boston Red Sox, you notice there's no Red Sox named, it's all Yankees." I started laughing.

But he's really a capable person, and nobody ever doubted that. And I think both Republicans and Democrats would agree with that, that he was very capable. Some guys would say he was a little too partisan, but I didn't ever have the partisan problem with him. But he played hardball to get things that he wanted, I mean he was not above forcing the issue and taking the hard stands, and he did it and he was successful at it, most of the time he got what he was trying to do in the Senate. I can't remember too many times that he ever really got rolled.

He was in a minority when I came to the Senate. I don't remember how he voted on the Reagan economic stuff, and I don't know as it's really that relevant. Was he leader when Bork was stopped?

BW: Let me just see.

SS: Or was Byrd leader then? Scalia got, see, first it was Sandra Day O'Connor, then Scalia.

BW: Scalia was '86.

SS: Okay, and then Bork was when?

BW: 'Eighty-seven, so that was before he was leader.

SS: That was before George was leader, yes, and that was, and a lot of that, you notice how these Supreme Court nominees now, how they don't really answer any questions? That's because Bork was so smart, he wanted to educate all those senators and teach them all what they needed to know about the Constitution. And that's why he lost, that's the honest truth. And the other reason was, you heard that story I'm sure that the plan was to put Bork on the court while it wasn't controversial, and then put Scalia on. Reagan interviewed, when Baker and those guys were running the White House down there, Jim Baker and later Howard Baker, Reagan always wanted to, whatever the issue was, he wanted to know the pros and the cons, and you can do this or you can do that, and then boom, he'd make a decision. And Don Regan wrote in his book that Ronald Reagan was the most decisive person he was ever around, he said, you'd go in and talk to him about the issue and show him, here's one side, Mr. President, some of the guys think you should do this, and here's the other side. He'd look at it and study it and he said, "Well, I think this is why I got elected." So, said he never looked back, never had any trouble.

Well when they took Scalia in there for an interview, and then Bork was supposed to come in the next day for an interview, and Reagan interviewed Scalia and liked him so much he said, "That's my guy, I'm naming him." And they gave him the pitch, they said, "Well Mr. President, Judge Bork is really an outstanding constitutional scholar and it'll be more controversial to get him in, why don't you at least interview him." "No," he said, "Judge Bork is twelve years older than Scalia," or something, fifteen, and he said, "I may not get another appointee and I said I really like the way this young man thinks, and he's my guy," period, end of statement. Ed Meese told me that story, he just, boom.

So he put Scalia on the court. Well then when they came back with Bork, it was then controversial because it made the court five to four, and Bork wouldn't listen. Hatch tried to counsel Bork. If Bork would have listened to Orrin Hatch, he'd have probably got confirmed, he probably would have been able to make it. But he wouldn't give an inch from his attitude, to be sure that he let those guys know where they were wrong and he was right. And it just isn't, you know, now nobody'll do that, I mean you couldn't tell the difference between Roberts and Sotomayor if you just read the text of the answers, because you don't, you know what I mean. But that's what I'd do too if I was one of those people, don't say anything, just say well I can't rule on, I can't give you an opinion on that because I might have to rule on that later and I don't want to jade my position.

BW: Now, Mitchell was leader when the Tower nomination came up.

SS: That was a sad day for the Senate in my book. I don't know how much of a role that George played in that, to be honest, that was mostly Sam Nunn's doing. And George was the leader so I guess he got involved in it in that respect. But I never could quite, to me that was the low point in my time in the Senate, was the Tower nomination, because he was by far the most

capable defense guy in the Senate, and I've always said we probably never would have never had the first Gulf War if Tower had been secretary of defense, because we kind of opened the door for Saddam Hussein to come in to Kuwait.

If you think back about it, if Tower had been over there as secretary of defense, he'd of probably put a battalion of Marines ashore in Kuwait when Saddam was up there.

BW: Massing the troops?

SS: Massing the troops and everything, and put the word out that they were there to protect American lives and property, and if they need to they could die over the barrel of a smoking rifle. And Saddam would have never have gone in there under those circumstances. But see, what happened was he kind of got invited in, and then we pushed him back out and then the rest is history. The whole thing's a mess, and now, did you see what happened yesterday? Forty people killed in Bagdad with another big bomb, they're trying Shiites now to stir up a sectarian war. It's just heartbreaking.

BW: Well on that sad note, shall we bring this interview to a close?

SS: Yes, but I just don't know about what happened with George on that Tower thing. It was too bad, though, because Tower should have been confirmed, and the Senate was never as nice a place after that. It really did change the attitude of people in the Senate. I know my former colleague, Jim McClure, I think that was one of the things that made him say, "I'm getting out of here," because he was really upset about it. And Tower just absolutely got the real ram job from the Senate, but the rest is history. He ended up getting killed a year later. He was killed within a week of John Heinz, I think, both in airplane crashes. And that was a sad day, too.

BW: All right, thank you very much.

SS: Thank you.

End of Interview