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Interview with Donald W. Riegler, Jr. by Brien Williams

Donald "Don" Riegler

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Don Riegle

(Interviewer: Brien Williams)

GMOH# 142

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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 Donald “Don” Riegle, Jr. We are in his offices at APCO Worldwide, Washington, D.C., where he serves as chairman of APCO Worldwide’s government relations team. Today is Monday, September 14th, 2009, and I am Brien Williams. Okay, I thought maybe we’d start with a little bit of your beginnings. You were ten years in the House before you moved over to the Senate.

Don Riegle: Yes.

BW: Right, and I was interested in ‘73, you changed parties.

DR: I did.

BW: Tell me why.

DR: Well, it’s interesting, we all have a little photo gallery in our offices, for the most part, and I have one up behind me here that, with a couple of photographs of Nixon, who I knew well and had a good relationship with, until he became president and with Kissinger at his side continued the Vietnam War, expanded the Vietnam War, when he’d made a commitment, I felt, when he was elected in 1968 to end the war. And so Pete McCloskey, who was a fellow House colleague of mine, an ex-Marine, Korean War veteran, we got involved in a challenge to Nixon’s re-nomination in 1972 up in New Hampshire and, essentially over the war, but it also included Spiro Agnew’s conduct in the southern strategy which was beginning to emerge at that time, and just taking the Republican Party, we thought, down a dark path, with Vietnam kind of right in the center of that.

And when that challenge in ‘72 did not work, in the primaries in New Hampshire, McCloskey got a little over nineteen percent of the vote, he’d set twenty percent as a cutoff as to whether he would continue, so that did not continue beyond that point. So I did not endorse Nixon in 1972 as a Republican, well, that was my last reelection, my third reelection, actually fourth reelection as a Republican. So in January I went to see Gerry Ford, who was of course the leader of the Republicans and from my home state, and a good friend and somebody who’d been something of a mentor to me, to tell him that I was going to change parties, which was not happy news to him, and did and became a Democrat.

And this was before Watergate blew wide open, I mean within six weeks of my changing in January of 1973, two significant events happened: one was, a few weeks later one of the Watergate burglars, a guy named [James W.] McCord, who recently died, sent a letter to Judge Sirica saying there was more to the Watergate story, and that was a torpedo into the cover-up and it started to unravel. And it took about a year, a year and half before it all did, as you would know as a historian.

But the other significant thing was, is that a few weeks after I changed parties, John Connally changed parties and went the other way. So he was later described as being, reminding people of the guy who bought the last first class cabin on the Titanic, because he boarded the Nixon ship of state, just as it was about to go to the bottom.

So I was a very independent Republican. Coming from Flint, Michigan, I was a somewhat unusual candidate because I left the Harvard Business School doctoral program to go back and run in 1966, got elected to the House, knocked off an incumbent Democrat, but was quite independent in my thinking and in my voting. I had known Nixon and I'd gotten to the House [of Representatives] when Lyndon Johnson was still president, went on the Appropriations Committee, went on the Foreign Operations Subcommittee, went to Vietnam, got very involved in trying to understand what was going on with the war, and was convinced based on the case facts that we were losing the war, not winning it, and expanding it didn't help.

So that was the basis for the challenge at the time, which then grew into a decision to change parties. The alternatives weren't wonderfully attractive. I didn't want to stay in the Republican Party, the Democratic Party was the alternative, there was no great clamor on the part of the Democrats to have me join them, so I just announced one day that I was going to be changing, and then went from one party to the other. It's an odd sensation, because if you're in the House and you've spent six years sitting on one side of the aisle, where today it's full of crackpots like this guy Wilson who fired off the other night at the State of the Union message, but then to cross the aisle and then be seated on the other side, your whole vantage point changes. I mean who you're a part of and what you see, it's a polar opposite. And when you go to the Democratic side and you're looking back across at the Republicans, you get a much different composite view of how they look from a distance than when you're in the middle of them. So that was an interesting experience.

BW: Was that a positive experience, in the sense that you were glad you made the move?

DR: Oh yes, no question about that. Although I would be quick to say that, I mean I'm much more comfortable in the Democratic Party, that's much more aligned with who I am and the things that I wanted to fight for and advocate, but neither party's perfect, although the Democratic Party is far preferable. The big difference is, the Democratic Party is really open to everybody, the Republican Party is not. It wasn't then, it even less so is today. And unfortunately, back at the time when I was essentially a moderate Republican, or what I would call a progressive Republican, there was actually quite a significant progressive wing of Republicans that included people like Chuck Percy and Bill Scranton and Mark Hatfield and a

whole group of people, Ed Brooke, who one by one all disappeared and they now no longer exist.

Specter is the last guy to jump ship under extreme circumstances, but the Republican Party that had a much broader base has really sort of gone out of existence, which is really a terrible shame because we need two vibrant parties. But the Republican Party has really become, I think, ultra conservative and I don't see how it makes its way back at this point, sadly.

BW: Flint, Michigan brings to mind unions and blue collar and such.

DR: Right.

BW: So was it exceptional that you won there as a congressman?

DR: It was. I was helped in 1966 because there had been the big Democratic sweep in 1964, when Lyndon Johnson beat Goldwater, and so there was a first-term Democrat in that seat, and the Republicans were quite desperate to find a candidate. The reason I got a cold call in Cambridge, Massachusetts, eight hundred miles away, asking me to think about running, which I was very flattered of course to get, is that I didn't realize at the time they couldn't find anybody within eight hundred miles of Flint who was willing to run as a Republican in Flint. Because that is the dominant history of Flint, the United Auto Workers had the sit-down strikes there, and a very strong Democratic orientation politically, and they had a phrase, a very strong, well stamped-in phrase, "Make it emphatic, vote straight Democratic," so everybody, and there was a very substantial UAW membership at that time. This had the largest UAW membership of any district in the country, by far.

And so the notion was, you vote for the Democrats and you don't vote for Republicans, so I had to really present myself as an independent thinker, which I was, that wasn't hard to do, but when I came back from the Business School I announced at the airport, to cover the notion of having been away, and then I went seven days a week, eighteen hours a day like you've never seen. And by just sheer human effort, with a lot of volunteers, managed to win that race, and then we were able to keep winning after that.

But it is, it's a tough, blue collar area, it's really been hammered since that time. You may have seen Michael Moore's movie, Roger Me, but if you haven't seen it, you should see it. But that's set in Flint – well now it's either twenty or twenty-five years ago, so Michael was ahead of his time.

BW: Now in '76 you succeeded -

DR: Phil Hart.

BW: Phil Hart. Talk about that a little bit. I'm struck by the affection with which people talk about Senator Hart and of course -

DR: Bordering on reverence.

BW: The building that bears his name and so forth, which is a major honor. What was he like?

DR: Well, it's very interesting, I only knew Phil Hart from a distance, because I had been a Republican most of the time when I was in the Congress, until I changed parties, and then was involved in the race to succeed him in a very complicated primary race, which I should mention a little bit about. But he was dying of cancer, as you may know, and so by the time I became the Democratic nominee it was, I saw him one time after that, but he was in such difficulty that it was really an intrusion and I didn't feel comfortable trying to intrude.

But back in 1976 when he announced that he wasn't going to be running, for reasons of health, and the seat was open, I was finishing my tenth year in the House, I had spent my first six as a Republican, my last three roughly then, at that point, as a Democrat, and I looked at the race in Michigan and I thought I could see who the Republican nominee would be. And I have very strong feelings about issues, one thing that's different about me than most people in that picture, there are things that I will go through a brick wall to try to do. I wish there were more people like that. There are some, but there aren't many and I happen to be one. That's not to be boastful; it's just kind of how I'm hardwired. So what happens on issues that matter to me, really matter to me, so I'm willing to take risk to try to, as we did to try to stop the Vietnam War, the change in parties or what have you.

So I looked at the race in '76, and first of all I thought I'd be the strongest candidate for the Democrats, although I'd only been a Democrat a relatively short time, and I really wanted a Democrat to win the race, I didn't want it going over to the Republican side. And I'd been in the House ten years, and I was now a junior Democrat and I'd gone from the Appropriations Committee where I had a very important position as a Republican that I'd been able to do something with, to the low man on the totem pole on the International Relations Committee, which is three tiers down to Doc Morgan, who at that time was the chairman, who was up at the top, Christ, you could almost not see him, I mean you needed binoculars from the far end of the table.

So I thought, I think I should run for the Senate and if I win, then I'm going to have an opportunity to represent the whole state, and I really enjoyed the representation part, I'm kind of a fanatic about solving problems for people and communities and so forth and so I thought, and Michigan already was beginning to struggle in a number of different ways. And so I thought, I think I can do a lot more in the Senate, if I can get to the Senate, but you got to give up your House seat to run for the Senate, but I thought that was worth doing.

So I got into the race, I think there were five of us in the primary, and the reason it was somewhat treacherous is, is that there were significant candidates. Another House member named [James G.] Jim O'Hara, who was a very prominent, active Democrat from Macomb

County, which is the place where the Reagan Democrats later were identified, and he had become chairman of the Education and Labor Committee in the House, was a great favorite of organized labor. So George Meany, who was alive at the time and his chief political guy, a guy named Al Barkin, loved Micky O'Haras, they called him, so O'Hara was going to run, did run, was in the race.

And there were three other candidates, but then the key candidate was an African-American secretary of state named Dick Austin, and he was kind of ubiquitous because the secretary of state's offices were all over the state, he was in the state, and everybody liked him, and the secretary of state's job is a somewhat non-controversial job. So in a Democratic primary, if you've got four white guys and one popular black guy running, in Michigan, with a pretty substantial black vote in the primary, those odds start to get long.

So, but I still thought if I could get nominated I had the best chance to win the general. And I was a pretty good campaigner, I had a lot of people who were willing to volunteer and help me and I thought I could maybe pull it off, and so we managed to do that. Now, Austin, one of the Detroit newspapers took out after him in that primary, because he had had a system where he was – I didn't know anything about this – but he'd had a system where his secretary of state offices were raising money for him politically, and while it wasn't illegal, it didn't look right and it didn't feel right, and it took the wind out of his sails and he didn't know quite how to deal with it. And we were just going like gangbusters, as we'd had in our first House race, and so I ended up winning that race.

And it was a tough, tough race. I beat a guy named Marvin [L.] Esch, who had gotten elected as I had ten years earlier, we both had been freshmen Republicans together, and then we ended up colliding ten years later. And then six years after that I ended up running against another Republican, who had been elected with me in '66 as a House member, a fellow [Philip E.] Phil Ruppe, so that's just how things sorted out over time.

So I went from being in the House, where your ability to do things really depends an awful lot on what issues you're working on and what your committee assignment is. The Senate's a totally different place, I could write a book about the difference between the two places. In the Senate I ended up – this is now jumping way ahead – but I ended up serving on the Banking Committee as chairman, on the Finance Committee with George, on the Commerce Committee and the Budget Committee all at the same time, so I was very busy, with a very complex, troubled state, but it's an illustration of what you can get your hands on, if you're serious about the work, if you go to the Senate, say, versus had I stayed in the House where I would have had a slice that I could have gotten a hold of, but underneath the weight of the seniority system. And so going to the Senate and having the chance to engage in things that mattered to me and which I thought were important was clearly the thing to do.

Had I lost, which I might easily have done, I probably would have gone back to the Harvard Business School, finished my thesis, which I never did, in the field of business and government relations; I had everything else done, the special field exams, the whole works. I did write a

book when I was in the House which became a bestseller for a while, called O, Congress, but that's not the same thing as a thesis. And so I spent twenty-eight years, kind of seven days a week, I felt like a Pony Express rider because both the way I approached the work and because there was always so much work to do, especially because Michigan, which is now a true basket case, was becoming a basket case. And so it was like operating, I have described it as operating in M.A.S.H. ward, you had injured companies, injured communities, injured unions, injured people, families, I mean the place has been really storm tossed.

BW: Did Philip Hart survive long enough for your campaign, or -?

DR: It's very interesting, Phil lived through the year 1976, and he died I think three or four or five days before I was to be sworn in as one of the new members of the Senate, and as a result of that it vacated the seat. And Bill Milliken, who was the Republican governor and who was a guy I always got along pretty well with, actually named me to the seat, to give me a bit of an edge on seniority, and so I actually became a senator two or three days early as a result of that.

BW: Did he endorse you, or campaign for you?

DR: Yes, he did, and in fact earlier in time when I changed parties, there's a wonderful little story. They did a welcome me into the Democratic Party event in Flint back in 1973 then, when I had changed. And Phil Hart came out to be there for that event, and so did Danny Inouye, and there's a wonderful story about these two guys, I don't know if you've ever heard it but if you haven't, apart from George Mitchell, it's a wonderful, wonderful historical story.

And we were all in Flint at what was called the IMA Auditorium that night, getting ready to go out and put me in the dunk tank, give me my official baptism as a Democrat. And that was the night that Nixon was announcing who was going to be his vice presidential replacement for Spiro Agnew, and he announced that it was Gerald Ford, which of course came as a great shock to a lot of people but a great interest to all of us there in Flint. But that happened on that particular night.

So Phil was gracious to me, although we never got terribly well acquainted, and I regret that we didn't, but the story I'm going to tell you will go to the question of: why was he so revered, and why would the building have been named for him. He was almost saint like in terms of his demeanor and his kindness, and so he was decent through and through, he was a social liberal, he got caught up supporting the Vietnam War, his wife was an opponent to the Vietnam War, there was a lot of tension there, but he finally switched around on that I think later in life, too.

But his kindness and his gentleness was a manifest quality, and the story, and this is a true story, because this story's been told to me by the other two principals. Phil Hart was wounded on D-Day, wounded at Normandy, and like a lot of the veterans, young people that were in the war and got shot, they were sent back to the United States for recovery and treatment. And the principal veterans' hospital at that time in the United States was in Battle Creek, Michigan, it's called the Percy Jones Hospital. And Phil Hart got sent back to the Percy Jones Hospital with two other

very badly wounded veterans – you’re nodding like I think you know this story – one was Bob Dole, the other was Danny Inouye. These three men met there, all as wounded veterans probably in their early twenties, and of course then would end up serving together for decades in the United States Senate.

But the story about Phil Hart, and I’ve heard Bob Dole tell this story, with whom I have quite a good relationship personally, that Phil was ambulatory, whereas Dole was not, he was very badly wounded, and while Inouye lost his arm, his situation was more severe too at first. The place was overwhelmed with veterans, they didn’t have enough staff, so Phil Hart, because he could get up and move around, would go around and empty the bedpans, I mean just to give you a measure of the kind of a guy he was. And so it’s not surprising that there should have been a wellspring of affection for him, and that he should have had his name put on that third building.

BW: I was struck by the class of ‘76 that came into the Senate, because there were so many new faces and so many important people retiring.

DR: Yes, huge number left. Then in the next two, if you take the Senate that was sworn in in January of 1977, I mean it was an extraordinary place, I looked at that list just the other day, I mean the giants that were on it like Jacob Javits and Frank Church and –

BW: Mansfield.

DR: Muskie and, I mean there was just, it was just a heavy, heavy, heavy, Warren Magnuson, Barry Goldwater, the tall timber was everywhere, and those of us that came in felt like we were walking in among a forest of sequoias versus being young saplings ourselves.

BW: But the thing that struck me was how many tall trees were retiring and being replaced by your, I mean -

DR: Many did, and it’s -

BW: Symington, Hart, Mansfield, Scott, Montoya, Pastore, I mean those were big names of a certain era, and so did you all feel like something was passing, or not?

DR: Well, I think because there were so many still left, you don’t know the ones that are leaving, because you’re walking in and they’re gone. But the ones that are still there are there, and there were so many of them, with Javits and Case and Ed Brooke, and I could go on with the list. And all the southerners, McClellan and Stennis and the place was, there were so many tall trees, the fact that a number had left was almost not noticeable to somebody who was walking in the door right then.

But what is even more interesting to me is, over the next two or three election cycles, how many more left. If you were to take roughly a ten year period as a historian and look at who was there, the old Senate versus the Senate in flux, and then in effect the new Senate, and how somebody

like George Mitchell, with so little length of service, should so rapidly move up into the majority leader's position is a pretty astounding story, but part of that has to do not just with his talent and the fact that he was the best of the bunch for that job, but it's also how thinned out the place had become over these two or three election cycles, which is, it's really quite a dramatic change.

It's a change that I was describing to a group of Kazak women who were here today, women political leaders, we had a breakfast for them, that there was a time when I was in the Senate when we had a hundred men and no women, not a single woman. And we now have seventeen women, and there's two from California, one from Texas, one from New York, I mean it's coast to coast. And it's such a profound change, to go from zero to seventeen within a very compressed time frame, that's a story all by itself as to how that's come about.

I don't know that anybody's ever really put the focus on it, because nobody tracks the Senate organically, as to what the Senate is and when are the time periods that the Senate has a certain critical mass and configuration, and even Scoop Jackson's death, and untimely sudden death, was one of those things that you couldn't foresee, but it came into this cluster of time when a whole lot of senior people went down. Gaylord Nelson lost a tough race to [Robert W.] Bob Kasten, so there were the retirees, there were deaths, and other factors that just completely changed the operational control of the place. And so guys like Bob Byrd and Ted Kennedy, who were the senior guys sort of sticking around, became even more anomalies, if you will, given the fact that most of their contemporaries had for one reason or another fallen by the wayside.

BW: One of the tall trees I would think was Ed Muskie when you came in.

DR: Yes.

BW: What was your appraisal of him, and did you have interactions with him?

DR: I did, yes. Muskie, he was an interesting guy because he used his temper, as you probably know, as a device and almost as a weapon, because he could, I think a lot of it was bluster. It was contrived anger and he was tall, and if you're tall and you're a booming voice, and you're assertive, then you can fill up a lot of space just by virtue of that. And I didn't know him well because we didn't really serve on the same committees, although I think he was still on the Budget Committee and I went on the Budget Committee when I first got there, but I felt that Muskie, my impression would be – this may not be accurate – my impression would be, like others that I've known who lost a key race, they were never the same after that. You could stay in office, but if you've had your big time at bat and it didn't work, I think you're diminished, you feel diminished.

And it's a psychological thing, and I've seen it with people who've been voted out of office. I have a colleague down the hall here who I love mightily, Jim Sasser, and when Jim lost his race in 1994, it was an impossible situation for him. He's had a very hard time recovering from that. He was named ambassador to China, which was a wonderful next assignment, but losing that race – and I would just tell you this off the record, you don't have to turn this off but I just tell

you this to make this point – he hasn't felt comfortable going back to the Senate. He has gone back to the Senate for his confirmation hearing to be ambassador, he has never gone back to the Senate dining room, he could have gone back to the Senate gym, has never done so. And I've tried to convince him, and Dale Bumpers and I want to take him up for lunch in the Senate dining room because we think it's long enough, it's time to go back and have a nice lunch and reminisce and so forth, so we're going to do that but – if we don't all die beforehand.

But I've noticed this with other political figures, too, that if you lose a big race – I think John Kerry was altered by losing his presidential race, and I think I would be if that, fortunately I never lost a race, and my father did, that was enough for me, to see him lose, he was in local politics in Flint. So I think people, and I think the same thing was true for Hubert Humphrey, Hubert came back, and of course he was not in good health, but I think too that if you ever get up to the plate and you get a chance to swing the big bat, like in a presidential race or vice presidential race, and it doesn't work, I think you may feel like you've missed your chance and therefore everything is a little bit of an anti-climax after that.

BW: You mentioned his anger, was that expressed among colleagues, or just by reputation of his staff?

DR: No, it was more, because I didn't see it with his staff, I saw it more with bluster in terms of debate and the give and take with colleagues and so forth. And another guy who did that in a different way was Fritz Hollings, the booming voice and a lot of passion. But I think in Fritz's case it, he's a very skilled trial lawyer but it wasn't just theatrics, he'd get going because it was something he felt strongly about. I think Muskie actually, not that he didn't feel strongly about what he was talking about, my impression was, is that he used it [as] an intimidating force, I think, and it worked, it seemed to work for him. Now that may not be fair, that's just an impression from a bit of a distance.

BW: Did his finger ever point in your direction?

DR: I don't remember it, but if it did I'm not sure I would have enjoyed necessarily that it would have, but we would have been on the same side of most issues so I probably saw him pointing at others rather than at me.

BW: Now, he went over to secretary of state, and George Mitchell was appointed to replace him. Did people sort of look askance and say, who is this guy?

DR: I once described Howard Baker in his prime. Howard was up at Kennedy's funeral, he doesn't look very good now because he's very overweight and so forth, and I think his health is probably terrible, so, just from the way he looks. But I always felt that Howard Baker was, well like one of these guys that shows up in a basketball game who's about five-foot-seven, baggy pants, old tennis shoes, and you say, what's this guy doing out on the court, and then when the game's over he scored fifty points, and you say how the hell did this happen?

And in a sense, George Mitchell is that kind of a guy, but not, I wouldn't use that same metaphor in terms of description, because George, I don't think initially, George didn't do anything to make himself obvious, that I recall. I don't remember him giving any impassioned speeches, I don't remember him trying to organize any cabals. Maybe he was doing it and so subtly that I didn't see it, but my impression of George when he first got there would be more like he was Clark Kent before he took off his suit and you saw he was Superman underneath the Clark Kent.

George, without overdoing it, did have some Superman qualities despite a, not exactly a self-effacing demeanor, but a modest demeanor. George was not the kind of a guy, to my recollection, that would push himself ahead, or appear to be pushing himself ahead, he was much more measured than that. But I think George's great, he has several great strengths, one is his intellect, one is his seriousness of purpose, the fact that he is a very hard worker, he's got a sense of humor when he's willing to use it, and it's wonderful when he does, but he's not a hey-see-me kind of guy. Never was, and I think that's followed since he left the Senate. I think in his assignments in Northern Ireland, in his assignment now, he's perfect for that kind of assignment because he's got so much talent, in my opinion.

I think George is one of the most talented guys around, and would have made an excellent president in fact, when people were casting around for somebody, saying well who can we have for president, this is pre-Obama and pre- the race and so forth. And I felt that one guy who would have been an excellent president, really had the makings that you wanted in a president, would have been George Mitchell. And I would have been very happy to have George run and I would have worked like a dog to help him, because I think he would be superior to Obama today, who I supported very early, two years ago, against the field that was then forming.

But for whatever the reasons, George I think, when he left the Senate and decided to change his life and get married and have kids --- he tells this wonderful story about --- you probably have heard this one. I was with him somewhere not long ago where he said he took his daughter to kindergarten and he realized when he was taking her, or first grade or whatever it was, that he was going to be ninety-four when she graduated from college, or some such age as this. I mean he had done the math, and the math was very striking and – how old is George now? We've got to do the math; he's got to be in his seventies, isn't he?

BW: Yes, I don't have that on the top of my head.

DR: Well, you add fifteen years -

BW: He was born in '33.

DR: Yes, so anyway, I don't remember the precise, and you should get him to tell the story, because if you can get it out of him, because George is very good when he gets a great story of telling and retelling it so that it's like a polished gem, so it's a multipurpose always available story, like the John Warner story.

But anyway, he was observing that he would be this very advanced age when his daughter, maybe it was when she graduated from college. And he said it as a quip, but my feeling was, is that George, probably for reasons not terribly dissimilar to mine, although our case facts were totally different, I decided to leave after twenty-eight years, I was fifty-six, and I had two young daughters and I've had an earlier family with three children, and I'd cut a lot of corners time wise and focus wise, and my parents were dying, both of them were dying in the 1976 time period, or 1994 time period.

And I thought, we're really going to change direction, you know, I've been Banking chairman for six years, that's kind of the top of the work assignment pecking order around here. I'm not going to run for president or vice president so I'm going to go and create a family-centered life. And we actually moved back to Michigan, we moved to northern Michigan and we tried that as an experiment, which didn't work, so we slowly made our way back here over a period of time and it's a much better balance now, but it's very much family-centered.

I think George, and we never talked about this to my recollection, but I think George, who's a very private guy anyway, was thinking about the balance in his life. Obviously he found a woman he loved, obviously got married later in life, started a family later in life, now does have young children but it's a whole different deal when you have young children at our age. I have a daughter that's just starting her senior year in high school, and I know how I feel about that, with college still ahead. And for him to have much younger ones, as Chris Dodd does now in his middle sixties, that's a whole different deal if you're trying to do full time, wall-to-wall, public service at the Senate level and still have more than a semblance of a centered home life. But I mean a home life where there's time and the ability to engage and do things and so forth.

And my sense was that George, even though he had this strong motivation to want to serve and be engaged, as he's continued through these other extremely busy assignments, I think wanted to get his personal life in order, and I think that was the right decision to make. It was a huge loss to the Senate, surprised a lot of people, but I absolutely understand the feelings because I was having my own feelings along those same lines.

BW: Describe from your perspective his rise to become the majority leader, and that vote and so forth.

DR: Well, you may have to prompt me a little bit because I don't have a clear memory of that. I was not, the question of the inside alignment of forces to move people up into the leadership would not have been a main interest of mine. It would have been more so of others, although I would have been absolutely delighted, and was delighted, to have George become the majority leader. But I think probably at that – what year did that happen?

BW: Eighty-eight. And it involved Senator Byrd being given Appropriations, and Daniel Inouye and Bennett Johnston also running for majority leader. And George didn't get it on the first ballot, but it was clear he was going to get it and so Bennett I guess is the one that said, let's do it by acclamation, and so he became the – so it's not clear in my mind whether Senator Byrd

was moved aside, or whether that was an option that he willingly took or, do you have any sense of that?

DR: Well I have great regard and respect for Byrd. My guess is, he had been majority leader, so he didn't have to go become majority leader because he'd been majority leader, and I think maybe for reasons of his own, I don't know that it would have had anything to do with Irma's health, she's since passed away, I don't think that she was necessarily ailing then. He did lose a grandson at that time to a terrible car accident, and Byrd was like a lost soul for about a year. There were a lot of people that wondered if he'd ever recover from it. I remember going to see him one time in his office, and he was like a haunted man, it's hard for me to describe to you the level of sorrow and despondency that he reached. And he created almost a little shrine to this lost grandson, who drove a car into a tree late at night I think is what happened, over in West Virginia.

And Byrd went into a terrible tailspin, a really profound tailspin, and he eventually worked his way out of it. Now, when that was and how that might have factored into this, I don't know, but you may want to try to figure that out if that's important to you, because I don't know that there was any great wellspring of desire to get rid of Byrd as the majority leader, I think I'd remember that if that were so. That doesn't mean that people weren't interested in what the other alternatives might be, but I don't think it would be fair to say he was forced out. I think he may have felt a little bit of a push, or he may have felt that it was time to concentrate on the Appropriations Committee; he was very aggressive about loading West Virginia up with projects and so forth. And he may even have been worried a little bit about his own reelection. I don't have any reason to think that's the case, but Byrd's a very serious guy and takes it very seriously.

*End of CD One
CD Two*

DR: So, how that opened up to create the race, and then I think, taking nothing away from George – and I wouldn't want to say this on the record either, because I wouldn't want to reflect badly on either Danny Inouye or Bennett Johnston, both of whom are good friends of mine – but I think, given just how the rolling composite of the Senate was changing, the newer members, the ethos of the place, the issues of the day, that George would have become the guy who would win that race, and would have a very good chance of winning that race.

Now how he did it with all the one-on-one personal things, I don't know. He would probably know and remember, but it would have been very hard for Bennett, as much as I care for him, to win that, even though he might aspire to it. It would be very hard for Danny Inouye to win it, as much as he might aspire to it. Anybody that's been in there any length of time knows how serious that role is and how you have to work your ass off, you have to have endless patience, you got to work with the Republicans, hour after hour after hour, let alone the Max Baucuses and the people in your own party that can drive you crazy. But once you get done with them, then you've got everybody else to deal with, you've got Howard Metzenbaum and, a dear friend of mine, let alone Trent Lott and everybody else on the Republican side.

So I think George's brain power and demeanor and energy, the seriousness of purpose, I would say, if I were to put a headline over George Mitchell, which would be not enough because there were a lot of wonderful components to George, and are, but I would say seriousness of purpose would come right out at the top. And that's one of the things that I admire most about him, and it's why I pay him the ultimate compliment of saying, who do I know that I think I would like to see as president, it's a pretty short list but he's one of the guys that first comes to mind.

BW: Some people have told me that his success as chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, with the '86 election, was a strong point in his favor.

DR: I think it was, I'm glad you remind me of that. I was on that committee at the time, and at the tail end of that race I remember we did something and I think there were a couple of other co-conspirators but I'm quite sure, if he would confirm this, we were right down to the point where we thought we had a chance to flip the thing back after having gone into the minority, which is really an awful place to be, in the minority, once you've been in the majority, and especially in the Senate. But we were out of money so, I like to think it was my idea, it may not have been my idea, but I said, I think we need to borrow the money, and we need to sign a note, because we need money to fund these candidates. We had a bunch of candidates who look like they could win, but they can't win if they don't have enough oxygen to finish the race.

And so we did something that had never happened before, to my knowledge. We, as a committee, several of us agreed to sign notes to pay back the money. I forget how we did it, through our campaigns or personally or whatever we did, but we made the decision pretty quickly, that we had to roll the dice and play to win, and go out on a limb and know that we were going to have to pay the money back, but if we won it'd be a hell a lot of easier to pay it back than if we lost. So we took that gamble, and I remember signing some papers, because those of us who felt we should do that were then called upon to do it.

So his memory would probably be far clearer on that than mine, but that was a key moment in time because George did a great job as campaign chairman, but you're quite right, that was the springboard. Had he not done that, I don't think what followed would have followed probably for him.

BW: The other thing some people point to is his taking on Oliver North during the Contra hearings, and he was the one that sort of pointed the finger and said, you're going too far, officer.

DR: Well good for him, I mean that's the kind, I don't have a clear memory of that, but that's the part of George, it's the judge and it's the rectitude about right and wrong on something that's really important. And it's one of the reasons why he would really have been an excellent president, because he had the depth and yet the moral construct that you need to have at a high level of leadership in the government, and he has that. I can absolutely assert under oath, because I've seen it enough times in George to know that that's part of his makeup.

BW: And the breadth, the range of things that a president has to deal with would not have been beyond his capabilities.

DR: No, exactly. And George was also, more so I'm afraid to say than Obama, I think – and maybe it's partly the difference in age and experience, as well as just the two different guys – I think George has shown an ability to reach for the talents he needs, and understand the talents he needs around him, and to make use of them. And one thing, one story that is personal and that you should get him to tell at some point is, when we were in the race in 1992 and we were trying to get Clinton elected, not that we had any great love for Clinton but we wanted to un-elect Bush and end the twelve years of Reagan and Bush and then Bush and Quayle.

And so we were back in the driver's seat in the Senate, and George was majority leader, but the question was how do we use that and skillfully on issues and politically. And we started doing these, you may have heard about this but if you didn't you'll hear more about it if you plumb into it, a couple of us started going to the Senate floor and giving lengthy talks about what was wrong with the Bush administration and why the country was on the wrong track and needed to change and so forth. And it started to take hold, and George saw the efficacy of that so then he started asking me and Jim Sasser and Paul Sarbanes to come over to the floor and do this with regularity, come over there and spend half an hour, forty-five minutes. And of course you have C-Span audience as well as increasingly, the press was watching what was being said, plus all the other members in the offices were, so as you developed political themes and argumentation, you could disseminate it in a very effective way over a very, and it's quite possible to do today, although most people aren't smart enough to have figured it out, that you could do it today, if you use the Senate floor the same way we used it back in that time period.

But as we were doing this, we would take charts to the floor on trade deficits and job loss and this and that, and it was a very compelling story, I mean it wasn't fakery, it was really laying a story out there. And Bush, who I liked a lot, I detested his son as president but the father was a pretty good guy, it's one of the reasons that picture of him is on my stand here, and that's Bennett Johnston also in that picture. But Bush was overly focused on foreign policy, he loved foreign policy, he'd been envoy to China and the CIA and so forth, and he was completely out to lunch on domestic policy at a time when domestic policy became hugely important.

So I was thinking about it one night, and this is one of the great little political things I ever managed to do, and I thought the problem with Bush is, he's got an economic program for every country but America. So I took that theme, and then I would read the newspapers carefully every day and I would see that the Bush administration was announcing a new aid program for Yemen, and a new aid program or some new initiative for some other country. So I would take these clippings and I would go down to the floor and I would start in, and I would say the problem with this administration, I would juxtapose this to unemployment numbers and people without health care and various other things, but then I would always come back to the notion that the problem with the Bush administration is they have an economic program for every country but America. And then I would cite the country that they were focusing on and then I would lay it against it and then I would get Sasser to come in and weigh in, and Sarbanes, and

they would come down and they would say, “Well would the senator from Michigan yield?” And then I would yield to Sarbanes and then he’d pile in, and the Sasser would ask Sarbanes, “Well would you yield to me?” And then he’d pile in.

And of course Mitchell was sitting off in his majority leader’s office but, you know, asking us and prompting us to come over and do it more often because it was helping him, and he obviously felt it was effective. And it was effective, and it’s one of these kinds of things, because the climate was right, and once you get a theme developing. And the reason I knew it was working is, one day Lloyd Bentsen, who’s even more buttoned-down than George Mitchell, was on *Meet the Press* or something and he was asked a question, and Lloyd, in his kind of blue serge suit way, he said, “Well you know, one of the problems with the Bush administration, it has an economic program for every country but America.” And I’m thinking, I finally drummed this into enough people that it’s moving out now on its own.” And even today Max Baucus will stop me, this is now twenty years later, and Max Baucus will stop me when we see each other, and he’ll refer back to these sessions we would do during the day on the Senate floor, with Mitchell’s encouragement and urging to take Bush to task and tee that race up.

And I’m convinced it had a hand, now that was a three-way race, and if you didn’t have Ross Perot taking twenty percent of the vote, I’m not sure Clinton would ever have won, and I’m no fan of Clinton’s, but nevertheless. So that was a case where George, he really appreciated the initiative, the ability to go out and make political arguments off the economic circumstances that weren’t being attended to. Because we were trying to do things to help the economy, it wasn’t all just eyewash, these were things that mattered, and particularly mattered to me so I didn’t have to pretend that these were things that I was upset about. I was mighty upset about it, and so I was willing to come and talk at great length about them, and did any number of times.

And so I think if you hit the “on” button with Mitchell on this sometime when you’re interviewing, and ask him about the sessions that he helped set in motion on the Senate floor when Sarbanes and Sasser and Riegle and Dodd would come over there and beat the living crap out of the Republicans and the Bush administration, what he remembers of that, and you’ll get a smile, a knowing smile, and I think it’s one of the things that he will remember quite vividly.

BW: Was that tightly coordinated, or not?

DR: No, and it didn’t have to be because I was a self-starter on this, I would come and do it on my own if he didn’t ask me to. I would come more often if he asked me to, because I was on these four other committees and I had lots and lots of things to do, so to find the time to do it, I mean you have to make time to do it.

The other thing is, is that you could do it spontaneously. In other words, these are the things I was working on and I cared about, so I could walk over, and I didn’t need a speech, I didn’t need anybody to hand me notes or anything, I could just start talking because I had the clay in my hands and so, and the same thing with Sarbanes and Sasser and Dodd, who were the co-conspirators, and we drove Dole crazy doing this, we drove the Republicans absolutely crazy

during this period.

BW: Did they respond in kind?

DR: Well, they tried a little but what happens is, it's so wonderful, when I take people over sometimes and take them on the Senate floor, I explain how this works. Once you're recognized and you have the mic, and you control the time, Dole can come down, or anybody else can come down and they can be fuming and they can say, "Would the senator yield?" And of course I don't have to yield, and after they're fuming for a while and I've made, and once they would come then I would up the octane and the illustrations and so forth, until they were really exercised.

And so then the tactic you use is, you say, "I'll yield for a question", or, "I'll only yield for a question." So Dole would come in, and in the form of a fake question, would try to rebut what I was saying. And I'd let him go about forty seconds and I'd say, "I don't yield further, because the senator is not asking a question." And then I would come right back with just carpet bombing the issue for another four or five minutes. And when you control the floor, the other side, there's nothing they can do about it if you won't yield to them. And so after a while they wouldn't come over there, because we were using them as foils, and they were wonderful foils, but they figured out they were foils and so finally they would just gnash their teeth because there was no point of coming over there, because if they did then they just let us make more of a show out of it.

But I know it had a great impact, because I ran into people all over the place who told us that they were hearing it, seeing it, they were repeating the lines and so forth. And that could be done today if somebody really had their wits about them, and if I were back there now, I would be taking advantage of that, I'd put a little army together and we'd be drawing the issues far more clearly and strongly than they are today.

What happens is, is that members – of course it's a different batch of members – but they become overwhelmed. You have so much going on, it is like drinking out of a fire hose, because there are so many meetings that you're asked to attend, there are so many constituents in town, you've got to go back to your district, you've got to go over and make fund raising calls off the Hill, that's the curse that everybody faces. So there's almost no time left to initiate, and this involves initiating, it isn't just the fact that you've got a hearing in your committee that you're due at right now or maybe three committees meeting simultaneously and you're trying to decide where to go. This means, if you're going to be proactive, you have to organize your thinking, you have to get yourself on the subway car, you have to go over, you have to wait, you have to get recognition, and whether you have one or two other guys with you or not, that just complicates the task.

But if you don't do that, I mean it takes that degree of organization. It doesn't take microscopic organization, if you have something to say. Now, if it's all bullshit and what you have to say is eyewash and nobody cares, then you'd be a fool to do it. You can only do this and have it work

when the issues are going your way and you need to take and ramp it up. And those things were in alignment at that time, but you got to have the energy and the sense of purpose to do it. It does not happen by itself.

But I recall different times, just to finish this, I recall different times I would be somewhere doing something, and a staff person would come to me and say, "Senator Mitchell's called, the majority leader's office called and asked if you can come over to the floor and talk about the economy for twenty, thirty minutes," which was what I'm describing here, to come over and do, because I had charts that I would make that I would keep right in the cloakroom. There's now a whole cabinet that's been built into the cloakroom for charts, that didn't used to be there, because we'd make these charts that would show the unemployment and the trade deficit and so forth. But that's where that all came from.

BW: Two of the things I hear people saying about Mitchell were his partisanship, which this would play into that, what you're just describing, but at the same time his capacity to work well with Dole and with the Republicans. So where's the balance there?

DR: Well, I think the balance is that George stood for something. I mean, you got a lot of people that make it to the Congress that don't necessarily stand too strongly for things. I mean they have a generalized political philosophy, and they're there and they want to do a good job, but that doesn't mean that they're on fire about certain issues. I think for George, and one of the reasons that he and I, I think, could relate to each other, though we're different people is, is that the things we care about, we really care about. I mean, George's style is a little different than mine, or maybe a lot different than mine in certain ways, but in the group of people who would be there because certain things really mattered to them and that they wanted to speak on those things and try to force the issues on those things and make those things happen, you know, the level of intensity is, you know, it's wherever it is, and it's in a different place for each person. And some people, it's a keen driving interest, and for a lot of others it is not, and I think for George it was, although, because George is measured in how he shows that intensity, but you saw the intensity in Northern Ireland, you saw it in the majority leader's position, you see it now in the Middle East, and you know, you have to have very strong feelings, and you have to be very highly motivated to take on vexing tasks like that and work your ass off at them. And not everybody will do that.

BW: What, for the record, were your big ticket issues, and what were Mitchell's, and did they sometimes cross over?

DR: Well, when I was in the House, I mean I'll come to the Senate, when I was in the House, because I was on the Foreign Operations Subcommittee, got very deeply involved in Vietnam, and that's what led to my change in parties and actually being very active in the effort to stop the Vietnam War, in a variety of different ways. And I think those of us who really did, we did shorten it. There would be more names on the wall if all that hadn't happened. Fortunately, we had the draft helping us at that time, which did create more outrage among the public. If we had it now, we would have been out of Iraq a long time ago, in my opinion.

But leaving that aside, so war and peace issues are extremely important to me, especially if you're sending kids to fight and die, and not willing to send your own, especially, that kind of hypocrisy. But for me, once I got to the Senate, coming from Flint, Flint is the vortex of what's gone wrong with the economics of America. In the golden age, post WWII that's now evaporating right before our eyes and the backward slide of the middle class, which is a huge, complex, global situation, I spent a lot of time on this and I've been writing op eds on it with other people, I just had one on CNN just a day or so ago, so I spend a lot of time thinking about this now, today.

If you come from ground zero, it's sort of the 9/11 of the economic meltdown of the country is Flint, Michigan, and General Motors' failure recently is another illustration of that. So if you're from Flint and you're from Michigan, and you start to see this and understand it and you really are immersing yourself in it, and you're trained in economics and finance so it's not as hard to see anyway, it's incredibly traumatic, and you end up spending almost all your time on it. I spend a lot of time on health care too, because that's a counterpart problem. I don't know what it would have been like if I were representing Maine versus Michigan. I think if George were representing Michigan and not Maine, he would have found that he was caught in this vortex of economic collapse where a whole way of life was disappearing. And the United Auto Workers, which is now this big, I mean this is all happening in real time and you see it happening, and you're trying to stop it or you're trying to come up with strategies, you're trying to figure out what are the dynamics that are causing this, and international trade and trade deficits and so forth, industrial policy, tax policy, everything feeds into it.

So the question then is, what do you do about it? And I found that for me, and that's why I was on these four economic committees simultaneously, is that this will take every waking minute of your time. I didn't really have time left for anything else, because I was in the middle of this economic meltdown, which is continuing to this very day, it's going on as we sit here in this room right now, and you probably just saw the statistics a day ago that median income in the United States went down like two thousand dollars per family last year, it's this backward slide. And there are lots of complex components to this, and I think I understand that probably pretty well, I understand it a hell of a lot better than Larry Summers understands it, who unfortunately is in charge of economic policy up at fifty thousand feet, and where it's not working in my view but that's another whole story.

So that became my job, whatever else I might have wanted to do, I don't even know what else I might have wanted to do. I've always had a great interest in foreign policy, but it was no time for it because there's just, the urgency and the emergency nature of the economic problem in the country, centered in Flint, centered in Michigan, accelerating to this very day is, it became a preoccupation. There's not room to deal with much else if you're applying might and main to that, so that's where my time and energy went. And if you'd asked me that when I came over to the Senate in the first instance, I was the lead sponsor of the Chrysler loan guarantees when we saved Chrysler the first time, which is what that one picture up on the wall is, but I don't know that I would have thought, when I first got there in 1977, because things were still pretty good in

Michigan, that we were going to start to descend on this rapidly, accelerating curve into this condition that we now find ourselves in. But as it's happening, if you're really plugged into your district and plugged into your people and plugged into the problems, you spend your time on what's needed. It is like being in a M.A.S.H. ward, and pretty soon you're in there and they're bringing people in and you're cutting off arms and legs or trying to sew on arms and legs. That's what you do because that's what you're called upon to do.

BW: Was it unusual for you to have that many committee assignments?

DR: It is, yes.

BW: How did that happen?

DR: Well, it happened partly because I felt the need to reach for other authorities to work on these problems. There were certain aspects of the problems that would relate to the auto industry that would come through the Commerce Committee, there were other aspects that would come through the Banking Committee with the loan guarantees, for example. But the Finance Committee is the key committee because that's where the tax laws are so important, and then the Budget Committee is where you add it all up. So if you're going to try to get hold of as many of the levers as you can, you've got to try to be all four places at once, which is impossible to do, but you've got to be there enough to be able to at least understand the cross connects so you can start to, or think in terms of what are the strategies that could work, and what are the things on the margin that we can do to start to bend these curves.

The anatomy of this problem, this is what we should be talking about on the nightly news tonight, because it's an ongoing situation, planes are flying into the World Trade Center as we speak, in effect, in terms of what's going on in the economic system. And we don't have a way to think about this, because we're kind of boxed in with the cheerleading and the old models and the classical economic thinking, and we don't understand what's happening to us because we don't have the detachment to be able to think of ourselves as we are, as four percent of the world's population, China surging, the rest of the world, increasingly.

I'll just tell you one more thing because you'll find it interesting I think. The big real estate mogul Sam Zell was in town last week, speaking to a group here in Washington – I did not go to the talk, but a friend of mine did – and he's made himself a billionaire in terms of smart movement in and out of commercial real estate in the United States, most recently when he sold off a huge amount of property just before the whole thing came crashing down. But in the course of his presentation, somebody asked him the question, "Where are you investing now?" He said, "I'm investing in Brazil." Well, this is like the movie "The Graduate" when the guy told the kid, plastics, you know? He's investing in Brazil for a reason and everything I see in the *Financial Times* every day confirms the fact that Brazil's in a very strong position, they're going to be a big story going ahead here.

But I also look at what's happening here, and I'll tell you just a counterpart story. I was up at the

Mayflower Hotel the other night to meet with the foreign minister from Kosovo. And I'm standing in the lobby and I'm there a little bit early, and a guy comes up to me, a complete stranger – this is a George Mitchell kind of story – he comes up to me and he says, “Excuse me,” he said, “your pant cuff is caught inside your sock.” And my immediate response was, I said, “Well you know, I'm from Flint, Michigan, and that's the way we wear our pant cuffs, if you're from Flint, Michigan,” and I'm sort of congratulating myself privately on my very clever, quick humor. And the guy says, “Flint, Michigan, that's really interesting,” he says, “I'm the school superintendent in Fargo, North Dakota,” He said, “In the last like ninety days, I've had five families move into my area and put kids in school who are moving out from Flint, Michigan.”

And I heard this, and I get emotional about it, because it's like a guy taking a knife and sort of plunging it into my chest, because what's happening here, this is the dust bowl all over again in a different form. Some family, who's lost their job and no handhold, heard about jobs in North Dakota and packed up everything, loaded it in a U-Haul and went out there and found a job, and then told his brothers and sisters or cousins or buddies or what have you, and now four more families have gone. And they're not going for six weeks or six months, this is probably a lifetime change, and they're leaving Flint, and they're leaving Michigan because they have to, because we've been so incoherent in terms of our ability to manage this epic change, this catastrophic change, that people are having to become job seekers and sort of global, and certainly national vagabonds. And this guy, out of the clear blue sky, in this little incident that just happened, was telling me that he's had five of these families now have to migrate out to North Dakota to try to get their lives started again in a brand new place.

And if you grew up in Flint in its heyday, which isn't that long ago, it seems like ten minutes ago, when General Motors was the biggest corporation in the world, enormously successful, we had the highest average income in that area because of the wage scale that UAW, after WWII, because we built the planes and all that kind of stuff before we went back to producing cars, and Flint was thriving. It was the epicenter, I mean General Motors Institute, which was the college they had to train people in running factories and so forth, was described by some as the West Point of American capitalism, that's where we were at that point. And it's been completely and utterly destroyed, and today General Motors, by virtue of the fifty or sixty billion dollars we put into it is alive, at least for now – we own, as a people, sixty percent of it. But the company has been, it was like flying a plane right into the side of a mountain.

And how this could happen, how we could be so out to lunch? Not just this one company or this one industry. If this were a one-state problem or a regional problem, it would be one thing. We've got fifteen states with unemployment above ten percent. You know what's happening in California, and California's a pretty important place. Alabama is in the same kind of situations and so it's not just Michigan and Ohio. But you look at this and you say to yourself: wait a minute, how did this happen? How did we go from where we were, with this robust and growing middle class, now to a situation, we got a shrinking middle class, there's this backward slide, we've got huge problems still ahead of us with more mortgage foreclosures coming, more commercial mortgages foreclosures, (I was speaking of residential ones before). You've got all of this structural unemployment, it's double what we say because we don't count people once

they go off the unemployment rolls and they stop looking and so forth.

And so, how can this have happened? And it just drives me crazy to think that we're squandering our future, because I think we're putting the country in a kind of peril. And just to jump it ahead a notch as to what I think can happen, and which I hope and pray does not happen, but there's several tens of thousands of people who came to town this last weekend with all the "Liar" signs and, I mean Fox News and so forth is super heating this group of people, many of whom are running around fully armed. Armed not just with handguns but automatic rifles, and taking in the meetings and prove that they [have] the right to bear arms and all this kind of thing.

We've got enough now back pressure building up, not just with that community which is kind of the angry whites – somebody told me in this, I was down at this thing, I didn't see a single black person, but in the black community right now the economic pressures are so excruciating, and getting worse, so that that's a community in deep distress a different way. And if some idiot takes a shot at Obama, which I think is almost certain to happen because there are just enough crazies whipped into a frenzy, and God forbid that they should hit him, because if that happened now, given how raw the feelings are in this country, our social fabric is far more fragile I think than people understand, and I hate the fact that we're in the kind of vulnerability that we are. But that's where we are because we're not managing our problems well.

And I sat in the House chamber the other night, I've been there over thirty State of the Union messages, in the chamber, listening to presidents from Johnson on down through, and I don't know how it looked on television because I was taking it in there in the room – other than the Kennedy stuff at the end, it was not an impressive job in my opinion, as a guy who's done this as a profession, seen every other professional do it for many, many years. And I'm worried about it, because Obama, for all of his potential is, he's still a rookie, and he's making rookie mistakes, and he's made some terrible personnel choices, and we're at a point right now where he's got to perform like Ted Williams, he's got to step up to the plate and he's got to hit the ball almost every time, and it's got to go somewhere. And I think there's quite a bit of a gap between what he's now called upon to do and maybe what he's now able to do.

And so I think we're in a very vulnerable point right now. I'd feel so much better if we had George, frankly, at the helm because first of all, I think he'd surround himself with a lot stronger, better people, he would never let himself be so insufficiently armed with talent as I think Obama is now. Obama doesn't know the difference because he hasn't been on the national scene long enough, he was in the Senate for about ten seconds before suddenly he's in the presidency, and I worked like a dog to get him there so I'm not saying I don't want him there, or didn't think he was far better than McCain. But what we need is more of what a George Mitchell could bring to the table now, which I don't know quite how that fits into your historical effort to get at Mitchell, but it's a compliment about Mitchell, is more than it is really lamenting what I'm seeing right now at the White House.

BW: When you look back to your years of service in the Senate, and with George Mitchell as majority leader, where, from this perspective now, do you see places where you should have

been more proactive in order to avoid the kind of problems that are besetting Flint and the nation?

DR: Well, it's a hard question. I think if we could go back and get the tapes of what was actually said on the Senate floor and what we were prescribing and what we were forecasting, they were pretty accurate. This was quite some time ago, but we were way ahead of the curve, I think, in terms of seeing this. As we should have been, because we were in the coal mine where the canaries were dying, so that was one of the things we could bring to the table.

I think what we were asking for, and I was asking for at the time, was what was needed didn't happen. One of the reasons it didn't happen is, is that you really need a competent president, and you need a competent White House, and I think – this isn't to excuse the rest of us for what we did do or didn't do or might have done – I think we were ringing the right alarm bells in the right way at the right time. I think very little was done about it, in terms of what then followed. I think Clinton squandered his presidency, it started early, and even though he got two terms and the Republicans took and wrapped Monica Lewinsky around his neck and so forth, I think the Clinton period, he was destined to win the second term because Bob Dole was not going to be elected president even though he was a decent guy and a competent guy, personality wise it wasn't going to happen, and so forth.

But I think we largely lost an enormous amount of time during the eight years of Clinton. I think the Clinton period is, in it's own way, it's not as bad as the Bush-Cheney period because there we went plunging into an abyss of mistakes with Iraq and all the wasted money and wasted time and missed opportunities and so forth. But what set us up for Bush and Cheney was really Bill Clinton's period, in my view. And there wasn't much that any of us could do about that, because Clinton was in charge of Clinton, although he was never in charge of Clinton, that's part of the problem. But you wonder how you ricochet down through time and circumstances, and you say well, well what if Kennedy hadn't been shot, or what if Hubert Humphrey had actually managed to win the race, or what if Carter had been a more effective president, or what if Gerald Ford had gotten a second term instead of Carter, and then what would we have gotten four years later, or what would have happened if they'd counted the votes properly and we got Gore as president instead of Bush and Cheney, or if John Kerry could have done a little better job.

You can, when you go down, and you're a historian so you know, when you try to make sense out of, how does history play out, and where are the moments in time, where are the pivot points and the circumstances that bend the path one way rather than another. You can go back to how things have unfolded up until now, but once you do that and then you bring us up until now and you say, well okay, we can't go back and we can't take any other forks in the road, we're where we are, what do we need to do right now, what's the nature of our problem right now. And I would say to you right now that the biggest problem that we have, and it's a dangerous thing because we've got a young African American president who we were fortunate to elect, but who if he isn't seen as performing well, or if he falls short, it's going to create huge problems. He's right on the edge of that now. I think he's squandered a lot of his first year I think partly by picking the wrong people, and not the right economic strategy to my view but we'll see. It's

playing out.

But we're now at a point where our strategic margins are sort of gone. We don't have the extra money to spend, high unemployment is starting to short us on tax revenues and on money in the Social Security fund, we got a state that's broken, California, we got other states that are right behind it that are broke, we've got broken companies, we've got a broken financial system, we've got real cracks in our political system. You go around this thing and you take a look at it, and I would almost, if I were in charge, I would almost say to George: George, we really appreciate what you're trying to do in the Middle East, I got a bigger problem for you. And it may not fall into your sweet spot, i.e., foreign policy complexity á la Northern Ireland, Middle East and so forth, but we need you to honcho an economic renaissance team for America, because we're sliding backward at such a rate that we're not going to be able to do whatever anybody thinks we should do in Afghanistan, we're not going to be able to do what anybody thinks we need to do other places around the world, including with health care or anything else right now, because our economic engine's in trouble and we're not fixing it properly. And if you've got the right brain cells or the right leadership skills, you're going to have to put together a team, and we've got to figure out how we get America's economic footing squared away here, while we still can.

Because the Chinese, for example, as they've told us on this tire thing, the Chinese are tough as nails, they're so smart, they work their ass off. They're not going to give us an inch. If we want a living standard in the future, we're going to have to earn it. And if we keep shipping the money over there the way we have been, and taking the flip-flops and the jock straps coming back the other way, we're going to be in an impossible position, as we virtually are now. I mean we're having a very hard time having a conversation with the Chinese because they hold the high cards. It's not that we hold the high cards.

So anyway, if you could get George's talent focused on the right problem here, which is to me a higher order problem, that would be a good thing. That's not going to happen because he's off on this other track, but if I were making assignments I'd reassign him.

BW: Have you had many contacts with him since you both left?

DR: We got our little group of close friends together one night, two nights for dinner, since he's left. And the first one we did over at the Willard Hotel, there was George, and I sort of took the lead in organizing that one, we had George, we had Daschle, we had Dale Bumpers, we had Bennett Johnston, we had Jim Sasser, Tim Wirth I invited because he's a very smart guy and he's dealing with the world through the U.N. Foundation. And then we had a subsequent one more recently, and I forget where we had that, but we again had Sasser, and Wyche Fowler I think was at that one, we had four or five guys.

But that's been it, we don't – the other time I saw him, this is a funny story, is the day that they unveiled his portrait in the Senate. And you've seen the portrait, I assume. And I don't care much for it. I love art but I thought it was too severe and it just, and so I'm waiting to come up

and congratulate George, as everybody was after the unveiling and the remarks and so forth, and I'm standing in line and I said, I'm in line and I said -

(Telephone interruption)

DR: And so I'm standing in line and I turned to the person next to me, I forget who it was, and I said, "That's a nice painting but who is it *of*, it just doesn't look like George." Well, I found out later that the guy right in front of me is the painter, so how stupid did I feel? But it's not a very good picture, frankly. Well done, but just doesn't look like him.

BW: Let me ask you just one question about a sensitive matter, which is the Keating Five period of your life. What kind of interaction did you have with the Democratic Party and with George in particular, during the time when that worked its way through?

DR: Well, it's very interesting, I can give you a very straight answer. We were told, those of us who were, of the five of us, that we were not to talk to other people about it. I was absolutely religious about that. I think that probably was a mistake, because I took that admonition and I followed it to a T, so to my recollection I don't believe I ever talked to George about it, nor did I talk to anybody else about it. I just played it straight down the way that was laid out.

I have very strong feelings about it because I think Robert Bennett, who was the special counsel, is a charlatan and a fraud, I think he was out to spring John McCain; I think he wrapped John Glenn around John McCain in order to get McCain out of it. He had the two war heroes, one Republican, one Democrat, and then could hang the three Democrats regardless of the case facts, and they were very different in each case, Cranston, myself and DeConcini. And so I felt that after being in the preliminary inquiry for like a year plus, it was a long time and it was every single day, in effect.

I was serving as Banking chairman at the time, so I had a job I had to do to straighten out this banking system at this time, at the same that I was going through this process, which was complicated, to say the least. But at the end of the preliminary inquiry, four of us were released, with different degrees of scolding, that we had created the appearance of a conflict of interest. This was in the eyes of Bennett, who had spent all this time and all this money to do this. One person, Cranston, was carried forward for a punishment.

Later on, because of the conduct of the way that was done, George, the Republicans, there were two special counsels, there was a special counsel hired later to go back and look at the Keating Five case – this is important – the Keating Five case, and also look at the case of the Anita Hill hearings, because information was released out of the committee at that time, in the Judiciary Committee, totally different situation, that the Republicans were objecting to. So George I think was the one who took the lead in saying, "Okay, let's hire a special counsel, we'll look at both of these."

So a lawyer was hired, a guy named Fleming, who was a Republican lawyer from New York, a

very, very good lawyer, and this is a key story that [has] never been reported because it came so late after the fact that nobody really cared about it. But Fleming went out and he plumbed both of those situations. When he came back with his findings – he did it on the same day as, and the Anita Hill findings got all the attention, not the ones on the Keating Five – but I can tell you that what he found and put into his official report on the Keating Five thing was, is that a whole lot of wrongful and deliberate misinformation, disinformation, was put out in the Keating Five case, aimed at me. Now, I was the Banking chairman, so you could see why I might be a particularly good target for that because it was more interesting than it might have been true for the others.

But then as he did his detective work, as to: how did this happen, how did this disinformation campaign, which he documented very thoroughly and very carefully, where did this all come from? And he traced it all back to only one person that could have been the beneficiary of this, given when it was done, how it was done, where it happened and so forth, and that was John McCain. And he says that clearly in his report, he says he can't prove that McCain was behind that, but he does conclude that the only one who could plausibly have benefitted from this campaign of really outrageous and egregious misconduct, in my opinion, was McCain, based on these investigative findings.

So, I mean I'm telling you this, I would not say this on the record right now, but it leaves me with, I sort of feel like I know the real John McCain, not the McCain that he's sort of manufactured.

BW: And his motivation for doing that was to take benefit for himself, or just -?

DR: He was trying desperately to get out of this problem. Because in fact, many of his case facts were the worst of everybody's, and an independent counsel, if Bob Bennett had wanted to look at the case facts and say, "McCain, you're the guy with the worst case facts," he very easily could have done that. He chose not to do that. And so McCain was trying desperately to get out of this problem.

I've since learned more about this, just because there's been a reporter working on this, two or three months ago, as to another reason why McCain was desperate to get out of this and would have done just about anything, including throw the rest of us to the wolves. It's not just throwing the rest of us to the wolves, it's basically creating a contrived story to send the bloodhounds after somebody else in order to save your own skin. I mean, so I have the worst kinds of feelings about McCain, because I've seen the guy up close, and I have no reason to tell you this if I didn't believe this to be true and feel that the facts that I have at hand support it.

BW: After the deliberations, were -

DR: But anyway, George asked for this special counsel, Fleming, to look at these two, because I suspect, I don't know, we've never talked about it, I suspect that George felt that something of this kind had gone on in this case that he was uncomfortable with, and he wanted to get to the bottom of it, and Fleming got to the bottom of it.

End of Interview