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Interview with Jeff Bingaman by Brien Williams

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Jesse F. “Jeff” Bingaman
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

GMOH# 147
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Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College with Senator Jeff Bingaman. We are in the senator’s office in Washington, D.C., today is Friday, September 18, 2009, and I am Brien Williams. I thought, I’d like to ask you to start, just your first thoughts when you know that you were coming to talk about George Mitchell, what occurs to you?

Jeff Bingaman: Well George, of course, was the majority leader for a significant period of the time that I’ve been here in the Senate, and a colleague before that. He is the epitome of a public servant, competent, smart, trying to do the right thing, great people skills, and obviously he has provided great service to the country in a whole lot of different capacities. And he’s the type of person, the fact that the president would choose to have him be the Mideast envoy I think is high praise for George, and that if anybody can make progress in that terribly difficult environment, George is the person.

BW: He was first elected to the Senate in ‘82, and came in as your class of ‘83. What were your first contacts with him? He, well just to back up, he was appointed to the Senate in ’80.

JB: Right, yes, he had already been in the Senate.

BW: He had two years up on you, right.

JB: Right, he had already been here by the time I got here and was, I guess, elected for the first time in ‘82.

BW: Right.

JB: Well, I think my first contacts were just as a colleague here in the Senate and got to know him in that capacity. And then he was on a track to join the leadership and become the majority leader, which all of us were glad to see. You’re not with George very long before you realize his grasp of issues was extremely impressive, and as I say, he had the people skills to get the support of his colleagues, myself included.

BW: So when did you see him positioning himself into that leadership track?

JB: I can’t remember exactly, I think it’s just that it became obvious that when, just as now,

when the president's looking to him to deal with the toughest issue on the international agenda, I think here in the Senate we looked to him to provide leadership on some of the toughest issues. I know he was very involved in the Clean Air Act work and deserves great credit for what finally was done with regard to improvements in the Clean Air Act. And I think he just naturally gravitated toward a position of leadership, and without any major overt effort on his part, people were anxious to defer to him.

BW: Talk about his election to the majority position, were you -?

JB: I supported his election. I can't remember the details of that, it seemed -

BW: Three of your colleagues were running, Senator Inouye, Bennett Johnston, and George Mitchell.

JB: Right, but it seemed as though George was sort of the early front runner in that, it seemed to me that way, just thinking back on it. I mean, I think all of us had respect for the others who were seeking that position, but as I say, George had developed the respect of folks in a way that made him the natural choice.

BW: Were any people thinking he was a little bit wet behind the ears at that point, only having been in the Senate for eight years?

JB: Well of course, he'd been a federal judge, and I think everybody had respect for him for that and recognized that he was chosen to fill a seat in the Senate because of his background. And of course much of what we deal with here does involve thin slicing of legal issues, that's just the unfortunate reality of this place, and nobody is better equipped to do that and to succeed in that environment than George, I mean he had a very keen legal mind, and so I think that helped him greatly when he arrived here.

BW: What words would you use to describe his leadership?

JB: Well, I think his leadership was very substantive, I've always felt that George knew the substance of the issues extremely well, the issues coming up before the Senate. He was not just making the trains run on time, he knew what was in each train.

BW: Who was on board.

JB: Who was on board, and what the issues were, and so I think that his first love and his great strength was a focus on the substance of what the Senate was trying to get done. And he also did the rest very well; the sort of pulling the votes together and trying to form the coalitions to get things done. But I never sensed that that was his most favorite part of the job, his most favorite part of the job was the substance of what we were doing, and that's what kept him here.

BW: Were there any significant moments or vivid memories you have of your working with

him, or observing him at work?

JB: Oh, I don't know, I mean we've had a lot of interaction over many years. I can remember him coming to New Mexico, doing fund-raising events when we were trying to raise money for the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee and when I was running for reelection, he did his share of all of that as well, and did it very well. I was not part of the inner group at all that was doing this, but I had great admiration for the success that he was able to achieve with George H.W. Bush's White House, in getting agreement on a budget deal. When they did that, I forget exactly which year they locked that down, but it involved essentially raising some additional revenue to begin dealing with the deficit problem. And I always saw that as one of the more constructive things that George H.W. Bush did as president, was that he sort of started us on the road of getting the budget back into balance, or into balance. And of course President Bush disavowed that in some of his statements later and said that was a mistake on his part – I don't think it was, and I think George Mitchell deserves a lot of the credit for having sort of forced that issue to be resolved in a way that was much to the benefit of the country, in my opinion.

BW: But not to the benefit of George Herbert Walker Bush.

JB: No, no, he took criticism for having agreed to what was then perceived as a tax increase, but it was clearly the right thing to do in terms of the country's fiscal situation. And as I say, I think it set the stage for what President Clinton then was able to do when he came into office, which again was very much required in order to get us on a track to a balanced budget, and of course George deserves credit for that part as well. But the negotiations that occurred out here at Andrews Air Force Base, I always thought George deserved great credit for that and didn't get near as much in the way of accolades as he deserved.

BW: You were party to that -?

JB: I was not, I was not there, I was not on the Budget Committee, but I just observed it from the Senate here and was well aware that it was occurring.

BW: Did you ever do travel with George Mitchell?

JB: Never did, never took a trip specifically with George that I recall.

BW: What about visits to the White House with him, for either Bush One or Bill Clinton?

JB: I think I was probably along on a few visits where he led a delegation of senators up there, but I don't recall the specific visits, the specific meetings. We go in and out of the White House pretty regularly and I can't recall specific meetings that George involved me in.

BW: You have served now under quite a few majority and minority leaders, seen them at work. Where would you rank George in terms of the leaders?

JB: Oh, I'd rank him at the top of the list. There's nobody who's more capable that I've served with, and more committed. As I say, I think George's - I think he became frustrated with all of the non-substantive parts of the job. I don't know, I never talked to him about why he decided to leave the Senate, but this place, there's a lot of political considerations that surround how people are coming out on issues, and unfortunately that tends to overwhelm your ability to focus on the merits of proposals and the value of proposals for the country as a whole. And I think that became a frustration for George in the last year or two before he left the Senate, I think he probably thought he could use his time better.

BW: Were you surprised when he announced that he was -?

JB: I was sort of surprised, but then as I thought about it, it seemed to me that the difficulty in getting past all of the political machinations was beginning to wear on him.

BW: After he made his announcement, did you have a chat with him, go by his office or sort of follow up -?

JB: Oh, I think I just told him, I didn't go by his office and have a particular chat with him, I think I expressed my regret that he was leaving the Senate, but certainly understood, and I think he knew that many of us thought he would be missed, and he has been missed around here. He comes back and talks with us, and fortunately subsequent presidents have had the good sense to involve him in different things. I told him at one point I thought he ought to be secretary of state, that that would have been a very good decision after he left the Senate, and I think that's true. I think that the diplomatic skills that he demonstrated both when he was in the Senate and in various capacities since then would argue that he would have been a very good choice for secretary of state, probably during the Clinton administration or at some stage there.

BW: I've heard some people say that they regret that he didn't consider running for the presidency in '92.

JB: Well, I've never gotten involved in the presidential campaigns that fire up around here, it does seem like there are a lot of folks who come to the Senate and then do go make some level of effort to get themselves considered as a presidential candidate. I never saw any evidence that George wanted to go that route.

BW: Did you serve on the Finance Committee?

JB: I did not. I'm there now, but I was not there when he was there.

BW: What about (*unintelligible*), were you and he co-authored, co-sponsored I mean, or worked hand in hand on issues?

JB: Well, I'm sure I co-sponsored various bills that he took the lead on, but I don't know of a

particular issue that the two of us exclusively worked on.

BW: I have to ask you this question, as we're going through the health care debate now in the Congress, are you getting a bad case of déjà vu?

JB: Well yes, we are. I don't guess I've been surprised, but it's clear that a lot of the forces that came to bear to keep us from doing health care reform back in the early '90s, when George was here, those same forces are still alive and well and they're resisting major health care reform at this stage, too. George went the extra mile trying to get something that could be agreed upon, and it was clear, to me at least, that Senator Dole and the Republican leadership here in Congress had just decided they were not going to allow health care reform to be enacted at that stage, and so they blocked it at every turn. Some of that same thinking is going on today, on the part of the Republican leadership, and I hope it does not prevail again.

BW: It looked like, in '93-'94, that part of the Republican zeal at blocking the health care was as much trying to damage the Clinton administration.

JB: Right.

BW: - as taking a position on health care, would that be a -?

JB: Yes, and I think some of that's going on again. I think that there are some who oppose health care reform because of substantive disagreements with what is being proposed. There are others who just oppose it because they don't want this president to get a major accomplishment prior to running for reelection.

BW: Looking back on the Clinton health reform effort, quote/unquote, 'mistakes were made,' from the point of the White House. It's been well documented and so forth and so on. Do you have the sense that mistakes are being made again on the part of the administration in this effort, or not?

JB: Well, probably mistakes are being made, but they're different mistakes, and they're understandable mistakes in that, the most obvious one that's the most commented upon of course is the Clinton administration, they decided they were going to develop the health care proposal, and Hillary did have a, convened a group and they put together a proposal and then sent it to the Congress and said, 'here it is' and that way of proceeding did not generate a lot of warm support among members of Congress because they see it as their job to be involved. And I think that was probably in error, the way that was done.

This time, of course, President Obama and his advisors have said, "Let's leave it up to Congress to develop the legislation, and we'll limit ourselves to broad general guidelines." And part of the result of that has been a lot of confusion, and it's provided an opportunity for opponents of health care reform to pick out pieces of individual bills that they thought were objectionable and characterized that as Obama Care. So I hope that that mistake and none of the others prove to

have been fatal. I think the president has just, in the last week or so has stepped up and begun providing much more clear direction as to what he thinks needs to be enacted, and I think that's had a salutary effect.

BW: You've been around this place now for quite a few years, what changes do you see in the Senate itself as a legislative body?

JB: Well, I do think it's become more partisan, and it has evolved more and more toward the circumstance that they lived with the House of Representatives for a long time. But some of that is because people from the House get elected to the Senate, and their early years in Congress are in the House where they come to think that it's normal to look at everything through a partisan lens. And so I think that's made it more difficult to get things done.

And Senator Reid is now doing a superb job of trying to get things accomplished here, but more often than not, if it's in any way controversial, he has to file a cloture petition and get sixty votes in order to proceed, and that's unfortunate. And most of the people, maybe all the people who are taking it upon themselves to throw up procedural roadblocks, are folks that came from the House and got used to that procedure, or those types of procedures in the House.

BW: Some senators from earlier on reflect how congenial people were in getting together for bourbon after a session, Republicans and Democrats together and so forth. I get the impression that maybe now, a lot of you are kind of lonely here in terms of not, this not being a very sociable environment.

JB: Well, I think there's probably a lot less socializing and camaraderie around than maybe there was at one time. Some of that is because of the more partisan flavor of the place, some of it just because the schedules that people keep. If you get on a plane Thursday night and fly to your home state and come back Monday night, or Monday morning or something, you're always sort of disjointed as far as you're trying to catch up with where you're supposed to be legislatively or on the issues pending before the Congress. So I think it tends to detract from your ability to pal around together.

BW: Do you sense a Mitchell legacy since he left the Senate? Is there any way in which his influence had lasting power, or not?

JB: Oh, I think he raised the level of the debate here in the Senate very significantly, in the sense that with George in the Senate, and particularly as majority leader, I think people knew that they had to do their homework on issues. And they still do, and I think he deserves some credit for having sort of, not preached that that ought to be the case, but just demonstrated it. As I say, my strong impression was that he knew the issues extremely well every time, and it wouldn't matter particularly what the substantive piece of legislation was, he would have made it his business to prepare on that legislation and understand it in great detail.

BW: Where do you place yourself on the spectrum liberal-to-conservative Democrat?

JB: Oh, I think I'm somewhat in the middle. I think I tend to take a more liberal tack on things such as civil liberties than some of my colleagues, and I think I tend to take a little bit more conservative tack on fiscal issues than some of my colleagues. It does seem to me that the center of gravity in the Congress has moved to the right, in the time I've been here. And maybe that's what happened in the country more generally I guess, until the last election that was the case at any rate.

BW: And have you moved in that direction too, or?

JB: Well, I don't think I have. I tend to think that I'm pretty much where I've been philosophically.

BW: Who do you consider your brothers in arms, sort of having a similar view point?

JB: Oh, I think there are a lot of centrist Democrats here in the Congress today, I think Byron Dorgan, I would say on most issues is a centrist Democrat, Kent Conrad is, Mark Warner is, there are lots of others, John Tester is.

BW: So you're not an endangered species.

JB: I don't think so. I think that the sort of center of gravity politically has moved, and if you take a moderate position on some issues, it is immediately attacked as being ultra liberal. It was sort of interesting, I was reading the paper this morning, and Olympia Snowe was asked how she would characterize President Obama's position on health care reform, and she said that she would classify him as a moderate, and not as a liberal, on health care reform, which I thought was an interesting comment on her part. I think it's accurate, but he has been so criticized by the right wing for being extremely liberal and trying to accomplish some kind of government takeover of the health care system, that a lot of Americans I think get a mistaken view of what his true position is. And I think that's just an example of the mischaracterization that goes on here at the Congress today.

BW: If George Mitchell were to step back into the Senate, would he be out of step, or right in line with -?

JB: No-no, I think he'd be very much in the mainstream of the Senate today. I think he had the respect of Senators from both sides of the political aisle when he was here, and I think still does.

BW: His relationship with Bob Dole was pretty positive, I get the impression.

JB: I think, yes, they worked well together, but I think George frankly was able to work with whoever had to be worked with. I don't, and Bob Dole is also someone who was, I think had a history of working with Democrats on a lot of things, although on specific issues he clearly was

in the opposition.

BW: Well, I want to thank you for taking time out -

JB: No, my pleasure.

BW: This busy day to -

JB: My pleasure, I think George is a great, he is a great citizen of the country, and Bowdoin College is lucky to have him as an alumnus.

BW: Good, thank you.

End of Interview