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### Interview with Bill Bradley by Brien Williams

William 'Bill' W. Bradley

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## ***George J. Mitchell Oral History Project***

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**William W. “Bill” Bradley**  
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

**GMOH# 121**  
July 17, 2009

**Brien Williams:** This is an oral history interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College with Senator Bill Bradley. We are in Senator Bradley’s New York office, where he serves as managing director of Allen & Company, LLC. Today is Friday, July 17, 2009, and I am Brien Williams. I thought I’d start by asking you when you heard about this project and that we were asking you to do an interview on George Mitchell, what were some of the first thoughts that came to your mind?

**Bill Bradley:** That it was a very appropriate project. I think George deserves to have a rich historical record for his life.

**BW:** You came to the Senate as part of the class of ‘78, and was there something special about that year and you coming in as a group?

**BB:** Well, George came in [‘80], there were I think nine of us that came in in ‘78. And one of the interesting things was, we were a bipartisan class that met as a bipartisan freshman class, and we did it more than a few times, so much so that the leadership of both sides wanted us to stop because nine senators who agree, who are both Republican and Democrat, can have a bigger impact than leadership might like, so we were told that this was not the wisest thing to do. And the person to talk about that is Al Simpson and Warren Rudman, who were the two key Republicans in that group, Carl Levin was in that group, and David Boren. There were, and David Pryor and everybody in the class.

**BW:** Tsongas and so on, yes.

**BB:** Yes.

**BW:** Who spearheaded that bipartisan, or did you all just sort of -?

**BB:** You know, I don’t, there wasn’t any one person who, I actually don’t know how that happened. From the standpoint of the historical record, probably Simpson will have the most accurate memory, as well as the saltiest.

**BW:** Were you coming in by way of the Democratic Leadership Council, had you had any contact with them?

**BB:** There was no Democratic Leadership Council when I was elected. I came in as a first term senator, I was elected, I retired from basketball in April of 1977 and worked briefly for the Energy Department in New Jersey for about six months, and then started running for the Senate toward the end of, the fall of '77.

**BW:** And did you get a lot of outside help from the Democratic Party?

**BB:** In the state I got no help. In fact, everybody was opposed to me. I was opposed by the governor, I was opposed by the state party head, I was opposed by all the mayors, I was opposed by the county officials, I was opposed by some of the interest groups. Basically I was a new person who was coming into the scene and hadn't, in the words of the people who had been there twenty years, 'paid my dues.' But you know, I'd done research and I sensed that Clifford Case was vulnerable, been a good senator, been there too long, twenty-four years, lost touch, and I remember a candidate – well this is not about me, so never mind, go ahead.

**BW:** It's an interesting story, but I actually have, you've covered that in your books. I did note in some of your writings that Senator Byrd appointed you to an economic task force.

**BB:** Yes, after 1980, when the Democrats lost control of the Senate, the Senate Democrats were stunned kind of, and Ronald Reagan came in, and Byrd made me the chairman of the Senate Democratic Economic Task Force. I was charged with trying to pull together an economic program, and I did that for a number of, well, for about two years. And the classic moment for me was when Byrd called me, I was at the Jersey Shore and he called me on a Friday, a Thursday or a Friday and said, "The president is going to address the nation on Monday night about his tax bill, and we'd like you to rebut him," and obviously at a time where I didn't really understand how things worked. So I figured, well, I'll put some thoughts together when I get there on Monday, maybe late Sunday, and so I spent the weekend at the Jersey Shore and got there and realized, this is a pretty big thing. And Reagan was Reagan, and I did my thing afterwards, which was terrible, and of course they passed the tax bill overwhelmingly, with a lot of Democratic support. Only eight Democrats voted against it.

**BW:** When you came into the Senate, was finances sort of at the top of your priority list?

**BB:** Yes, I wanted to be on the Finance Committee, the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, and from the day I decided to run for the Senate I started working for that, both in terms of asking Russell Long to coach me during the Senate campaign, because I was running against the original Kemp-Roth thirty percent tax cut person, what's my tax look like, and he helped me devise a tax – of course I had the chance to meet him. And then Scoop Jackson, I met him and sought his advice, and then when you got to the committee assignments they were both my advocates, so I got on the two committees that I wanted to get on, right out of the box.

**BW:** Finance and -?

**BB:** Energy and Natural Resources, which has jurisdiction over all energy sources and the

public lands which are about, I don't know, what, a third of the United States.

**BW:** So not long after you got on Finance, along comes George Mitchell.

**BB:** Yes, George was appointed.

**BW:** 1980.

**BB:** 1980, and was in the Senate briefly and then had to run in '82, and I think he spent his first two years getting ready for that run. And his time on the Finance Committee was taken with that kind of thought in mind, I think.

**BW:** What are you saying, that he wasn't around very much?

**BB:** Oh no-no-no, he was around, but I forget what issue, some Social Security or some issue on the Finance Committee that he used very effectively in his campaign, and some of the things that occurred in the committee helped him.

**BW:** I've seen footage; in fact Senator Packwood shared with me a DVD of the conclusion of the 1986 Tax Reform, when he was being congratulated and so on and so forth. There were also a couple of statements on that tape by you and Senator Mitchell, noticed you were both side-by-side on the dais in the committee, at least at that time. So did you sort of develop a buddy relationship, or?

**BB:** Yeah, no, I mean I liked George from the first time I met him. He's a very likeable person and extremely competent, bright, methodical, a true judge, infinite patience, clear strategic sense, and he liked basketball; he talked a lot about basketball. I didn't talk to anybody about basketball, but George had a brother who was a great basketball player, Swisher I think his name was, and we had a mutual friend in Maine that I once stayed in his apartment in Washington when I was an intern in 1969, '70, a guy named Hal Pachios, and so there were these little connections. George played the basketball card well, and so we developed a relationship sitting next to each other. We saw what each of us did, we saw how prepared each of us was, we saw what was ours and what was the staff's, and we got a sense of each other's competence level I think.

**BW:** Were you working pretty much in tandem on financial issues, or were there -?

**BB:** Yes, I think that we did. I remember in '86, the '86 Tax Bill, we passed something out of the committee and our strategy was no amendments, and George offered an amendment to do, in this tax bill, what I had offered amendments to do in 1981, when the Reagan tax bill came along, right, so I could almost give his speech because I gave that speech thirty times in 1981. And because we all had an agreement we were going to do no amendments, I had to oppose his position, which I did and we managed to defeat it. But no, I was not, shall I say, overwhelmingly negative about his position, having offered it myself five years earlier.

At that time there was this caucus, Wednesday or Tuesday or Monday, whatever, a caucus, Senate caucus, and when there was a big issue up we had a debate about the issue in the caucus, and I remember George and I debated each other on his amendment in the caucus. Probably nobody else will remember it, but I did, I thought we each gave and got.

**BW:** So who won?

**BB:** Well, you mean in the caucus or on the floor?

**BW:** No, I mean in the caucus, who carried the most in the caucus?

**BB:** [There was no vote in the caucus. There] was a good debate [on the floor and George's amendment failed].

**BW:** Did you sense from early on that George was potential leader of the party?

**BB:** Yes, as a matter of fact, George and Jim Sasser and Paul Sarbanes and I met to try to facilitate George's elevation to leader. I thought he had, you know, if you're going to be a Senate leader, what do you need above all else is patience and strategic, a strategic sense, and I think George had both of those. And so that group met two or three times, and then kind of, I think George then started a strategy of not having a group meet but doing individual senators, picking them off and – my impression was Paul Sarbanes was probably a very trusted ally in all that, because he had been there longer and could give a sense of who people were.

**BW:** That was a delicate thing to bring off, wasn't it, because was Senator Byrd ready to give up the majority leadership position?

**BB:** Well, I think George calculated that if the Democrats got control – he was head of the Campaign Committee – that he would be positioned to get the credit for that. And Byrd had been the minority leader but he'd been the majority leader when the Senate lost and therefore he had that to deal with. And I'm sure George was very diplomatic toward Byrd on a personal basis and worked him well. I don't have any facts about what he specifically did, but I think that he outflanked or outmaneuvered Byrd so that after the – I remember a particular meeting after the campaign, when the Democrats got control. It was a luncheon, and I think Byrd was the host, and as the minority leader who had appointed George as the head of the Campaign Committee, and when the caucus received George as positively as it did, I sensed Byrd realized, 'well, maybe something's going on here.'

**BW:** Do you have any idea how it was orchestrated that Byrd would go to Appropriations and president pro tem and so forth?

**BB:** Well, I mean he'd go to Appropriations because he was the senior member, and if you lost the, if you decided not to or you were defeated as the minority or majority leader, you then

assume your seniority rights, and his was Appropriations, and that's not a bad second. And president pro tem was, it's ceremonial; I mean it's not anything. Why are you laughing?

**BW:** Why am I laughing, well because 'it is mainly ceremonial and' -

**BB:** Yes, president pro tem, yeah.

**BW:** Right, right, but you had a big office and -

**BB:** Yes.

**BW:** It's mainly ceremonial, right. What is your evaluation of George Mitchell as a Finance Committee member on fiscal issues? Is that a real strong point of his, or what do you think?

**BB:** Well, the Finance Committee didn't deal with fiscal issues, per se, we dealt with tax issues and health issues and trade issues, those are the big three. And George was diligent, well prepared, had a point of view on the tax system that it should be more progressive, had I think a mixed view of trade that overall it was positive but there should be some exceptions, some of that related to constituencies and labor, some of it related to maybe his own sense of what was the proper way to go. And on health care, he had the ability to understand an extremely complex issue and then make arguments that were clear. And I thought he was a really outstanding Finance Committee member, which then later played into his leadership as the Senate majority leader when he took control of these issues sometimes, much to the chagrin of Moynihan or Bentsen or whomever. Not to the chagrin, but it was clear that – when Russell Long was there and Byrd was the majority leader, Russell Long determined what the tax policy was, and when Bentsen was there and then Moynihan, although Moynihan was, was he a chairman, did he take over while George was there? Yes, I think so. They had to deal with a majority leader who knew as much about taxes as they did, and who had his opinions and who from time to time would seek to win them over, and then if not, outflank them.

**BW:** Talk about finance issues over the period from Ronald Reagan's coming in office -

**BB:** Well, this was a time where the income tax system was transformed. When Ronald Reagan came into office, I think, you'll have to check this, the marginal tax rate was seventy and the capital gains rate was fifty or something like that. In his first tax bill he cut the rate from seventy to fifty, and capital gains to twenty-eight. And so that was the bill that I argued against, voted against, and with a very small minority of about eight Democrats to vote against it, so we bought into, as a party, the Reagan revolution, right.

And then in the 1982 – one of the reasons I went to the Senate, one of the things I wanted to do from the time I was a basketball player, was reform the income tax code. So I wrote a book, introduced a bill, there was a professor at Harvard who had argued this for years, and began the process of reforming the code with lower rates and fewer loopholes. And so I had to master the code, which I tried to do and think I did, and then the '84 campaign came out, I had written a

book, Gephardt was the cosponsor, and we went to see Mondale and in 1984, he was the nominee, and we knew, since Reagan was the great tax cutter that taxes were going to be an issue, Democrats were going to get tarred with tax increase, and why doesn't he advocate lower rates and fewer loopholes. Could be just as progressive as the current system, and he'd have a win and have an advantage.

Well, I remember Charlie Rangel was at a meeting in Mondale's house with us and rejected [it]: this is not possible, this is pie-in-the-sky. And so Mondale decided not to do anything, but the Republicans had heard that this was going on, that I was trying to convince, and they thought 'Well maybe Mondale will do it.' So in the middle of the campaign Ronald Reagan issued a press release or made a statement that his Treasury Department was going to study for his second term a comprehensive reform of the income tax system, right, so in case Mondale went there he could say, "Look, I was doing the same thing."

And then he was elected, overwhelmingly, Don Regan was the Treasury secretary, and Baker was the chief of staff, and they produced two separate studies, one of which was pretty much along the lines of what I had proposed, and so we then started to cooperate. And I worked with Rostenkowski a lot, and Packwood and the White House and the Treasury in trying to shape something that would be as progressive as the current system, and would at the same time have the lowest possible rates. And so the whole tax reform movement really moved through that period of time, from 1982 through to the passage of the law in 1986. It was a four-year effort, nobody said it would ever happen, and it happened, which was I thought a tremendous omen, good omen [that] you could cooperate across the lines to do big things.

And then what happened was, the day after, not the day after but a couple months after the bill passed, all the guys were in to get their special things back in, led by the capital gains guys. So what we did was we said, "Look, capital gains is twenty-eight under Reagan, we're going to have a top rate of twenty-eight percent so you don't need a differential. If the top rate ever goes back up, you'll have the twenty-eight percent." So they came, they were arguing, "We want a differential, we want a differential." I said look, you get a differential, what's going to happen is the top rate's going to go up. They said, "Oh no, no, no, we want the differential." Then in first Bush, George was the point person in saying 'no' to capital gains, because this became theology, they wanted lower capital gains. George said, "No-no, under no circumstances," and I think there were some pretty, not bad blood but there were pretty testy exchanges with the White House over this issue. But he stood his ground.

Then Clinton came in and he wanted to raise the rate to thirty-nine percent, which is exactly, and then give a differential to twenty-percent, which is exactly what was predictable if people weren't disciplined enough to recognize that you could have a progressive system with a twenty-eight percent rate if you gave fewer and fewer loopholes to the rich. And you got a system where everybody who earns the same income are paying the same tax, as opposed to those who use shelters paying less.

And so George was a player in that whole sequence of tax ideas, culminating in 1993, and he

was always well-informed, he always knew what he believed, and he was on this issue a great majority leader because he knew what he wanted and he knew the subject.

**BW:** Were you part of the meetings at Andrews Air Force Base in '90?

**BB:** No. That was my reelection year.

**BW:** Anything else on Finance? Why, in a nutshell, was someone like Rangel so opposed to cutting back on the loopholes, I guess it was the loopholes?

**BB:** I think he was not opposed against cutting back on loopholes; he was opposed on reducing the rate. And then he was a creature of Washington and felt that there was no way that you were going to get any of this to happen because the special interest would kill it, all the people who benefitted from the loopholes.

**BW:** What about some of the other major battles during your years in the Senate, and George Mitchell's participation? I think of, anything from -?

**BB:** Well I think George made his mark as a legislator with the Clean Air Act. I think that was his most substantial legislative achievement, as a legislator, not a leader but as a legislator. And it was significant, and it has shaped environmental thought and legislation ever since. I don't know what he thinks is his biggest moment, but as I look at it, not having the full benefit of every vote and everything, that's what I remember as being his biggest thing, outside of being the leader.

**BW:** What about health care?

**BB:** Well, I think he wanted health care but the Clintons ran the health care operation, and Dole was a negative force. They were not their own best friends, the Clintons, when it came to this, and I frankly don't know how deeply involved George was in it. I know Moynihan was cut out, which is a fatal mistake on the part of the White House, and I don't know if Moynihan was cut out with George's acquiescence or with just the White House being the White House.

But I remember a weekend retreat in 1993, Senate Democrats out in Maryland, we had that once every two years or year, and Hillary was there with her chief substantive guy, what's his name?

**BW:** Ira Magaziner?

**BB:** Yes, Magaziner, and a pollster, and they said okay, we want this passed [ ] by the July 4th recess," not unlike what we're hearing now. And some of us who had done big reform knew it took four years, so we raise a hand and say, "Well what if you don't get it passed by July 4th?" "Well, we'll get it passed by the August recess." "Well what if you don't get it passed by the August recess?" To which the response was, "You don't understand, those people who oppose us, we'll demonize them and it'll pass." Flash forward, 'Harry and Louise,' who got demonized?

The irony of power politics in Washington.

And so I think George obviously as leader was probably in a lot of those meetings, but I have no idea, I don't have any insights into the role he played in that legislation. My guess is he probably wasn't enthusiastic about the way it was coming down from the White House because he understood as leader that patience and listening are pretty important. And I think if Obama learned that lesson, maybe, who knows that the result will be different, but clearly that's a very valuable lesson.

**BW:** You were part of the so-called Rump Group, weren't you?

**BB:** Yes, oh, you mean on health care.

**BW:** On health care, yes.

**BB:** Yes, I mean the thing was burning down, wasn't going to go anywhere, and so a bipartisan group tried to put together a proposal, and we had a pretty good proposal that we thought actually might work. I always looked at George as an ally in that, although he wasn't an active participant in the group, as I remember. As leader he had a staff person there so he had to know all of what was going on.

But then it was jettisoned by Dole and organized labor, for different reasons, each wanting, with the organized labor it was that we were agreeing to tax the highest employee health benefits, which of course UAW had at that time. Now they've still got the high benefits but they don't have any health insurance.

**BW:** Were there any significant crime bills that -?

**BB:** I wasn't in Judiciary, obviously there was the big crime bill of, what, '93, which was Clinton's big initiative, with Joe Biden taking the lead. But George understood that there are four kinds of leaders: the leader the people love, the leader the people hate, the leader the people fear, and the leader that people don't even know he was a leader, and the best legislative leader is that kind of leader. And I think George was that kind of leader; he wasn't somebody that always had to be out front and yet he made things happen. I think Daschle was a very trusted lieutenant, a younger lieutenant in that battle, as well as Sasser and Sarbanes.

**BW:** Do you have anything to say about the Martin Luther King holiday debate?

**BB:** Oh, other than the fact I had a very acerbic exchange with Jesse Helms, it's all in the record if you want to read it. It was a very emotional expression on my part. But it was a losing hand that he had, and he made a fool of himself, in my opinion. And George was smart enough to let him make a fool and then pass.

**BW:** How important do you think Mitchell's participation in the Iran-Contra investigation was

for his career?

**BB:** I think his exchange, the famous speech from the dais that he made with Oliver North was a seminal moment in his career. I think he knew that it could be and he prepared for it, like he always did, but spent probably a lot more time preparing for this. And after that the hearings were kind of anti-climax, because in some ways the committee refused, or did not take as aggressive action as it could have. If they would have followed the logical conclusion, you would have had Ronald Reagan deeply involved in this, but I think some, Inouye being one, did not want to go there, because they had been there at Watergate and they were fearful.

But George was right there, and his moment was the seminal moment of the hearings because substantively there was not a whole lot happening out of these hearings, in some sense, very serious issue that we had to air, as we air many scandals in a democracy. Out of it there was no, other than kind of nefarious dealings of McFarlane and North and weird other people, and Israelis on the side, you could never quite know what came out of it.

**BW:** Did that frustrate you?

**BB:** No, I was on the Intelligence Committee then, and so I was in the committee that was providing a big chunk of the evidence and information to this committee. They had their own counsel – he's died now, but New York lawyer, Arthur Liman – and they did their work, but they did not go to the heart of the matter or push it to the logical conclusion.

**BW:** And as you say, there were several occasions in recent history where that has happened, I mean Nixon being pardoned might be in something of the same category, and various other issues. Isn't it frustrating that, in Iran-Contra, it wasn't taken to the full extent that the committee backed off?

**BB:** Yes, for me it was very disappointing, because I had things on the record that only Hollings really looked at, and there was very clear evidence about Reagan's involvement.

**BW:** What about the vice president?

**BB:** Less clear. I don't really know the vice president's involvement. It was, well I guess Cheney's relevant and therefore Bush would have been relevant, but it was really the president that you were interested in, and figuring whoever was vice president was not operating on their own, although we shouldn't make that assumption after the Cheney-Bush years, not the Bush-Cheney years.

**BW:** We covered the decision in '88 for Mitchell to run for majority leader. Again, Inouye was involved in that, wasn't he, because he was, he and Johnston, Senator Johnston, Louisiana, were running too.

**BB:** Yes, George challenged Inouye, or Inouye, George won in '86 and '88, Inouye

challenged him. It was the difference between somebody who was new who was bright and had done his work in the Campaign Committee, and who had a new generation of senators, versus someone who was an older generation of senators and who everyone thought would at some time become the majority leader, because he'd always been a good trooper, he'd always done the work.

My first year in the Senate my colleague got indicted, right, and there was the issue before the Senate and he was the defender of Williams because somebody had to do it, therefore he was doing the work for the Senate, he was very much a Senate man; over time, incredible relationships with Stevens and Byrd. And I think you might say that he waited a little too long to make the move, and George had momentum, and I think that's why George won. And George handled that as he always did, very gracious in victory, very inclusive and realizing that you can defeat someone without making them an enemy.

**BW:** What would be the words you'd use to describe Mitchell's leadership style?

**BB:** A patient listener, with strategic ability. He knew where he wanted to go, he knew he couldn't impose that will, he had to listen and nudge and push and suggest and have somebody else do what he wanted really to happen. So he was not a Lyndon Johnson, but then very few people have been a Lyndon Johnson, but he was a leader that was consistent with his own personality. And as I said, he was a leader that people didn't even know he was a leader. Obviously you knew he was the leader, right, and he was using that to project himself, which is fine. But it still wasn't like, 'I got to get all the credit,' he was willing to disperse it, particularly to those who were supportive of him.

**BW:** Did he develop a team?

**BB:** Well, I think he had Sarbanes, Sasser, Daschle, a few other people.

**BW:** And did he live up to your expectations for him when you were supporting him in '88?

**BB:** Oh, absolutely, I thought he was a good leader. I was a little surprised that he left, but I felt that the health care bill sapped his energy as a leader. And he thought we could get it done. We have a president, Democratic House, Democratic Senate, you don't get it done, and so he says, 'well, where am I going to spend the rest of my life, here batting my head against the wall, or am I going to go out and do other things?' And so he chose to leave, and I think that was 1994. And I left in 1996, not that what he did was determinant of mine, but that was an example of a guy who decided there were other things in life. Of course he was falling in love, and of course he wanted a family and his wife didn't like Washington and all of this, which is not inconsequential in trying to make a decision.

**BW:** So you, when you left you said that the Senate was broken.

**BB:** I said politics was broken.

**BW:** Politics was broken.

**BB:** And by that I mean, way too much money in politics, superficial media, and not enough politicians speak from their core convictions. And that didn't win me a lot of friends in the Senate after I said that, but I was only in the Senate another five months. Because the tradition was, you leave quietly. But if you leave quietly, then you don't really say what you feel. I felt it was important for *me* to say that, I think there were enough reasons for George – I don't even know if he felt that, other than the frustration. And I think the personal stuff probably played a bigger role than the frustration.

**BW:** And it was never in your thinking that part of the brokenness of politics at the time could be laid at his doorstep, at Mitchell's.

**BB:** Oh no, none, zero. At his? No. The problem was that people spend all their time raising money, as opposed to understanding a subject or talking to their constituents, right? The problem was the media rarely gave people the benefit of the doubt, it always went for the sensational and the superficial, and the reality was, the big things got lost, and that people don't always speak from their core convictions. Now, you can't always, a lot of times you have to set up screens in order to move behind the scenes to make things happen. Lyndon Johnson was a great example of that, right, bide his time until he had the power to make the voting rights or Civil Rights Act, felt that way since the '30s, right?

So, but you do need to have a Phil Hart every now and then, or for that matter a Howard Metzenbaum, or you need to have Douglas, who was the anti-Johnson in the Johnson era. And the existence of not only a Johnson but a Douglas, or not only a Mansfield but a Hart, gave the Senate a quality that it didn't have if there were not people who were going to speak from their core convictions, that everything wasn't transactional.

**BW:** And that would be, Hart would be an example of that, speaking out from -

**BB:** Not Gary Hart, Phil Hart.

**BW:** Right, right, yes, I know. Was there such a thing as a legacy when Mitchell left the Senate?

**BB:** Well, as I say, I think his legislative monument is the Clean Air Act. I think that his leadership monuments were the two big budgets of '90 and '93, and maybe the crime bill, although I don't know how. He was clearly the judge, so he knew the thing cold, but he let Biden take all the credit. That's a good example of him being the leader that people don't know he's a leader.

**BW:** In your book, *The American Story*, you talked about 'old story people and new story people.'

**BB:** Right.

**BW:** Where would George Mitchell fit on that continuum?

**BB:** I don't think he'd be in either category. I think that he was innovative in the sense of the Clean Air Act, no question about that, but I think he had a respect for the old traditions, and that's part of what you need to be a Senate leader. The new story has to be told by an executive leader, not a legislative leader, because the new story is a can-do story, it's a 'we head in this direction.' A senator can give a speech, but then he needs fifty votes, or sixty votes, which means that however he says we're going there, you end up going there, as we're seeing with the health care bill. So George was a leader of a legislative body, not an executive, and I don't think he, he was a judge and then a legislative leader.

**BW:** When you were – excuse me.

**BB:** What time is it?

*(Brief pause.)*

**BW:** The question I was going to ask you here, I've never asked anyone because I guess I haven't had the opportunity to question someone who seriously was running for president, as you were in 2000. Did you ever contemplate who might be in a Cabinet of yours?

**BB:** He would be there, he would have been there.

**BW:** In what capacity?

**BB:** Well, I always thought of George Mitchell as a Supreme Court justice, I thought of him as a good secretary of state, among others. I mean obviously he could have been attorney general, but I'm sure that wouldn't have excited him. So, the two big ones were State and the Supreme Court.

**BW:** Did he participate at all in your campaign?

**BB:** George of course didn't do anything publicly, but he was very helpful to me. I remember, I was in this titanic, in this battle with Gore and it looked like I might win New Hampshire, and then I had this heart thing, right, but there was a real conflict between Gore and me. And one day Hal Pachios called me up on the phone, his [i.e. Mitchell's] friend and my friend, and said, hey, "George Mitchell is here in my office" – in other words, he didn't place the call from his office – "and maybe you'd like to talk." And so I talked to George and he said, "Look, when Gore attacks you this way, here is what you should say." And he then said, say dah-dah-dah-dah-dah-dah. And I said, "That's really great, that's a good point George."

So the next debate, which was the debate in New Hampshire, that moment came, I said exactly what George said, and I thought it was a good hit. So he was helpful, he was directly helpful in that particular strategy. And I would be surprised if he was calling Gore, offering him strategy, and yet he had no fingerprints on it and he wasn't public, because he wanted to keep his options open. I think he was already in the Clinton administration with the Irish negotiations, and he wasn't going to bite the hand that fed him.

But I always had respect for him, we had a wonderful relationship, and if I had succeeded, that's where I would have wanted him, at my side. But it was a very odd run, because the whole political establishment was like my first run in New Jersey, right, the whole political establishment was against me this time. However, running for president with the political establishment against you is a little bit tougher than running in New Jersey.

But George was, I consider George, in those times, the people who gave you the slightest help, you never forget. Nancy Pelosi, I had a meeting with her and she said, "Look, I'm not going to endorse anyone." I consider that a great victory. I would consider it sometimes chicken shit, right, but not with Nancy in that moment, because I knew the pressure that they were putting on her. And so I knew George couldn't endorse me, he was in the administration, a former head of my New Jersey office was in the Labor Department, he couldn't even be seen with me. So we had, but within that context he was helpful, and I'll forever be grateful to him for that.

**BW:** Have you had any contacts with him since?

**BB:** Yes, in New York, where he's a lawyer, and I'm here. He invited me to dinner any number of times. I was kind of in another place for a few years, but we talk on the phone, and I've talked to him on the phone about his new assignment and made some suggestions about people that I think could be helpful to him. And I truly believe that the best way for Obama to proceed is to give George his portfolio and get out of the way, because if anybody has the motivation and the skill to resolve this, it is George. And I think he should get a Nobel Prize when he resolves, and he could. And it'll create holy hell politically in the United States, because sometime the president's going to have to tell the Israelis, "Sorry, this is it," and that'll be a moment of truth for the president.

But I think George will make it as palatable as possible with at the same time being strong. George has a real emotional commitment to this, as well as intellectual commitment and a career commitment, because of his mother. And I think that he's very, very, very skilled at listening and finding common ground, and being patient. I think he has said, when you do these things, you can have a hundred successes, you only need one failure and the whole thing's undone. I think he learned that not only out of the Irish experience, but out of his Senate experience. And who knows, maybe out of judicial conferences, between lawyers.

So, just like Obama is, he conducts his administration like he led the *Harvard Business Review*, I mean the *Harvard Law Review*: different views, let me listen to these things. So I think George leads like the judge in trying to settle a conference, he's got to listen to people, and he knows

when to push and when not to push.

**BW:** And his speaking to you since he has gone on this assignment, he doesn't express frustration that it is so daunting?

**BB:** No. You don't take something if you believe that. If you don't think you can make the difference, you don't do this. Look at the sacrifice he's making with his family. This is his second family, the family he was going to be with, right. And so, you don't do that unless you think you have a chance to be successful.

**BW:** Right. Well, is there anything we're going to leave unsaid here, do you think?

**BB:** I don't think so. I mean I could talk forever, but I think you covered -

**BW:** Are there any memorable sort of exchanges that you had with him, or sort of moments that -?

**BB:** There was one. I remember in 1990 I was up for reelection, I was caught in a tax storm in New Jersey, the governor raised taxes. I didn't denounce the governor because the governor was one of three people in 1978 in the whole state Democratic Party who endorsed me, blah-blah-blah, I gave him the benefit of the [doubt], so I was trapped. And it came down to a vote for the 1990 tax bill, and I knew a vote for it was death in New Jersey, and Bentsen was playing rough so he leaked a few negative stories to the *New York Times* two weeks before my election. But with George I said, "Look George, I just can't vote for it, here's the, you don't understand the situation." And we had to stay in until October 25th or something like that, like ten days before the election. And so the whole campaign was what was happening in Washington, which was considered to be, well whatever.

And so then the election took place and I narrowly won, and George called me up that night and he said, "Well, you were right, if you'd have voted for it, you would have lost," which was true. And he was always realistic, he was always somebody who moved on. And if you couldn't be with him and told him, he'd understand that, and he'd always have three or four that he held back that he could make happen.

**BW:** Your trip to Russia, the Soviet Union at the time, with him, what was that like?

**BB:** Well, it was a good trip. There were, he and Daschle, and who else went on that? I went, Daschle went, I forget who it was, Sasser or somebody. I remember meeting with Gorbachev with him in the Kremlin, and it was his usual Gorbachev-in-power performance, as opposed to Gorbachev now, who actually talks. But Gorbachev then, you'd have a meeting and he'd speak fifty minutes and give you ten minutes, right, so that was what happened. But he had good relationships with Primakov, and I'd known Primakov since '87, and George had developed a good relationship with him, and Primakov was the apparatchik, who later became prime minister or something.

So I think George was using that as partly a learning experience, partly exercising majority leader power in an international setting by simply being there. I don't know if he was carrying specific messages from Clinton or not. I doubt it, because the Clintons really didn't have a Russia policy, and so I think George was just kind of position-, I forget what year that was.

**BW:** Give me a second here, I think I -

**BB:** 'Ninety.

**BW:** 'Ninety.

**BB:** 'Ninety, yes, that was in my reelection year, and the reason I went was, I'd gone to Russia every year since 1985, and so I went because I think he knew of my interest, and I spoke about it a lot. And I think he was doing it in part wondering if he was going to run for president in '92, that's part of what I was feeling, sensing. But he never confided in me, but I sensed that's what was going on.

**BW:** He never mentioned that at all to you.

**BB:** Not to me, no.

**BW:** What prompted your interest in going to the Soviet Union every year?

**BB:** Oh, my first trip to the Soviet Union was when I was a student at Oxford in 1966; I always had an interest. My first trip in the Senate was to the Soviet Union, with Biden and Luger leading the delegation, and this was the country you had to understand. And so, in particular when I got on the Intelligence Committee, I ran a Russian task force that met every week and kept up with what was going on, and part of it was going over there. And really, after I was reelected in 1984, I realized I needed foreign policy, so I got on the Intelligence Committee, I went to Russia every year, I led the U.S.-Japan Legislators Conference out of Stamford, and later the Asia-Pacific Leaders Conference and I went to Mexico every year, because I figured those were the three places. So I think George took me because he knew of my interest in Russia.

**BW:** Good, well thank you very much.

**BB:** Thank you.

End of Interview