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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Bob Dole

(Interviewer: Brien Williams)

GMOH# 151

September 22, 2009

Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College with former Senator Robert J. “Bob” Dole. We are in Senator Dole’s Washington, D.C., office where he serves as special counsel in the law firm Alston & Bird. Today is Tuesday, September 22, 2009, and I am Brien Williams. For eight years, or almost eight years, you and George Mitchell had a sort of special relationship, and I was wondering what words you would use to describe those years of working as leaders of your respective parties?

Bob Dole: Let’s see, was it eight years together?

BW: Well, it wasn’t quite, but he came in in ‘89 as majority leader, and he left in ‘95 when, after the ‘94 election.

BD: Well, it was a good relationship, and Mitchell and I hadn’t had a lot of contact before he became leader, we just weren’t on the same committees. And as you know, unless you’re on the committee, you never really get to know your colleagues, because you’re always running here, there and everywhere. So it was the beginning of a long, lasting friendship, as well as getting our work done in the Senate.

BW: During that period of time, you were always minority leader, and he was always majority leader. Did he lord it over you at all?

BD: No, nope. He would come to my office for meetings; I would go to his office. I don’t remember what the margins were, I think at one time he had a pretty good five- or six-seat margin, but he understood and I understood the Senate’s different from the House, and the House is different than the state legislatures, and we had enough Republicans to give him headaches, so we got along fine.

BW: You had had the House experience and he had not; did that make any difference, do you think?

BD: Probably some, and of course we both came from states with small delegations so we didn’t have a big footprint in the House. I think he had, what, two? I had four. But I think it does make a difference. Now, when I came from the House to the Senate it was a big, big change, and that would certainly carry over into the leadership.

BW: Stepping back for a moment, he came in in 1980 as an appointed senator, appointed by the governor of Maine, and Ed Muskie went to the State Department. Eight years later, he's elected majority leader. Did you see this rapid rise coming, or was it a surprise to you on the Republican side?

BD: Well, if you of asked me the day he arrived, "Will he be the leader in eight years?" I probably would have said, "No." But I think he demonstrated the ability to bring his Democrats together, and to make friends with the Republicans, and he's just a smart dude.

BW: When did you begin to see him as a potential leader, was there any particular activity he was doing or anything, or not?

BD: I don't think so, but he had the background as a judge and he was a quick study. He understood, once he was there, he understood the House probably as well as I did, because he studied it. But I think the key to our relationship was that we, as I recall, had a no-holds barred meeting when he became leader, and just thrashed it out that we knew we were going to have to carry the flag for our party. If we didn't want to, there were thirty or forty others who'd be happy to do it. We knew we were going to have disagreements, but it didn't mean we had to be disagreeable, we could still be friends. So we had a basic understanding of what our colleagues expected of us, and what we could do because that was our duty, we were elected by our peers to provide leadership, and I think it worked pretty well.

We had a lot of differences, but I don't recall us ever having a cross word on the floor, or even in his office. I would say, "I don't agree with you, George," and he probably said the same thing to me, but we also understood we had to keep the train running, and Mitchell was the kind of guy that felt that way, and not only felt that way, did what he said he would do. You can delay that place up there for, well, not quite forever, but you can take plenty of people's time. I remember in fact he kept us in during the health care debate most of the recess, and our guys were seething, teeming, aye-aye-aye, they were really mad at Mitchell, and probably mad at me because every day somebody would come to me and say, "Look, let's get out of here, we want to get out of here." I said, "Well go ahead, nobody's keeping you here." "Well, we don't want to miss any votes," blah-blah-blah-blah. I said, "Well, he's the leader, and he can keep you here. May not be able to pass anything, I don't think he can," and he came around to that same conclusion. I think we had about a couple of weeks' recess, three weeks.

BW: Compare working with George Mitchell with his predecessor, Senator Byrd, as leader of the Democratic Party.

BD: Well, Senator Byrd didn't trust me initially; he felt I was a bit too partisan. And he came from the old Southern domination; he was pretty conservative in those days, too. But you go back and look at who chaired the committees, I think southerners, all but one, and so they ran the place, even though they didn't have the numbers, because they happened to be in key spots. And Byrd told me, not in public but on the Senate floor, that I really surprised him because we were able to work out any problems and did it the way we should have done it, privately, not in the newspaper. I think once he was satisfied that I had certain obligations to my party, I had to say

certain things, do certain things, talk about certain things, but I got along fine with Byrd, and I think after a while he got along okay with me.

BW: You describe the relationship with Mitchell as being such a ruffles-free arrangement and so on, was the same true with Byrd, or did you sometimes kind of come to blows?

BD: No, I even remember going to Byrd for advice. In other words, “Bob, let me ask you a hypothetical, and if you can answer it in good conscience, it would be most helpful.” Because he knew the rules and he knew every trick in the trade, and it was power; knowledge of course is power. So I think he helped me out on a few occasions. But once he got over this, I wouldn’t say fear because he wasn’t afraid of anybody, that I was this upstart Midwest politician who didn’t really know much and got elected, not certain why, I think. He was, I guess, for Ted Stevens, they were buddies, they were on the Appropriations Committee, and Ted was a good guy and he’d been around, and I’m certain there was a little disappointment to Byrd when I won the leadership post.

BW: When Mitchell won the leadership post, from the Republican’s perspective, was that a surprise, or did you anticipate that happening?

BD: Let’s see, who’d he run against?

BW: Senator Inouye and Senator Johnston.

BD: No, that wouldn’t be any surprise. I may have voted for Inouye, I’d have to go back and check (*spoken facetiously*), because we were army buddies and wounded a week apart, a hill apart, ended up in the same hospital. He later ended up in the U.S. Senate.

BW: Do you think you could have worked better with Senator Inouye as majority leader, or not?

BD: Well, I think it would’ve been about the same. I knew Danny, or Senator Inouye, Inouye, I guess, better, because of this relationship and we were in the hospital together, where he demonstrated to me at least that he was the best bridge player in our wing of the hospital. And he weighed ninety-three pounds soaking wet. Now I think he must be 186 at least, he just doubled it. But he just had a great personality and he lost an arm, but in the scheme of things, in today’s world that’s a terrible loss to a person, but you’ve got TBI and PTSD, you’ve got all these other spinal injuries, burns. And an amputation, if you got some of the stump where they can, or even they can do it by vacuum, you don’t even need a stump, but he just took it in stride. And I don’t think he wears his prosthetic device every day. And one thing about Danny is that he never talks about it, even though he was awarded the Medal of Honor. Probably a little of politics in that by President Clinton, and I was honored to be invited for the ceremony.

BW: You said in the book that you and your wife wrote that when George Bush the First came into office, he wanted to be very bipartisan. And you went on to say that George Mitchell and the Democrats prevented that from happening for four years, and it struck me as being somewhat

harsh criticism, but maybe true.

BD: You mean harsh criticism by me?

BW: Hmm-hmm.

BD: Yes, well I think it probably was, but again, if you're trying to get things done and you've got more people pulling on the rope on one side than the other, and you're trying to get results because you have the White House, it's pretty easy to place some blame on the majority. It didn't happen every time, but we had an obligation not just to Bush but to the people. He was elected, he had a program, the American people supported him, and he tried to keep his campaign pledges. But Mitchell and I, he talks about it whenever we get together, how we used to go in his office or he'd insist on coming to mine, we wanted fifty-fifty, how we could disagree on the floor and make statements and look like we're mad at each other, all that stuff, and it just wasn't true. He was my friend, I trusted him, he never gave me any reason not to. I think he's one of the brightest men I've ever met.

BW: Did your relationship change at all when Bill Clinton succeeded George Bush?

BD: Relationship with?

BW: Mitchell.

BD: No, no, in fact, my memory's gone here, let's see, Mitchell was very discreet and he wasn't going to reveal any conversations he had with Clinton with me or anybody else, but he did sort of hint from time to time that things weren't going too well with health care or something. But supported his president as he should have, he was the president's leader in the Senate, and he did a good job.

BW: Let me ask you one question about the health care issue during the Clinton administration; was there really a time when you would have wanted health care reform to occur?

BD: Well, I started working on health care reform in the '70s, and I think I made a statement here about a month ago: we should have passed the Clinton bill. I didn't mean as is, but I think we could have probably worked it out with the Clinton people. I'm not certain about that, but he, just like Obama, wanted a health care bill, I mean that would have been a big, big feather in his cap. But he didn't have the votes, and you had the 'Harry and Louise' ads, you had all these, sort of a different way to undermine credibility. And Clinton really worked at it, he addressed Congress, Mrs. Clinton was on the Hill every day for a while, until it started going backwards.

So I haven't seen a side-by-side comparison of the Clinton bill and the Obama - Well he doesn't have a bill but he has sort of an outline, but in the Obama [*sic*: Clinton] case our argument against it was it sort of created a dual system, too much government, too much bureaucracy. We had this chart that showed the patient up here going into the doctor's office,

and ninety days later here's the doctor. Senator Specter drafted that little cookie. But, and again, Clinton was easy to get along with.

BW: One other place where I think you and Senator Mitchell worked well together, I've read, was in the Senate Dining Room. Talk about that, how did those meetings go, and were they just drop-ins or organized, or what? I've read that you and he often would meet there for dinner.

BD: Well, it wouldn't just be the two of us, but yes, if we're going to be in at night, rather than sit around upstairs, we'd go down in the dining room. Take our time, other people would join, pretty soon you'd have ten people, eight people, six people, and you could really talk shop. We all I think were honorable; we weren't going to run around tattling that Bob Dole said this, Mitchell said this, Domenici said this. You get a lot of work done when there's no pressure, there's no press around, and you can kind of let your hair down.

BW: Do you have some vivid memories of certain instances when you and Mitchell clashed, or worked very well together, or joked or went down to the White House and shared an experience, anything stand out for you?

BD: Yes, I tried to think of some of that, knowing you were going to be here. I think there was sort of a tacit agreement that we could disagree without being disagreeable, and I think we kept our word on that. And my view is we achieved more that way than kind of lining up every morning and saying, "Well let's go after Mitchell here." That doesn't mean we didn't try to beat him or try to outmaneuver him or try to be successful, but I know I was accused by my colleagues of selling out to George Mitchell, but then he got accused of selling out to Bob Dole, so there's always some of that.

BW: How did you respond to that comment from your colleagues on the -?

BD: Well I remember one case in particular, we were in a conference and it was Senator Wallop, who's a dear friend of mine – poor guy's pretty sick right now – but we were having a conference on some issue that was very touchy. And he made it very clear in front of all my colleagues that I wasn't doing the right thing, probably wasn't doing anything, and Mitchell was riding roughshod over me and I spent more time in his office than I did in my office. I remember that very well, I remember saying to Malcolm, "If you want to have a new leader, let's have a vote right now." And he declined, but it got pretty hot.

I think another time, I can't remember the date, a group of my colleagues traipsed down to the White House to see Sununu about my leadership. Trouble is, none of them had the votes to beat me, and most of them were not enemies, they just disagreed with, not on the issue, but my strategy for doing the best I could for Republicans. But Malcolm and I buried the hatchet – not in each other, but we buried it.

BW: Did you -

BD: But you pay, I think the point is, is there's a price for leadership, there's a penalty for

leadership, unless you're just going to roll over every time there's a hot issue, you go and say, 'George, what do you think we ought to do, blah-blah-blah-blah', and you end up doing it his way every time, you wouldn't deserve to be leader, but Mitchell never got into that gamesmanship.

BW: Did you feel as if Sununu maybe had lost faith in you as the leader?

BD: I don't think so. I think some of us lost faith in him, after he rode up to get his teeth fixed, going to Boston; must have a good dentist up there. He pointed out, he knows a dentist. No, John was kind of an explosive guy and I remember him leaving at least two meetings, one was a bipartisan meeting on Americans with Disabilities Act, and he got up, threw his papers down and walked out. We thought he'd come back but he didn't, but we didn't need him anyway. We wanted White House input so the president would sign the bill, we didn't want to finally get a bill after all those years [and] the president veto it.

We weren't perfect, and I was known as a fairly tough competitor, but we did believe in bipartisanship in certain cases. The Clinton health care bill, I think, drowned because of excess partisanship, probably on both sides, as opposed to the Obama bill that, it's not so much partisan politics, it's survival politics. These people like it here and they don't want to leave, and they figure they're going to be here longer than Obama so why walk the plank for him, he'll be gone, I'll still be here. So it's going to be a different kind of a vote, but I still think there'll be a bill, but (*unintelligible*).

BW: There were times when you and George Mitchell were able to cooperate, and I think particularly of the ADA Bill. What was that like, passing [it]?

BD: Well if I had done the research, I don't know how many years it was just about to surface and had to wait another year, which is another thing I don't think people understand, it's hard to impose deadlines, and I think it's a mistake most of the time, because people feel very strongly for or against some of these things. We couldn't understand why anybody, why would anybody oppose a disability bill? It wasn't a big cost, it was just recognizing that they were a challenged group and they deserved certain considerations that the rest of us didn't need. So, and again, I think everybody agreed to that, but it took I don't know how many sessions to get it passed.

BW: What was your reaction when George Mitchell announced he was retiring?

BD: Well, I thought, from a selfish standpoint, it was a big loss for the Senate, and for the Congress and the country. As I said, this guy is smart, and he'd had bench experience, and at least I could, I could talk to him, and I've never seen him explode on the Senate floor or take somebody to task, even though that's alleged by certain senators. But I was surprised when Howard Baker did the same.

BW: Did you, do you recall having had a conversation with Mitchell after he announced his retirement?

BD: I probably did, but I don't recall it.

BW: So, he left in January of '95, and you remained the leader until your own retirement. Was there a Mitchell legacy at all, what was the Senate like after George Mitchell left, were there changes?

BD: Let's see, he left when, in '95.

BW: Well, he didn't stand for reelection in '94, so yes, right.

BD: Yes, oh, I see what you mean, yes.

BW: And of course in '94 so many Republicans were elected, so it was a big change, and you became majority leader.

BD: That's right. That's a much better job than the other one.

BW: Was there a Mitchell legacy at all, or really you just all moved on?

BD: Well, you all move [on]. I thought when I left, the Senate would probably have to lock up for thirty days just to get over the grief-ridden attitude of the members. You find out they do the same thing, they have to go on as they did the day before, which is very little. But no, I think we lost a friend, we lost a very bright member of the Senate, we lost a contributor. Some people who pound the pavement up there, I mean pound their desk and talk loud and all this stuff, Mitchell used to, I think we all did, we'd take the floor if we wanted to be heard on some story that was in the paper or whatever, we had that right if we could get the floor. Plus I think he had this relationship with newer members coming into the Senate, sort of a tutorial, that he'd been there and he knew it wasn't easy, but remember, you're one of a hundred. I remember him telling them, you have a very important role in what happens that affects not only people in Maine but all across the country. And he really believed that and stuck to it.

BW: Now, was he a factor in your choosing to go to Verner Liipfert, the law firm, after you retired?

BD: Yes, I mean I obviously, I had a lot of faith in Mitchell, and when he called me and said, "I've got to be out of town, but would you meet with Berl Bernhard and Harry McPherson and a couple others?" I said, "Sure, I'm not sure what I'm going to do, but I'd be happy to meet with them." Yes, he was a big factor, just as I think I was a factor in getting Daschle into this firm. You know the person and you can speak up for something that ought to be called to the firm's attention, why, if you can do it privately and don't read it in the newspapers.

BW: Did you and Mitchell work on any cases together for Verner Liipfert, or were you still -?

BD: No, he was so far over my pay grade that I'd have sat back in awe. I mean, the guy is smart, but he doesn't toss it around, he doesn't rub it in. I mean he's got a short fuse sometimes,

I've observed that, but I was never the recipient. When I was around him he was just a great guy, and it was all business, and when the business was finished then you can sit around and laugh and tell stories, or do anything you want. But if Mitchell had a goal that he wanted to reach on a Friday afternoon, because you're never there on Friday, it's an unwritten rule, you were there on Friday and you were voting on Friday, but you had notice on Friday, you're going to be voting so he'd say, "Don't blame me if you miss votes, I'm giving you advance notice, we're going to have da-da-da-da-da." Which I think was helpful, because if it was late in the week you could still make some plans, because some people never believed he'd do anything except at least put out a press release that you're going to be home.

BW: How long were you with Verner Liipfert, was that a couple years?

BD: About two-and-a-half, three [*sic*: five-six], yes.

BW: And was that a good time for you?

BD: It was pretty good, but I think I was underutilized, as compared to this firm. And of course I didn't know anything about anything on K Street, I'd heard about K Street and all the powerful lawyers. And some members of Congress would not lobby and, well I did very little of it, I did sign the papers when you're asked a question: are you being paid for this service? Whatever, and I wasn't ashamed of it because my lobbying was limited to taking Mr. X up to see Ted Kennedy and leaving the room, in most cases. I think in the first ten years I was out of the Senate I 'lobbied' nine senators and maybe a couple agencies. So I wasn't up there pounding the pavement every day. I always thought that was kind of demeaning, particularly for a former leader, to be sitting up there with his hat in his hand, and I didn't wear a hat, waiting for somebody to come in and grab him and, "Can I just have two minutes of your time? This is very important." Daschle doesn't lobby at all.

BW: Did George Mitchell do much lobbying, are you aware of?

BD: I think he did some, not a lot.

BW: What motivated your move then over here?

BD: Well, they were bought out by Piper [DLA Piper].

BW: DLA, I think.

BD: Yes, two thousand lawyers? It's more than I have in my hometown, more people. Not quite, but - I think it was just a question of just getting too big. And I remember the partner who came to see me to convince me to do it said, "You'll be doing a lot traveling, but you'll have a good time, we'll take good care of you." And that was enough for me, when I heard the word 'traveling', because I'd had enough traveling for thirty years, fund raisers and all that stuff, but it's a good law firm, and Senator Mitchell is very happy there.

BW: So you've had other contacts and projects with Senator Mitchell since you left that firm, right?

BD: Yes, we haven't worked on anything together except this bipartisan nonprofit health care effort.

BW: Who instigated that?

BD: A fellow named Jason Grumet, is it pronounced Grumet? [G-R-U-M-E-T] and the Pew [*sic*: Robert Wood Johnson] Foundation underwrote the grant, and they didn't want any partisanship, they didn't want any, you know, this is nonpartisan, bipartisan, and had it gotten partisan, they would have just left us hanging out there. So we knew that our primary donor was looking for a result that would be helpful, and I'm not certain whether they've ever complained about maybe a little partisanship seeping in, I don't think so. But again, there's Mitchell, Daschle, Dole, and Baker, and we didn't just sit around waiting for the staff to say, "Here Senator, this is good, sign here, then sign here," it wasn't that kind of a commission, it was a working commission. We actually, the four of us would sit down and debate the issue, we agreed at the outset we wouldn't be, have a bunch of 'don't know' and all that stuff. So it worked out very well.

BW: And was it all focused on health care, you didn't take up any other issues?

BD: Well no, Tom and I did a piece on agriculture.

BW: That's what I thought.

BD: And they've done a piece on, let's see, what are they getting ready to release now, is it energy?

Outside speaker: They have a National Security project, they did have an energy project which I think may be ongoing, and Senator Koch just did an Iran project with -

BD: Yes, he and Chuck Robb, so that's, it's a very active group, and I'm not sure how much more I'm going to do, but it's well staffed, it's fair in the sense, partisanship staffed. They're a little tilted to the left, but not, what is it, two-to-one, Mike?

Mike: What's that?

BD: The staff at BPC, but it's not a partisan group; they're just good, solid people.

BW: You issued the health care report not too long ago. What has been its reception?

BD: It's been pretty good in a place that it counts, and that's with Max Baucus. And I know during the recess Max would call me and say, "Would you mind calling some of your Republicans, tell them they don't have to be for anything, just tell them to hold off and not put

out a statement [that] they're going to give up on health care." So, and they've for the most part done it. I still think there's going to be a bill, and there's going to be a signing ceremony, as I said, if it's a recipe for a devil's food cake, they'll call it health care and sign it and have a big hullabaloo, because the president really wants this, and I think the American people want it if we can inject some clarity, this is a complicated monster, and I don't know how it's gotten as far as it - Well we had Mark McClellan and Chris Jennings, they're a couple of bright guys.

BW: Let me just ask you a few final questions here. First, how do you think George Mitchell ought to be remembered as time goes on?

BD: Well in what sense, on a scale of ten, as a legislator, or just generally?

BW: Yes, or history students twenty-five years from now, what would you want them to know about him and his career?

BD: Well, you want to know about his ability, and why does he get these special assignments, whether it's the Mideast or whatever it may be. It's because he's that smart and that well qualified, and I think people should remember that because, I was kidding somebody, I said, "He's got an easier job trying to settle the Mideast crisis than he had working on health care," so, because health care is rough. And I remember I introduced a bill in '77 which has many of the things we have in today's bill, along with Senator Domenici and Senator Danforth.

He's an honest man; his integrity is without question, unassailable. And he's partisan. Mitchell and I used to [say], if they want a nonpartisan leader, there are probably some people out there who qualify, but if you want a leader of your party in all the debates, and somebody with new ideas or old ideas or ideas, you want somebody who's going to carry the flag for your party, and partisanship in that sense is not bad. If you're going to have a two-party system, you ought to have at least two ideas, and certainly he could bring that to a head. And then just his personality, his geniality, just other basic characteristics that kind of round out a man or a woman. Of course, the women are taking over, so men have had it, right Carol?

BW: Do you have anything to add, Carol?

Carol: I don't, not for this.

BW: Right, well I think we've done a good job here and very pleased with this interview.

BD: I don't want to ruin Mitchell's chances for the Kentucky Derby or anything.

BW: Well let me thank you very much for this interview, Senator.

BD: Yes, well thank you.

End of Interview