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Interview with Dick Gephardt and Tom O'Donnell by Diane Dewhirst

Richard 'Dick' A. Gephardt

Thomas 'Tom' J. O'Donnell

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Richard A. “Dick” Gephardt and Thomas J. “Tom” O’Donnell

(Interviewer: Diane Dewhirst)

GMOH# 200

March 17, 2010

Diane Dewhirst: This is Diane Dewhirst, it’s March 17, 2010, we’re in downtown Washington, D.C., and I am here with Richard Gephardt and Tom O’Donnell. And I’m going to ask them to say their names and spell their names for the record, and then we will ask each of them when they first met Senator Mitchell and their first impressions or stories. And the whole purpose of this is for me to say as little as possible and you two to tell stories, so Mr. Gephardt?

Richard Gephardt: My name is Richard Gephardt, that’s G-E-P-like in Paul-H-A-R-D-T. I first met Senator Mitchell I think in the period 1987-1988 when as a member of the Ways and Means Committee. I was working on tax reform – he was on the Senate Finance Committee and was working on tax reform – and my first impressions of him in meetings on the subject were that he was very, very intelligent, very measured and patient and smart, and had a unique gift for expressing himself in simple but understandable words and terms. He spoke slowly, which is helpful, and he was deliberate, and he was measured, and he had a very good demeanor about him. He didn’t lose his temper, he wasn’t excitable, he was very rational and sensible and compassionate. He was a traditional Democrat and cared about Democratic values, what happened to the people in the middle in the country, people who were poor, and just general Democratic values were very strong in everything that he said and did.

DD: We’re also here with Tom O’Donnell, who at the time when he knew Senator Mitchell served as Mr. Gephardt’s chief of staff. Tom, could you say your name and where you’re from.

Tom O’Donnell: I’m Tom O’Donnell, O-apostrophe-D-O-N-N-E-L-L, from New York originally. As a matter of fact, I first met George Mitchell in [1972] when he ran the Muskie campaign with Berl Bernhard. I was an intern on the Muskie campaign, I was a college student, and actually I worked in the communication shop for the campaign doing radio actualities. And I believe one day somebody introduced me to Mitchell, that was my first, I guess the first time I ever met him.

DD: ‘Seventy-two.

TO: Nineteen seventy-two, that’s right, it was ‘72, yes, I was a junior that year. And then I also became aware of him when I worked at the DCCC [Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee], where I was the deputy director, in 1985-‘86, when he was the chair of the DSCC [Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee]. Well, I don’t think I met him but I was sort of aware of him, and I don’t think I met him until I worked for Dick Gephardt as his chief of staff

and George was the Senate majority leader, and probably in meetings. And I think my impression always about him, I'd say two things: one, he was really smart, and the other thing, I thought he was very tough, and he had to be on that Senate. And as a matter of fact, at one point I remember Dick was thinking of running for the president maybe in 2000, and then he decided not to, and at one point I remember saying to myself, maybe I'll go see Mitchell, to see if we'll get him to go run, but I never did. But that's how I first met him.

DD: Mr. Gephardt, let's talk a little bit about, if we can go back a little bit, a lot bit, to the tax reform bill that you worked on in Ways and Means in the mid-'80s, and I know on the Senate side, Senator Mitchell worked closely with Senator Bradley. Senator Mitchell fought for the middle class tax cut, you were instrumental in moving it through the Ways and Means Committee with Mr. Rostenkowski and others. Could you just talk in general a little bit about that and that battle?

RG: Well, like any tax reform effort, it was a tough thing to get through. It's always complicated, there are a million interests that come at you and try to get their particular thing in the code. What I remember about Senator Mitchell was that he was steadfast, he knew what he wanted to do, he was tough and strong when he needed to be and could face down lobbies and other members who were trying to complicate the bill or take it off course, and he was just a big part of being able to get that legislation done. Whenever you try to lower rates for anybody, you've got to take away special exemptions or special treatments that different people have in the code, so it's a very tough political exercise. And what I noticed about Senator Mitchell was that he was well adapted to facing down interests and people that had to be faced down in order to get something that he thought was important done, which was cutting taxes for hardworking Americans.

DD: In '86, the Democrats won back the Senate, you had the majority in the House, and in '88 Senator Mitchell, at the end of '88 Senator Mitchell became the Senate majority leader, Mr. Foley was the speaker after a bit, and you were the majority leader. President Bush the First was in the White House, and there were many things that went on but one in particular is the budget discussions that went on that led to lengthy discussions at Andrews [Air Force Base]. There was a dynamic there of you three really being the face of the party, along with Mr. Bentsen and others and whatnot, as far as the fiscal piece was, but that dominated a lot of those four years when Bush was in charge and you three were really the face of the party until the presidential nomination process started. Could you talk a little bit about that, and in particular the Democrats' success?

RG: Well, it was a very interesting time because you had a new president who was pretty moderate as Republicans go, even then, and certainly now, but George Bush had been in the Congress, he'd been in the House, he'd been on the Ways and Means Committee, so a lot of members knew him from that period. I didn't, but others did. He had gotten elected in part by making a pledge when he gave his convention speech in, I think, August of that election year. And he said in his election speech that, "Read my lips, no new taxes," and it was a wild applause line. And it kind of became the theme of his campaign, which as I remember was run by Lee

Atwater and other people who were very adept at politics and probably talked him into making that pledge.

So here we are, we have a new majority leader in the Senate, we have a new speaker in the House and a new majority leader in the House – Jim Wright had just left in the spring, in the early spring of '89. So we had a new cast of characters, and we were the new leaders in the party, and we had to figure out how to deal with a newly elected and politically strong president, President Bush. And so we immediately, we all knew that a big issue that was on the table was the deficit. It had been on the table in the '88 campaign because it had grown to a large amount by that time, but we also knew that Dick Darman, who was the president's budget director, and others in the administration, and the president really was pushing us to deal with the deficit publicly, to make the deficit smaller, to come up with a balanced budget or a deficit plan that would bring you toward balance.

And the main thing I remember was that Tom Foley and George Mitchell were really willing and able to work together. They respected one another, we all liked one another, and we met frequently to come up with the kind of strategy and tactics that we were going to follow in trying to deal with this new president, especially on the budget issue. And we all said to one another that we were willing to enter into a major negotiation with the new president and his administration, but that it had to be everything on the table, that we couldn't put tax increases off the table because, you know, obviously Democrats don't like cutting programs, Republicans don't like raising taxes. So we felt that if this was to be a fifty-fifty solution, that taxes had to be on the table.

It was clear from the way Bush had run his campaign that that would be very hard for him to agree to putting taxes on the table. And in fact, in a number of meetings we had in the White House he just stoutly refused to even consider putting taxes on the table. John Sununu was his chief of staff, he was particularly adamant, along with others and the administration, that this was not going to happen.

So the three of us kept in close touch, we talked frequently, sometimes many times a week. We certainly talked together before we went to any meetings in the White House, we planned out what we were going to say and how we were going to say it. And to make a very long story short, after many, many meetings I think we finally convinced the president that in order to get a budget negotiation, he was going to have to put it on the table. And I remember clearly, we were in one of the rooms on the first floor of the White House and we were having lunch, and the Republicans kind of thought that Mitchell was the toughest guy in this trio, and they put a lot of their fire and their criticism on him. And publications like the *Wall Street Journal* and others really targeted Mitchell as the bad guy in this play, although we were all bad people from their viewpoint. But George was just tough as nails. I never had any doubt in my mind that we were going to stick with this to the bitter end, come whatever may.

And so we just kept pressing him, and both Foley and Mitchell pressed him in all of these meetings to put taxes on the table. And finally, in the middle of the lunch, I forget how, we

always came to this subject because it's kind of what we were there to talk about, Bush looked at us and said, "Okay, if that's the only way we can do this, then I'm going to put taxes on the table." And he had a written press release, and he handed it back to Marlin Fitzwater, who was his press secretary, and said, "Put it in the press room or whatever you do to put it out," and he was kind of disgusted and angry that he had been forced to do this.

And then I remember after lunch we walked out in the back of the White House, where the road goes around in the back of the White House, and we were waiting for our car to pick us up. And President Bush was kind of jumping from one foot to the other, you could see he was really nervous, and one of us said to him, "Well, what's wrong, or what's worrying you?" And he said, "The fat's in the fire." And so he knew from that point forward – and it dogged him through the rest of his presidency and his reelection campaign with Bill Clinton – that this breaking of the pledge was really an important political moment for him and his administration. My own opinion is that that is not what defeated him. What defeated him was, the economy was in a tailspin right before the election and he didn't quite recognize it. But I'm sure that he still thinks to this day that giving up that pledge was a major part of the right wing in his party losing faith in him and not being motivated to work for him and help him get elected.

But the last thing I'd say about this episode was that the key to it was that the three of us stuck together, that we totally agreed on our strategy and our tactics every step of the way. And George Mitchell, of the three of us, was the toughest and strongest and the most steadfast in really facing the president down to get him to do what we knew he had to do in order to get this negotiation started.

Then we went into the negotiation, it went on up on the Hill for weeks and weeks. Then we decided that we needed to get off campus and get away from the press so that we weren't negotiating everything in the press, so we went to Andrews for, I don't know, ten days or something, and were there day and night. And again, George Mitchell was critical in both helping to keep the Senate folks on line and in line to do what needed to be done, and he had some pretty strong characters to deal with, like Senator Byrd and others, who really didn't want to do any of this. But George was a steadfast and fabulous leader, and great interaction with all the senators, kept everybody moving in the right direction, and after a lot of fits and starts we finally got something put together. And then, unfortunately, Newt Gingrich kind of backed up on us in the end and surprised the president, surprised Dick Darman, we lost the first vote in the House, which really scuttled the whole work that we had done. And so we put it back together with Darman's help and the president's help, and again, George Mitchell was the leader that we needed in the Senate to hold the Senate together on a new package. We finally got it all done, I think, a couple of days before Christmas in the year 1990, as I remember.

So it was quite a performance, and it really gave me a good measure of George Mitchell, and my admiration for him went way up from that experience, and has always stayed up since then, because of his tremendous ability and leadership ability to get that done.

DD: Just to go chronologically here, I'm going to ask Tom just to make some comments

about that same period of time, and any insight, wisdom that you might have.

TO: Well, one thing I would say about that period is in the space of five months in '89 we had new leadership in both the House and the Senate. Although Mitchell went in in the beginning of the Congress, Foley and Gephardt, Foley didn't become speaker, Gephardt didn't become leader until May, June as Dick said, the budget was the big issue. And I remember when they decided to go to a summit after these talks down at the White House, Mitchell and Foley decided that Dick would chair the summit negotiation, and we spent an enormous amount of time over in Leader Mitchell's office, and also in our office, just sort of plotting strategy. We had meeting after meeting to plot before we'd go down and meet the White House, and then after the White House we'd come back and we'd talk some more, and then, when we decided to go into this summit, sequestered out at Andrews Air Force Base, I think we did that in the fall of '90.

And a lot of it was the budget, but the interesting thing is that the fight, or the real differences between the two parties at that time, was really about tax fairness and having a progressive tax system, and I think Mitchell and Gephardt and Foley, this was the big difference between what they wanted to do for the country and what the Republicans wanted to do at the time. We had a lot of battles on this at the time, but as Dick said, initially we failed to get what came out of the summit product done, and then we finally put something together where we passed both chambers. And we actually won, and we had a lot of momentum certainly going into the November election, because we picked up seats in the House in 1990, and I think we probably picked up Senate seats. I'm not sure but, maybe not too many, but I think we picked up some seats, so it was pretty good.

The other thing I would say about the time, the amount of time the three leaders spent in those meetings because of the summit, I think, may be unprecedented. And when we were out in Andrews, Dick was on the phone all the time with Mitchell and Foley. And I remember Mitchell would come out at night sometimes, because sometimes we'd be staying there, and we'd have discussions long into the night at Andrews Air Force Base about what we were going to do on the strategy.

But the other thing I would say, if you sort of look back, because two years later Bill Clinton was able to win. We didn't have a president as head of the party from '89 to '92, and it really was three congressional leaders that I think gave a message and a definition to the Democratic Party, of standing up for the middle class and really fighting on economic argument. I really think it was the work of these three leaders that set the stage for Bill Clinton to win the White House. I think without the work of these three leaders, without them standing up for principles they believed in, I don't believe Bill Clinton ever would have been successful in 1992.

And as a matter of fact, I remember Ron Brown was the DNC chair, and I would say it was the work of these three leaders that really got the party galvanized and gave us an opportunity then in 1992 to take back the White House.

Let me just say one last thing. We spent so much time in Senator Mitchell's office, I know, but

one of the things, and it's true today, he always told us, "You're as strong as your weakest senator," and I think if you look at what's happened in the last few years here in Washington, the Senate, it's very, very true.

DD: Not to ignore a lot of the accomplishments -

TO: Can I do one more thing? – sorry. The other thing is, getting Bush to give up on his tax pledge. And I remember we sent them, I remember the discussions before. The three of them and the staffs, you made the decision, you had to move him on this. And I remember you went in there, you had lunch with them, and you may even have had lunch in the residence that day, because somehow I remember, you went up in the elevator and you had lunch with him in the residence. Maybe I'm wrong. But I remember you coming back and in a sense, the three of you couldn't believe he relented and he agreed that, 'look, we're going to balance this budget, we're going to have some cuts, we're going to cut discretionary, but we're also going to have some tax increases, and we got him off the pledge.' And although a lot of people said, and the Republicans probably said, it really hurt him in his reelection in '92, it probably did hurt him with his own base. But I'll be honest, I think the election successes we had in '92 had more to do with the three of you defining what the Democratic Party was about and who they were fighting for.

DD: I think it was also that piece of paper, I think you guys also insisted that – it was something like, "It has become apparent dah-dah-dah-dah-dah," and you guys insisted, because I remember seeing the little caret on the paper, "to me," because it was a statement from Bush. And I also remember that we went through this whole thing about the White House press corps – I was the press secretary at the time, but the congressional press corps – so we used to like do what we had to do with the White House press corps, and then we'd come back and we'd do it all over again up on the Hill. And it seems so ridiculous now, but it worked for – remember that whole, we went through that, and we said, 'how do we get around this?' Anyway, so it very much was a cohesive – and not to ignore some of the good things that were done that you had a role in and others, the Civil Rights Bill in '91 and the Clean Air Act and very significant pieces of legislation but, and not just to focus on the negative, but there were some other. Before we get to the Clinton years, which we'll do, is there anything else in that period of time that you would want to mention, Mr. Gephardt?

RG: Well, the thing that I appreciated the most about him in that period, which was very strenuous and difficult, was his ability to lead a very tough group of people to lead. I mean, these are big personalities in the Senate. We have big personalities in the House, but I think they're a little bigger in the Senate. And many of the people, like Senator Byrd and others, had been there a long time before George Mitchell, so they were senior to him. But he had the human ability to keep them with him, and to believe in him, and to want to follow him, and to come to an agreement even with things they didn't want to agree to.

DD: And how did he do that, how did he -?

RG: It's his personal chemistry. He's an exceptional human being. He's patient, he's not boisterous, he's not loud, he listens well, he's very rational, very logical in the way he presents his ideas, and he inspires confidence in people in him, and in what he's trying to do, and people want to help him. And they're not put off by him. He's a very, very skilled negotiator, and in the end I think his skill goes just into understanding human beings and how they react and how they want to be treated, and how they want to be communicated with, so that he can get them to come to an agreement that they probably don't want to really do. And of course you've seen that in the things he's done since he left the Congress, in Ireland and what he's doing now in the Middle East, which is probably his greatest test.

DD: And baseball.

RG: Yes, and baseball, you can go on and on. There's just nobody as good as he is at negotiating with people, listening to people, treating people well, so that he can get them to eventually, patiently, come to a place where they probably really don't want to go. And that's the sign of leadership. Harry Truman said, "Leadership is about getting people to do things they really don't want to do." And that's George Mitchell.

DD: Let's talk a little bit about, in '91 the presidential race started to pick up, and in '92, I can remember that we didn't, the three of us didn't switch off the Sunday shows as much because the presidential campaigns were going to take over. And there was – these are *my* words – a little bit of tension, I'd say, as the Clinton campaign was exerting, rightfully, exerting its leadership, and somewhat a, I think there were some that were hoping for more of an embrace of the congressional leadership, But once he was elected I can remember, we went down to Arkansas and everyone met, and then there was that first run at it where there were some successes and some difficulties, the successes being family and medical leave, the difficulties being gays in the military. So just to jog your memory with a few of those, if there's anything you'd like to say about the campaign, the transition, and then those first few months, before we get to health care. How's that for a mouthful?

RG: Well as you will remember, everybody remembers that the early days of the Clinton administration there were some problems, or difficulties with things, like gays in the military being the first issue out of the box, and everybody knowing that we had all these challenges we wanted to address that were really tough. And like any administration, it's hard to get your footing, and people were trying to figure out who's who and what's what, so I'm sure there was angst. But I guess I'd go back to the week after the election. I forget what day it was, probably the Monday or Tuesday after the election, we had a meeting in Little Rock with the new president and his wife Hillary, and George Mitchell and Tom Foley and myself. We had dinner and we just talked about what we thought the big priorities were, and we obviously talked about health care, which had been a big issue in the campaign, and middle class tax cut, and probably talked about an energy tax of some kind, talked about Medicare and Medicaid and other education programs. But I clearly remember that a number of us, probably all of us, said to the president elect that the deficit would really keep us, if we didn't do more about it than we had already done in 1990, that it would keep us from fulfilling his priorities. And that as hard as it

would be, we really needed, in addition to doing health care, to try to do something about the deficit that was meaningful and that would really balance the budget.

And I remember the president just, he understood it. He didn't quarrel with it, he understood that we needed to do that and kind of agreed, yes, that's kind of the precursor for everything else that we want to do, because if we don't have any money we can't address any of these other priorities. And I always remembered back to that, because then it became clear how hard that was going to be to do. That was an important moment in the early part of the Clinton presidency.

We then went from – I don't remember the exact time sequence – we then tried to do that in the first budget, and we also were simultaneously trying to do health care reform, and wound up getting the budget done with no Republican votes in either house, which was painfully difficult to do, and frankly, almost impossible to do, but we somehow got the votes in the House and the Senate. George Mitchell was superb in both strategizing how to do that and then executing the plan to do that. Today, people look at this and say, "It just can't be done." Well in our time, it was as big a problem as it is today, if you deflated the dollars back to 1992-1993. But in truth, all the work we did and all the difficulty we had probably made it a little harder to get the votes for health care. And I think health care, although I may be wrong, came in sequence after the budget.

TO: The next year.

RG: So '94 was the health care fight. And I think in truth it probably set the stage for not being able to get the votes on health care. And health care was really difficult in both houses. We couldn't get it out of the committee in the House. I'm sure George Mitchell had similar problems in the Senate: if we couldn't get it started then they couldn't finish it. So I'm not even sure that, I don't think it got voted on on the floor in either house.

DD: I think it came out of Kennedy's committee and not (*unintelligible*).

RG: Yes, I think that's right. So it was really a tough, tough time. But George was superb through the whole thing. I can't imagine anybody better to work with, better to deal with, better to have as a leader in the other body. And these are two very large and difficult groups to deal with, and he was as good as it gets. There's just no way that you could have any better leadership than he gave in that period.

DD: I'm going to be respectful of your time. I'm going to ask Tom to say something and then I'm just going to come back to health care once and then we'll wrap up. Does that work for you, Mr. Gephardt? Is that okay, Tom?

TO: The only thing I'd say about the Clinton years is that it was a real change for us to have an executive at the head of the party. After all, we hadn't had a president since 1980, so it was twelve years when Clinton came in. And the leadership of Foley and Gephardt and Mitchell had

been in power for roughly four years, and I think did a good job, worked well together, and then all of a sudden we've got somebody else who's calling the tunes for the party. Never mind we have all these committee chairs in the two respective chambers that are used to setting the agenda for the country, and now you have a young president from Arkansas come in and -

DD: Outsider.

TO: Outsider, with his own agenda, and you're not sure if he likes the Congress and how he wants to deal with it. And so it was a real shakeout period, and I think it went on for quite a period.

DD: Health care, it seems like a lot of this discussion is, 'there's nothing new under the sun.' But anyway, on health care, you had been a leader in the House on that before '93 and '94, Senator Mitchell had been a leader, having done a long-term care bill himself, had done a bunch on spousal impoverishment and a lot of other things or whatever. Can you just comment briefly about health care coming after the deficit reduction package, the First Lady's activities that led up to the bill coming forward, and then it was finally pronounced 'gone,' at least in the Senate, in September – because I remember that we stayed in through some of August and Senator Kennedy was every breath that there was there. But just a little bit about what that process was, and Senator Mitchell's role, and maybe how it helped lay the groundwork somewhat for what we're hopefully going to be accomplishing soon here now.

RG: Well first of all, you've got to remember all this took place after the really difficult vote on the budget, which really took a lot of political capital away from us because members were already getting criticized at home, first for – in the House, we had voted for a BTU tax, which was an energy tax that never went anywhere in the Senate, so they had a vote out there that was already unpopular. Then they had this unpopular vote to balance the budget, and it included taxes on gasoline and on Social Security benefits for higher income Social Security recipients, so they were already getting incoming missiles politically. And now we're off into health care, and it's not well remembered, but about at the same time we were working on a big crime bill, anti-crime bill, that included a provision on guns that became very controversial and difficult – for the speaker, who had a position of being against gun control, and the head of the Judiciary Committee in the House, Jack Brooks, who had a long-time position against gun control. So there was a lot going on against the backdrop of some very unpopular votes in the House and Senate in 1993.

Further than that, the health care bill was kind of put together in the White House under the leadership of the president's wife, Hillary, and Ira Magaziner, who was an old time friend and a policy person, old time friend of the Clintons. And he did a lot of work and brought in a lot of experts, but this was a case where the White House kind of wrote a bill and handed it to the leaders in Congress and said, "This is what we want." And that may be the way you have to do this, I'm not second guessing them at all, but it created some controversy because you were coming into committees in the House and in the Senate that had a lot of experience, where people had done a lot of work on these issues, and you were trying to push people to do what the

president wanted them to do, and they hadn't been involved in writing the legislation. So it was kind of a struggle from the beginning to get acceptance of these ideas. And then the Republicans were attacking the White House for writing this bill in secret and not talking to everybody, and so it became very controversial.

Having said all that, again, Senator Mitchell was ideal to work with. He calmed people down, he got people to concentrate, and he had, again, some very large characters to deal with. Senator Moynihan is an expert in this area and had dealt with all these issues and had his own ideas of what he wanted to do. There were others there, I forget who now was the head of Senate Finance -

TO: Moynihan.

RG: Moynihan was Finance, who was -

DD: Kennedy (*unintelligible*).

RG: Kennedy was the head of Commerce, and he had his ideas and he had been up and down this mountain many times even before this. So George had an incredible challenge in getting people together, and ultimately we didn't make it happen. But we certainly tried hard and we learned a lot, and we gave it our good old college try, and then went ahead and got a crime bill done, which many think was the main reason we lost the election in '94 because of the gun control stuff. So we had people against us because we had raised taxes, and we had people against us because we had put in some gun control measures that were unpopular in many rural areas in the country. And I'm sure in the state of Maine they were pretty unpopular, too, so George was -

DD: The gas tax was the worst thing in Maine.

RG: Three cents, it was a huge increase in the gas tax, three cents. So, that was the last time the gas tax has been increased at the federal level, incidentally. And so it was quite a period, and George was, again, fabulous in leading and in getting people to do things and in convincing people to be part of an effort for the good of the whole, and the country.

DD: Were you surprised when he announced he wasn't going to run again?

RG: I really was, I really didn't expect that, or I thought, you know, I still feel that he really enjoyed his service in the Congress. But I'm sure he had his own reasons to do that, and I kind of have always felt that those of us in public life probably should leave when we're doing pretty well and not when we're on the downward slope, and I think he did that as well as it can be done. And then obviously he's gone on and done fabulous stuff that is probably even more important to the world's effort than what he did in the Congress.

DD: I just have to ask is there anything else, and then Tom, could I finish up, and then Mr.

Gephardt, if you have to go you can go and I can finish with Tom, would that work for you? Is there anything that's I've forgotten to add, or any issues that have come up? I know that you and he worked, well, there were trade issues that you also worked on, and also just any personal impressions, many of which you've already given but that I may have forgotten for a summary and ending.

RG: Well, I always enjoyed everything I did with him, I had total confidence in him; he had great discretion, he would never leak information that came out of meetings. He was just a prince in every way. He also had a great sense of humor, and it was a dry sense of humor and he'd get a grin on his face. And the one story he told me, when we were talking one day about him being the head of the Senate was that, his mother was a Lebanese American immigrant, I think, was so proud when he got elected to be the head of the Senate and she was just bursting with pride. And so in his first week as leader, he went on the floor to announce the procedure by which some bill was going to be brought up. And one of his staff people, he said, came over to him and tugged on his sleeve and said, "Senator" – I think it was Senator [Gordon J.] Humphrey from New Hampshire – had decided that the procedure, which everybody has to agree to, was not to his liking and that he wanted to talk to Senator Mitchell about it. And so Senator Mitchell said to his staff person, "Well bring him over here." He said, "No-no, you have to take the microphone off and you have to go over to his office and talk to him and negotiate this."

So Senator Mitchell did that, he thought it was kind of unusual, but that's okay. So he went over and worked out what Senator Humphrey's problems were in the procedure. He came back and they wrote it up and then he got back on the floor and he put the microphone on and he announced the new procedure. And a few minutes later his staff person came back, tugged him on the sleeve and said, "Senator Humphrey's just called and he's changed his mind, he wants to do something different, and you have to go over and talk to him." And Senator Mitchell said, "Very early, I figured out that this fabulous position, running the United States Senate, was simply a license to kiss every senator's ass every day."

TO: 'I've got to kiss ninety-nine asses every single day.'

RG: Every day, and, "I'm only as strong as my weakest senator." So he had a very kind of humored view of this role, and a humble view of his role, and that's part of the reason he was so good at it.

DD: He would clean up his language, you know, he was so proper, he would clean up his language, and it was 'herding cats,' that was the herding cats. Thank you so much, it was lovely to see you. Tell your wife I said hello. I really appreciate your time.

Okay, Mr. O'Donnell, can you just do a little bit on Clinton and, oh, you did the Clinton. Anything more on Clinton and on health care, and crime?

TO: The only other thing I would say about Clinton, when we passed the reconciliation bill, which really, I think it led to, what, the largest post-war economic growth, or boom, but the

interesting thing is, a lot of that was started by the budget deal they did in '90, and that's when the economy first started, although the Clinton reconciliation package was critical as well, but I think, of this leadership team, I think it was the singular accomplishment, of having the largest post-war economic boom we've ever seen.

DD: Which is referenced a lot today.

TO: And I'd say a few things about the team, and particularly Dick and George, they got along I think well, they liked working with each other. They both had strong beliefs, they were willing to stand up on principle, and I think they were willing to lead. And I remember when Mitchell told us, he told Dick he was going to retire, I mean there was sadness. Because during that five-, six-year period, I think we developed a really good working relationship, and I know Dick was sad that he wasn't going to be working with George, because I think they really developed a great working relationship over the years. And I think they did a lot of good for the country, and I also think for the party.

The only other things, in terms of the - The crime bill I remember because we passed the crime bill in the House, and it was all the assault weapon bans, and the only reason we had passed it is because we had absences that day and we really didn't have the votes to pass it.

DD: When did you pass that?

TO: We probably passed it in July, no, probably earlier in the year of '94. And the first time we passed it, the only reason we did is because we had absences. And I remember Mitchell, Foley, and Gephardt – and this was when the conference was getting together – went down to the White House and tried to get the president to take it out, because we really didn't have the votes. And what happened – and he wouldn't do it, he was going to stand his ground.

DD: So this would be summer of '94?

TO: This is now, yes, it was August of '94, it's right before the recess. And they went down there, and he wouldn't do it. So he forced us in the House then to take up the crime bill with it in it, and we couldn't pass it and we lost on the rule, and then we spent a week negotiating. And if you look at the polling data, we didn't start going down in the polls until August, it was right after this. And our inability to deal with that issue initially I think hurt us a lot more than the failure on the health care bill. A lot of people say it was because of health care we lost, I think it had more to do with us not handling this crime bill the right way. I don't think I have anything else.

DD: Anything more on health, nothing more on health care?

TO: No, I mean health care was sort of a, it maybe goes back to – look, we were a congressional party, we weren't a presidential party. We had all these people who had worked on this issue for years, and then we have a new administration come in and they want to write,

they won, he's the executive. But we ended up being handed a health care bill and we were supposed to pass it, and it just didn't work that way. And I think the Senate, and it was Chafee and a few others basically at the end of the day came up with a compromise, but we couldn't get the White House to agree to it. And as a matter of fact, Jim Slattery, he was a congressman from Kansas running for governor, President Clinton came out to campaign for him, and Slattery got in the limo with Clinton in Kansas and he pleaded with the president to go along with the Chafee-Dole compromise, or whatever it was, but he wouldn't do it, and we just couldn't get the votes then in the committee.

I know we had a lot of meetings on health care, but I think on health care a lot of it was, the two chambers were going at different speeds. We just had a very, very difficult time in the House, I mean we couldn't even get anything out of committee. At least you, I think, moved the bill out of committee, but we couldn't even get a bill out of committee. And I know there were a lot of meetings, but I don't remember a lot, I guess, in terms of the bicameral -

DD: I know we spent a lot of time with Finance and Kennedy.

TO: Yes, and that's what we ended up doing.

DD: And I think we were thinking we would, if it went well, we would come together at some point, but we didn't.

TO: But we didn't get that far on a bicameral, but I think in both leadership, in both the House they had to deal with, they had all the substantive people and the people who had been setting the health agenda in this country for a long time, and I think they sort of felt, initially at least, they weren't heard from on this, and I think the leadership had to deal with that within the chambers.

DD: Any closing thoughts?

TO: No, I mean, look, my time up there, I think he was the best leader I saw. And again, I think the two things about George Mitchell is he was tough when he needed to be, but he was willing to lead and take a stand and fight for it, and I think he had a great set of skills to lead that institution. To be honest, I think he would have had a great set of skills to lead the nation as well.

End of Interview