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Baldacci, John oral history interview

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Interview with John Baldacci by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Baldacci, John

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

August 1, 2007

Place

Augusta, Maine

ID Number

MOH 446

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Biographical Note

John Elias Baldacci was born January 30, 1955 in Bangor, Maine where he grew up. He graduated from Bangor High School, in 1973; earned a B.A. from the University of Maine, Orono in 1986; and was a member of the Bangor city council from 1978 to 1981. He served in the Maine state senate from 1982 to 1994, and then was elected as a Democratic Congressman to the One Hundred Fourth and to the three succeeding Congresses (serving January 3, 1995-January 3, 2003). In 2003, he became Governor of Maine; at the time of this interview, he was serving his second term.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: The Baltimore Restaurant; Muskie cigar story; Bangor, Maine politics; John Baldacci's father, Bob; Ed Muskie as mentor; Murray family of Bangor; Kennedy event at Bass Park in 1960; and the Muskie family.

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AL: . . . Muskie Oral History Project, on August 1st, 2007 at the State House in Augusta, Maine, and this is Governor John Baldacci. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu interviewing.

John Baldacci: Andrea, thank you very much, and thank you and Don for what you're doing to spend time and research on the career of an individual who is one in a million, and who I have had the good fortune to talk with and work with, and has known my family since I was knee high

to a grasshopper or a gleam in my father's eye.

Senator Muskie, I remember the stories because my parents and grandparents operated a little Italian restaurant under the bridge called The Baltimore. And I remember over the years my father telling me that when my grandfather emigrated from Italy he landed in the port of Baltimore, and America was always the land of opportunity so he wanted to name his first business in Bangor, Maine, even though it was in Bangor, Maine, The Baltimore Restaurant because that's where they first landed.

And they imported Italian labor into Maine to help build the paper mills, and there's actually Little Italys in Millinocket and in Rumford, Maine. And Rumford is the home, of course, of Senator Muskie and his family. And Senator Muskie, knowing the background of the restaurant and my family, had brought the governor of Maryland in one time because they couldn't believe that there was a restaurant in Bangor, Maine named The Baltimore Restaurant. And they brought him in and he was overwhelmed with that fact.

But Senator Muskie and my father [Robert "Bob" Baldacci] and Uncle Vasco were very good friends, and they were, probably the origin of the Democratic Party in Bangor was my father, my uncle, Charlie Butera, Madelin Kiah, in Brewer. Bangor-Brewer worked together, but they also worked with Lincoln, Millinocket, a lot of the working class neighborhoods of the greater Bangor area. And of course, you know, we had our good Old Town connections there with Jack Cashman's family and Mike Pearson and Doc Pearson, his father and mother, and just a lot of really good, good people.

But it was at the beginning of the Democratic Party and my dad used to always say that, when he first started, you could put all the Democrats in a telephone booth. And it wasn't really a Democratic area, but Senator Muskie and Frank Coffin, working at the statewide basis, along with my father and uncle and people like that, locally, built the Democratic Party from nothing, and they worked hard at it.

I had a photo of governor, well, at that time he wasn't governor but it was, Ed Muskie was a senator at that time and he was running for reelection. And they had done up a truck to make it look like Harry Truman's Whistle Stop Tour and train, and they had taken a truck to it. And I remember my dad telling me that Senator Muskie, when he was running for governor, had actually spent about \$50,000 on a state-wide campaign, which it goes to show you how long ago that was, and how frugal he was. Because today it's ten times that and then some, and it doesn't even begin to address the cost of running these gubernatorial operations or state-wide elections.

Senator Muskie did it, he did it, he built it with a lot of great people, like Frank Coffin, like Don Nicoll, like my father and my uncle and many others. They built it, and they were the origin of the party, and it was a very exciting time to grow up. Because, you know, as a kid growing up, to see your parents excited about politics or politicians gave us a sense of, well that's what we should be involved in.

So I remember my dad took me to an event at Bass Park when Governor, well Senator Muskie, brought Jack Kennedy to campaign in 1960. So it was Senator Muskie, Senator Kennedy, it was, they had the Native Americans, they had a crowd of people on a Sunday afternoon, and I remember Senator Kennedy and shaking his hand, it was like he was a rock star and everybody was screaming and pounding on the cars, and it was a very exciting time. And one in which, you know, we all as kids became fascinated with.

We all had our JFK All the Way hats on, and our buttons, and the cars were done up. My father had gotten my neighbor's car, Freddy Murray, decorated so that he would be able to ride Senator Kennedy at that time in the convertible, as we did from the airport to Bass Park, we did a motorcade. And it was just a very exciting time and one in which I think was about the best and brightest, and about Camelot and about the real optimism and opportunities that our country had, and what great leadership we had.

President Kennedy's press conferences, we used to sit and listen to and we'd be so enamored by his grasp, his wit and wisdom, and they were events, you know. Unlike today, these were real events, and President Kennedy, just to galvanize people. And he and Senator Muskie were very close, and he was always an inspiration for us to see them both working together and talking together and, you know.

So those, and then as I got older, you know, and I'm skipping ahead here because there are so many Senator Muskie stories, but Senator Muskie would, when he was getting ready for a reelection effort and there was talk that possibly Bill Cohen was thinking about running against him, that Senator Muskie organized a real grass roots effort all over the state. But he worked in Bangor and he came to the restaurant, and I remember Clyde MacDonald, who did a lot of work for Senator Muskie, organized and did a very good job organizing and laying the groundwork.

But at that time, Senator Muskie was fond of cigars. And I was tasked with the responsibility of going to Tri-City Pizza to pick up cigars. And at that time you weren't, they didn't say whether you were twenty-one or not, at that time they didn't have those laws, but they'd sent me there and the only thing they had was King Edward cigars. And not knowing King Edward from Edward the First, Edward anybody, in terms of cigars, a cigar was a cigar. So I remember getting back to the restaurant and my father looked at me and he said, "King Edward cigars?" And Senator Muskie didn't even bat an eyelash, he didn't, to him it was like coming out of a fine box, you know, he just opened it up and just lit it up and, you know, he didn't care. He just wanted a cigar after his lunch.

And, but I remember that, that time that he spent and that campaign that he waged. At that time Senator Cohen didn't run against him. I think a guy by the name of Neil Bishop ran against him I think at that time, if that was the correct campaign. But Senator Muskie kept his ear to the ground, he had his antennas out there and he wasn't letting any grass grow under his feet. He was meeting with people; he was listening to their concerns.

And, you know, there are so many different stories. I mean, when I went to Washington one

time I met with him, and he was chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, and he actually, and Al From who worked for him. I think one of the great stories about Senator Muskie is that people who worked for him, like Madeleine Albright, like George Mitchell, like Al From, like our good friend here, Leon Billings, you know, and many others, I mean just had this connection to Senator Muskie. And I think when I'm in Washington, when I was in Washington as a member of Congress, it was interesting to see his kind of antennas. Even the people I served with, like Sam Gejdenson from Connecticut, they all knew him. They either worked on his presidential campaign, or they had relationships with him.

But Senator Muskie was somebody who was a foundation in Democratic and Maine politics. He was somebody who people knew and respected, well regarded. I mean, whenever I went around Washington, Senator Muskie was very well regarded. And when I first got to Washington I was the only Democrat in the state's delegation, so I remember calling Senator Muskie frequently for advice. He really was a very good advisor. And what I was disappointed in myself is that I didn't do it more. And I never wanted to take advantage of the time that he and Carol would give me to talk to me, but he was always, he always had good advice.

My father had passed away, and Ed was somebody who gave me very good fatherly advice. And sometimes, you know, when things would get especially challenging, you need to talk to somebody like a mother or a father or grandparent, you know, to get advice, advice that's honest and advice that's objective. And he was one that gave me that frequently, and I was so appreciative of the time that I did spend with him, to realize, you know, the real greatness of this individual, you know.

And, you know, he's not around any more, but I hope he knows how much I think of him and what he did, and how lucky I was to have some experiences with him. Because, I mean you talk about the Budget Committee, you talk about what he did on the Committee on Public Works, you talk about his work as secretary of state, you talk about, I mean I remember him when I was in high school coming to speak to us about the Vietnam War, and as controversial as that was and as difficult as that was, trying to explain to people what his position was and why he felt very strongly about it.

So, you know, I've known him in so many different positions and relationships and everything else, but the common denominator to him is that he, like he always said to me, he and my dad gave me the same advice, just be yourself, tell the truth, and work hard. And that was it; just stand up on your own two feet, my dad used to say. And Ed would say, no matter how difficult or challenging, you got to just be yourself, tell the truth, and work hard. And I've thought to myself, no matter how challenging the issues are or the times are, if you just remember those basics.

And I tell school kids that all the time when I go to talk to them, you know. And I use little stories to describe how, you know, it is, that it's so important to tell the truth, but the basics are there, and they never go out of style. And I guess Senator Muskie never goes out of style, and it's a standard that I would consider a gold standard of public service, integrity. I mean, to have

served our country, our state and our communities as long as he did, to make the sacrifices he did, know they come at a cost because he didn't get time to spend with his family, which I appreciate the sacrifices he and his family have made.

But in terms of public interest, public service and selflessness, I think Senator Muskie was there all the time. I mean, I don't know, I mean we got too many, there's too many stories that are out there, but -

AL: I have a question. You mentioned Madelin Kiah earlier, and we didn't get a chance to interview her because she had passed away. But do you have any memories of her activity, or was she, I don't know

JB: Madelin was a great lady, she was a great lady. Her and my dad, and Theresa Brennan is another lady, I don't know if you could interview Theresa.

AL: I have not been able to find her.

JB: She lives over on the west side of Bangor. Her husband, Bob Brennan, may have just passed away. She's a great lady. She was the registrar of voters in Bangor. Between Theresa Brennan and Madelin Kiah, and there's a lady in Lincoln, I can't remember her name, and I'm losing my mind here, it's a family up there, her and her husband, I want to say Bradford.

AL: I want to say Bradford, too. I think you're right. I think I have the name, but I haven't found them.

JB: Yeah, this is a family up there, husband and wife that are up there, and boy, but I'll tell you, they were powerhouses of people. I mean, they really were. I mean, they talk about that generation being the greatest generation for the war, in WWII, but they also did a lot of things in terms of establishing the foundation in politics, too, and they were real leaders. And they sacrificed a lot, they worked hard and they built the party up from nothing. And they created the foundation of what we have been able to enjoy since then.

I mean, when you stop and think about it, nobody was going to register as a Democrat. In order to get a job or to get along, you had to be a registered Republican. Ed Muskie, my father, and many other fathers and mothers that were out there, during that time period, built the Democratic Party that today runs the House, the Senate, the Blaine House, and is looking to take back the White House.

But I mean, they built the Democratic Party, and it's quite a lot of work that it takes to get it to that point. And they did it without any medals or pats on the back or anything else, but they did it because they felt it was important that there be two parties. And that there be a party to speak for working people, a party to balance the scales and to make sure that people are treated with respect and dignity. My father always said to me, his quote was, "What have you done for the people today?"

I mean, he'd be washing dishes, bussing tables, so I could serve in the legislature. And he'd always, he'd say he didn't mind doing that at all for any one of us, but he'd want to know what you were doing for the people, what in your position as a state senator or a city councilor or a congressman, I mean he wasn't around to see me, I mean, as a congressman, but he would always say, you know, "It's about serving people. It's not about you being comfortable. It's about you putting yourself out there to make sure that it's better for other people."

So, and that's what my mission in life has been, you know, so. I started at the age of twenty-three, and I'm going to be retiring at the age of fifty-six, you know, but it's all been about serving. And my father would say, "Why are you stopping at fifty-six?" If he was around, I know, I know, he'd be kicking me in the butt, saying, "Get out there." And I'd say, "Dad," and he'd say, "just get out there." I can hear him now.

But, you know, I just, my son is going to be going to college and trying to get, you know, my wife and I are going to need to lay our foundation somewhere in the Bangor area and, there's just so many things going on. But I can hear those genes kicking in, you know, and I can feel the nightly call. So I'm sure in some capacity I'll probably try to keep my finger in it, I'm sure. It's like denying my heritage at a point, but I'm going to try.

AL: Did you know the Murray family growing up, too. Robert Murray?

JB: Oh yeah, Bob, oh, Bob and Laura and Frank and Cynthia, oh yeah, very, very well. Oh, god yeah, very well. Severin of course married Cynthia Murray-Beliveau, and her two boys have been helpful in my campaign, Emmett and Devon. Just got a great family, I mean it's a great heritage, I mean my father and Frank and Bob Murray, you know. Because, see, Frank went to school with my brother Bob [Baldacci], because there are eight in our family, and so yeah, we'd go to church together and we did different family things together. And we also did the politics together.

You know, we had one time where we were on separate sides of the issue of, Bob [Murray] was working for Carter, and we were working for Kennedy, at the caucuses. And I have to tell you, that was like, I mean that was unbelievable, what took place at those caucuses for Kennedy and Carter in Bangor. I mean, it was like there were more people that were bussed in, that were there. I mean it was a battle royal, it really was a knock down, drag out campaign that tested everybody's mettle.

But usually when my dad, when the Murrys and the Baldaccis are on the same side of an issue, it's a slam dunk. But, you know, that one time we were on separate sides. But sure, I remember being over at Bob's house when we were listening to the returns on presidential elections, you know, radio addresses and things like that. A wonderful family, wonderful, wonderful family.

Madelin Kiah's son is still alive. You should talk to him, Michael Johnson. Because, when I ran for the city council back in 1978, Madelin actually helped me, because she never loses the art of

calling people. See, you need people to call people on the phone to get out the vote or to get absentee ballots, and she was willing to do that for me. Me and Mike, Mike and I ran at the same time, and Madelin was helping, and it was an opportunity for my dad and Madelin to reconnect and, you know, my dad was coaching me as I'd go along as to who to talk to.

And of course John Diamond's parents, Nat Diamond and Ellie, you know, were very active. Nat had been in charge of the band, and my dad used to organize these torchlight parades, rallies to go from City Hall to Cascade Park, so Nat would be getting the National Guard Music Corps, the band, to play along, the marching music and things like that. They were very active, and his mother Ellie, John's mother.

And then John served in the legislature, too. He was a house majority leader, and now he's working for the University of Maine system, so he's got, his family's got those roots over the years, and they, and it's important. My dad was always told me that our roots are important, and the traditions and heritages are important.

AL: We were able to interview Madelin's daughter, Mary Ellen.

JB: Mary Ellen, oh yeah.

AL: Yeah, so that gave us a little insight.

JB: Good, she would know, too, yeah, Mike and Mary Ellen, because their children work here. Casey and Mike Johnson, Jr., is upstairs, right? It seems like the next generation, oh yeah. Well, that's why Jesse Connolly, I mean, I don't know if you know Jesse and his father Larry Connolly. See, he was very active in politics and, it's hereditary, it just gets in your blood and you can't get it out, you know?

My son, I watch him, how he interacts with people, you know, and he's got, he's got good skills. He's caring, compassionate and listens, so we'll see if that skips for another generation.

AL: And do recall Dick McMahon? Dick McMahon would have been in the early days, the governor years. Well, no, a little later, too.

JB: What did he do?

AL: He was part of the campaign in the '50s.

JB: Was Dick McMahon? My mother and father probably knew him, but I, the ones I remember, the stories I remember were about, because my mother held teas over at their house.

AL: And they called him Friar Tuck, and he was a big guy.

JB: Where's he from, McMahon?

AL: I think he was from Waterville, and he was an uncle to Dan Gwadosky.

JB: Oh really, that's interesting, (*unintelligible word*) ran for mayor of Waterville and lost, and then ran for governor, I think, later on after that. But it was interesting because they'd run in Waterville. No, I don't recollect the name. I remember, of course I remember Frank Coffin, and I remember the stories about Ed and Frank Coffin, and Lyndon Johnson. Of course, Don has enough to regale you about those stories, you know, those are great stories. But no, I don't remember that.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about Senator Muskie in terms of -?

JB: Well, you know, you know George Mitchell's my relative. We used to go to, George used to work for Ed, and I remember going over, as a kid, to George's house, we'd go over on Sundays, my grandmother would go over to meet her sister Mintaha, George's mother, and we'd all get in the station wagon and go over to George's house on Front Street, down by Head of Falls. And, of course, I'm half Lebanese like George, and we'd go to the Maronite church if it was on Sunday.

But George at that time was a staff person for Ed, so I mean, Senator Muskie, so we used to talk to him, you know, about the work that he was doing. It was exciting work, he was spending a lot of time doing research and writing and things like that. So, you know, I just, we got a Senator Muskie view from a lot of different angles at that time.

And frankly, we were very surprised when George decided he was going to run for office, because he just never came across as a politician. He just was always somebody who was in the background, doing the research, doing the hard work, very smart, very, very smart; worked in Intelligence during the war. But you just never figured George to be the politician, because he was always doing the heavy lifting, you know, he was not one of those guys that slaps you on the back and, you know, gives you a big grin and says whatever you want to hear, he's just not that kind of guy. But he was a very smart man, did a lot of work for Senator Muskie.

That's why it was kind of interesting when he ran for governor that time. But he's done terrific. And I know, you know, he's hopefully somebody who you spend a lot of time talking to about Senator Muskie.

No, I have enjoyed both he and Jane and their entire family. We've done the Muskie Bakes over the years, and did it at their home in Scarborough. And, you know, she's just, she's a classy lady, Jane was a classy lady, she really was.

Now, you've asked everything, you've drained me out. Anything else you'd like to know?

AL: I think I've gotten what I need. Thank you so much.

End of Interview