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Billings, Leon oral history interview

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Interview with Leon Billings by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Billings, Leon

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

November 13, 2003

Place

Washington, D.C.

ID Number

MOH 420

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Biographical Note

Leon Billings was born in Helena, Montana on November 19, 1937. His parents were Harry and Gretchen Billings. His father was an editor and publisher of a progressive newspaper; his mother was a crusading journalist. He graduated from high school in Helena, Montana in 1955, and then attended Reed College for one year in Portland, Oregon. He completed his undergraduate studies and took graduate courses toward an M.A. at the University of Montana at Missoula. Billings worked as a reporter and organizer for farm groups in Montana and California. He met his first wife, Pat, in California. They married in Montana and moved to Washington, D.C. on January 4, 1963. While in Washington, Billings worked for the American Public Power Association for three years as a lobbyist. In March 1966, he was offered and accepted a job on the Subcommittee on Air and Water Pollution on the Public Works Committee. He worked for Muskie helping to coordinate work on environmental policy. From 1966 to 1978, he served as Muskie's chief of staff. He served on the Democratic Platform Committee staff in 1968 and in 1974, was co-chairman of a Democratic National Committee task force on Energy and the Environment. He later served as President of the Edmund S. Muskie Foundation; a tax-exempt foundation endowed with a \$3 million appropriation from Congress to perpetuate the environmental legacy of Senator Muskie.

Scope and Content Note

The interview includes discussions of: the period 1980 to 1981 just prior to and during Muskie's time as secretary of state; organizing Muskie's papers and finding a home for them at Bates College; senatorial staff transition from Muskie to Mitchell; the relationship between Muskie and Brzezinski and other state department staff; and changes in Muskie's relationship with President Carter.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Thursday, the 13th of November, 2003, and Don Nicoll is interviewing Leon Billings in his offices at 1625 K Street NW, Washington, D.C. Leon, we will talk today about the State Department period, and I'd like to start, even though we've touched on this in another interview, with the invitation from President Carter for Senator Muskie to become secretary of state.

Leon Billings: Well, it's a fascinating story because Muskie and I had talked in late evenings when the Senate was in session on what he might do if he left the Senate, how he could gracefully leave the Senate without being defeated or carried out. And he said, I said, "Well, you could take a Cabinet appointment." And I believe his direct quote was, "Oh hell, they'd want me to be Director of the Office of Management and Budget." And I said, "No," I said, "that might be your view but, you know, there's no reason you couldn't be secretary of Treasury." And he thought about that and he says, "Yeah, yeah, I could be secretary of Treasury." I said, "Or you could be secretary of state." He said, "Secretary of state is something I would leave the government for."

And I had a, because of a trip we'd made to China together, a close personal relationship with Frank Moore who was the president's congressional liaison, and we talked about the possibility of Muskie as secretary of state in a second Carter administration, assuming Vance would step down. Cy Vance was then secretary of state. Well, in I guess it was May, first of May, right around there, when the Iranian rescue mission went awry and Vance resigned.

I think it was the same day, that night, I got a call from Muskie about, he wanted to have a meeting with Berl Bernhard and myself and Jane and his accountant the next morning. And I said, "Well, are you going to accept the job?" And he, "What the hell do you know about it?" And I said, "Well, I assume Carter offered you the job of secretary of state." Well, he wasn't aware of the fact that I had been in conversations with Frank Moore about his willingness to do this.

And I don't think I told you this before but, the President called several people before he called Muskie about being secretary of state. And I know from personal contact that he talked to Sol Linowitz, he talked to Bob Strauss, and he had talked to Warren Christopher. And in each case

the, when he talked to Sol Linowitz about being secretary of state and who he might select, Linowitz made some suggestions, including Warren Christopher. And Carter said, "Well what would you think of Ed Muskie?" And Linowitz said that that would be an absolute coup, I doubt that he'd take it.

He said the same, he called Bob Strauss, and Bob Strauss in his inimitable fashion, at least what Strauss told me, which was probably a joke, said, "Well, I first suggested myself, and then when he said 'what about Ed Muskie?' I said, well, you know, Ed Muskie would be a great choice, but there's no way he'd leave the United States Senate." And he also asked Christopher what he thought of Ed Muskie, and Christopher didn't know Muskie that well, but he thought it was a good appointment.

So Carter obviously knew from his conversations with Frank Moore that were the offer to be made it was quite likely that Muskie would take it. Which was an enormous benefit for Carter, because the, if you recall the politics of the time, the failed rescue mission and the Vance resignation were a serious blow to the President. The selection of Ed Muskie immediately removed all that debate, and Vance became irrelevant, the Iranian hostage failure, rescue failure became page five news. And Muskie as the secretary designee became front page news and saved the President some considerable loss of political support.

DN: Did Ed talk at all with Cy Vance at that point?

LB: I do not believe so. If he did, he did it not to my knowledge. His conversations were with, he wanted to talk to his accountant to see whether they could afford it. He obviously had already talked to Jane about it but he wanted her there in the discussion process. He wanted to talk to Berl and me about the politics of it, and he, I think more, I was sort of the go-to person on, you know, 'what do I have to do to pull this thing off?'. And then he, of course he talked to Joe Brennan. And he, I don't think he talked to anyone else.

My recollection is, it actually was a pretty well kept secret. He announced it to Nordy Hoffmann at about quarter to two the next day, that day, the next day, because we went to Maine and saw Brennan, then came back. And then at two o'clock he announced it to staff. And about one-thirty Bob Rose, then the press secretary, was getting telephone calls from people because it had by then leaked out. But it was, for Washington, it was an enormously long time that, and I think he kept it closely held, Berl and I kept it closely held.

DN: And the White House, obviously.

LB: Obviously.

DN: Now, what was the reaction in the Senate from his colleagues, particularly his close colleagues?

LB: I don't really have a read on that. I do know that one of the, the confirmation hearing was very warm, very friendly. The, during the debate, there was only one negative vote on his confirmation and that was from Jesse Helms who came over to him and said, "I think you'll do a

great job. I'm all for your being successful down there, you just have to understand that I can't vote for you." It was a very warm, friendly overture on Helms's part.

DN: What was Helms' reason for voting against him?

LB: He thought Muskie was way too liberal, you know. I mean, and it was, part of it was the whole United Nations, he saw Muskie as a one-worlder. The interesting thing was, one of the things that I did was, I immediately moved to bring Scoop Jackson and Howard Baker into a close working relationship with Muskie. Baker was one of his best friends in the Senate, but Jackson had been his long time antagonist, very different philosophy. And so I suggested to Muskie shortly after he got there that he ought to sit down and talk to Scoop. Well, needless to say, it elicited the usual Muskie reaction, you know, "What the hell should I do that for? He'll never come to a goddamn meeting. I'd just embarrass myself." And I said, "Well, let me set it up."

So I set it up, and Scoop came down and had breakfast with him which was, Muskie had, Muskie did a lot of work at breakfast, because he got up very early in the morning and breakfast was his best time of day. And Scoop came in and the two of them met. And I asked him later how the meeting went and he sort of brushed me off because it was, as far as he was concerned it wasn't any of my business, but apparently it was a fantastic meeting. Scoop basically said, you know, "You're the Secretary of State, I want to help you, I will do anything that you ask. I want you to have the, I want you to be successful." And Muskie was sort of taken aback by how generous Scoop was. And then Baker, Baker became sort of a constant. He was the guy that Muskie saw periodically for breakfast, and when he was on the Hill he saw Baker. And Baker was sort of liaison with the more moderate Republicans, not necessarily the more conservative ones.

Then the interesting, I think, was Pat Moynihan. Moynihan had never been a particular, anyone that I ever identified as being a fan of Muskie's or a friend, but Moynihan called me one day and he said he wanted to see the Secretary and he knew he had to go through staff. It was a very strange phone conversation, because I'd never had a pleasant conversation with Pat Moynihan in the years he'd been on the Environment Committee and I was on staff there. And he became enormously supportive of Muskie.

So there were benefits that, from that Senate relationship, that I don't know that they were evident immediately upon the appointment. And remember, it moved very quickly and I think we were, he was nominated on around the first of May and he was in the office the eighth of May. And by the tenth or eleventh of May we were in Vienna meeting with the Russian foreign minister for the first time since the Afghanistan invasion.

DN: Now, obviously you had an enormous amount of work to do to get the office ready and take care of the transition. How did he proceed and what sorts of instructions did he give you on staff selection?

LB: Well, first, from your experience you'll know that these things with Muskie were more of an iterative process than an instruction process. I had made a decision when I became administrative assistant in '78 that we needed to do something about Muskie's papers, because he

had talked about whether he was going to run again and so on. I didn't want to back up against the '82 election with, Muskie was probably the most prolific legislator in American history and he had enormous records, plus he had a twenty-five year political career going back to the state legislature and so on.

So I went to Maine and met with people at the University of Maine, and I met with Hedley Reynolds at Bates, and came back to Muskie and said, "You really should put your papers at the University of Maine Orono. They've got a brand new library, they'll give you a whole floor, they'll give you an archivist," and so on. But his heart was at Bates, and so he talked to Hedley Reynolds and we began an archival process. And I hired a librarian, a woman named Lillian Hetling who did it for about a year, and then Anita Jensen took it over. But we were really well on our way. I had hired a young fellow to go into the attic at the Waterville office and just put the stuff in boxes because it was strewn all over the floor. I think it was David Lamoine, wasn't it, or who was it?

DN: I think that's right.

LB: Anyway, so we were well on our way at least to being organized. And so that part was relatively easy, that was just a follow through. And we had a contract with Bates College on the papers. With respect to staff, it was more complicated because Muskie was the first political Secretary of State, seriously political secretary of state in modern times, since the senator from South Carolina.

DN: [James Francis] Byrnes.

LB: Jimmy Byrnes. And the State Department had no capacity to deal with this concept. In history, the secretary had been served by a career Foreign Service officer as executive assistant, and by career secretaries and so on. And, you know, we were expert at the care and feeding of a high maintenance United States senator. And so I said to Muskie, I said, "What you're going to have to do is, you're going to have to find, you're going to have to tell these people, the president and whoever else, that you want to bring Gayle [Cory], because Gayle is your liaison with Maine and your liaison with your wife. You're going to want to bring Carole [Parmelee] because she's your personal assistant. You're going to want to bring Bob [Rose] because you want to have somebody who is not the State Department who is thinking about your press relations and your speeches and so on. You want to bring Leslie [Finn] because she keeps your books and writes your checks. And I want to bring Fran [Miller?] because I'm going to need a secretary who understands that I'll be doing things that are not going to be public or visible.

And that was six people, including me, and there were just screams that we couldn't do this. One of the loudest screamers was a guy named Jerry Bremer who is today known as L. Paul Bremer. And the career Foreign Service was furious. They, they pointed out that the secretary of defense only had one political appointee, but needless to say Muskie got what he asked for.

DN: And how was it handled in the office in terms of those who wouldn't be going to State?

LB: Well, we, Muskie asked Joe Brennan at their meeting at Brunswick Naval Air Station,

before the appointment was announced, if he would try to protect the staff during the transition. He said he understood whoever his successor was would want his own staff people, but he hoped that he, Brennan, would ask the, his appointee to protect the staff and give them sufficient time to make their transition. And it turned out, of course, I don't think George Mitchell replaced any of the staff. We had taken out enough of the key staff that there was a lot of budget there for him to play with, and he was immediately engaged in a life or death political struggle so he didn't make many changes.

DN: You went into the State Department with some resistance because of their views of a political secretary coming in with a fairly substantial personal staff, and immediately had the trip to Vienna on your plate with the meeting with the Russian foreign minister.

LB: [Andrei] Gromyko.

DN: And whom Ed had met in prior trips.

LB: Right. Many years ago.

DN: Seventy-one.

LB: Seventy-one, yes.

DN: When -

LB: And that, by the way, was an interesting event that merits some attention. When we got to Vienna and we were convoyed to the place where this meeting was to take place. Among those present were Berl Bernhard and Steve Muskie who was photographing the event, and myself, plus the State Department people, George Vest who was the assistant secretary for Europe. And we go into this sort of holding room, and in walks David Aaron from the National Security Council, and his entourage and he informs Muskie that he has come to attend the meeting with Gromyko. And Muskie looked at him and he said, "I didn't know you were invited. I'm meeting with Gromyko, you're not." And Aaron was just ab-, he said, "Brzezinski wants me in that meeting." And Muskie said, "Well you tell Brzezinski that if he was here he wouldn't be in that meeting." And Aaron turned around, red as a beet, and wheeled out of there.

And Muskie then had a meeting, a one-on-one, with Gromyko with the only other person there being the interpreters. And then he wrote up his own notes on the meeting. And the, I mean it was a display that probably had multiple benefits, because number one, the State Department professionals were very antagonistic towards the National Security Council, Brzezinski and Aaron, so Muskie put that in proper perspective. And number two, Muskie was prepared to go head to head. That scared the hell out of them, but they realized that they had somebody they had to deal with.

So it had quite a beneficial effect, and it set off what became a much more competitive situation between the National Security advisor and the secretary of state, which Muskie did not handle well. Because Muskie did not see he and Brzezinski as competitors. He saw them both as

serving the president and the country, and he was not aware of or prepared to accept the fact that Brzezinski would do everything he could to undercut him as secretary.

DN: Did, was there an immediate fallout from the Security Council office? That is, did he and Brzezinski have words about his affront, if you will, to Aaron?

LB: I'm not sure what exactly happened. There was a group called the MBB group, which is Muskie-Brown, Brown, Harold Brown, the secretary of defense, and Brzezinski who met weekly to talk about national security matters. And I don't know, that was a bad, an extraordinarily bad process because Brzezinski kept notes on the meeting and shared them with the president but didn't necessarily vet them with the other attendees.

The only thing I really know is that almost immediately after that event, the social contact that we had and the political contact with Madeleine Albright, who had been Muskie's legislative assistant for foreign affairs and had become congressional liaison for Brzezinski and who was sort of, you know, part of the welcoming team when we came to the State Department, suddenly she just disappeared and wasn't talking to us at all. So clearly there was fallout but I, again, we . . .

And also the role of Warren Christopher in all of this, I mean Christopher was sort of the guy that kept the department in toe and kept the, you know, controlled the department. Muskie didn't have much to do with that. And Christopher would identify areas in which Brzezinski was overstepping his bounds and so on. But, and was, because he'd been there much longer and he'd seen it for a longer period of time was much more sensitive to it, and Muskie was just, even though Muskie had set a precedent with Aaron, he, Muskie didn't see that as a part of a larger struggle with Brzezinski.

And, you know, the president basically said, "I want to have this kind of competition." Well, Muskie said, "I'm not here to compete with Brzezinski, I'm here to conduct foreign policy." The personality, it was a real problem.

DN: How did Carter deal with that?

LB: For a long time, he tended to listen to Brzezinski because Muskie was not asserting himself. The, that changed in the summer, one of, when, you know, historically starting after Memorial Day the Muskie family moved to Maine, and this year was no different. Muskie moved his family to Maine, and it was his wont to spend his weekends in Maine. And so he would usually take a Air Force gulfstream up to Stanford, what is it?

DN: Sanford.

LB: Sanford, and drive over. And he'd work out of the, his Maine house and on Saturday there'd be, a plane would go up with cable traffic and so on. And then he'd usually come back Sunday night or Monday morning.

Well, it was, and understand, we were all there, I was there six days a week. And it was a little

bit irritating because the State Department is not an entity which ever sleeps, and when the driver's not at the wheel it tends to go on its own, and the direction may or may not be what you want. And when you have another driver trying to grab the wheel, which is what Brzezinski was doing, it became an enormously problematic situation.

So in the, in August of 1980 the, Brzezinski asserted himself in a very public way on a foreign policy issue, on a, some time over Friday night and into Saturday morning, having to do with I think Afghanistan but I'm not sure, I don't remember fully. I sat down at my manual 1942 Royal typewriter and I wrote a message to Muskie. And one of the Foreign Service officers came in and said, you know, "There's not much happening today, we're not going to send the plane and the courier to Maine today." And I said, "Oh yes you are." I said, "If that bag only has one thing in it, it's going to take this note up." And I wrote Muskie a note which basically, which said, quote, "At this point Zbig is running American foreign policy. You're AWOL. If you want to be secretary of state, you should get your butt back to Washington and be secretary of state." That's all it said, it was three lines long. Folded it up, put it in a letter.

Well, unbeknownst to me, that afternoon, the plane got up there that morning, that afternoon Muskie came back. And Muskie did not, he never acknowledged it, I'm sure he destroyed it. He was in the office that afternoon, late, he was in the office on Sunday, and he never left Washington again for any vacation during the period he was secretary of state, and it made an enormous difference. I mean, he went from being sort of gentleman secretary to being hands on secretary, and when that happened his relationship with Carter changed dramatically also.

You recall the photograph of Muskie and Carter walking out to a helicopter after Carter, I think it was after he lost the election, after, when he left the White House. And Muskie's got his hand on his shoulder, and Carter was a pretty small man size wise, and it was a very impressive picture but that was what their relationship became. And he became a force for foreign policy in that final September, October, November, December period, the last four months.

DN: Did his relationship with Brzezinski become more confrontational at that point?

LB: Well, to the extent it could deteriorate, it deteriorated. It was still not Muskie's wont to be confrontational, but we had, one of the things that drove the State Department professionals nuts, Christopher and others, was every night Brzezinski would send notes to the president. And the, it was decided that Muskie should do the same thing. And the problem was that Brzezinski was an engaged foreign policy addict, and Muskie was a big picture foreign policy guy. So that they'd prepare these notes that Muskie would send but they were by and large non-controversial, non-confrontational. But Brzezinski was basically directing foreign policy through these notes, and he would get them back with little notes from the president on them, and then he would tell the secretary of state what to do on the basis of his instructions from the president. And needless to say, this was very disconcerting to the, because not knowing what the input to the president was, we had no idea what the basis on which the output came.

I have in my files, there was a particular incident, boy, this was, the Dresser Company, which has been subsequently acquired by Halliburton, was a big oilfield supply company and they had a contract with the Russians. And Brzezinski wanted to, as a part of the ongoing anti-

Afghanistan thing, wanted to cancel this contract, even though all of the sensitive material had been delivered and there was nothing left that merited under the law a cancellation. So the State Department opposed it, saying it was a breach of legal authority.

Well, Brzezinski ordered the contract cancelled without any evidence that the president was aware of it, or the president had in fact directed it. And so we raised hell about it. And the, so Brzezinski sent a note to the president that came back with the note from the president, "I don't want you to raise this issue again." But it's a clear example of the way this communication worked between the president and Brzezinski and the State Department, which I have in my files together with a backup memo that I wrote at the time putting the whole thing in context so that at some future time, if somebody wants to use it.

DN: Now, when the president said, I don't want you to raise this again, was he saying this to ESM, or to -?

LB: He was saying this, he didn't want it raised again by anybody, he made this decision. But again, our problem was we had no idea what the initial input was, and you know, there were legal issues here that the president may or may not have been aware of. I mean, this president wasn't unthoughtful, but our experience was, you know, that the, this president was not extremely sophisticated and he didn't have a prolonged period of government service. And we didn't know how much we trusted his judgment, you know, after some of the things like the fifty dollar tax rebate and stuff like that. But the, it was very frustrating for the secretary.

I mean, one of the, one of the ongoing issues was the, the key ongoing issue, was the Iranian hostage negotiations. And as was the case in, I think, other crises of this kind, everybody had their Iranian and, I mean there were people in the White House, Hamilton Jordan, and people in Brzezinski's office and so on, who were talking to people who supposedly had influence in Iran. And there was Bill Casey, the Reagan's CIA director who was over in Switzerland talking to the Iranians about not settling, you know, that stuff was going on. And there was no control, it was just, and the problem was that the, it gave the Iranians a sense that if they held out they would keep, they would maintain chaos in the United States. And that's what they wanted to do because they wanted to bring down this president.

So finally Arnie Raphel, who was a career Foreign Service officer who'd been in Iran part of his career, who spoke fluent Farsi and was the, one of the two Foreign Service officers assigned to Muskie on a regular basis, convinced Muskie that we needed to just shut down all of these back channels and wait until the Iranians got the message that there wasn't going to be any more official gasoline poured on the Iranian fire. And Muskie took that advice, and he took it to the president and got the president to agree to it.

And then it was as a result of that decision that we eventually got to the point where the German foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher came to Muskie on a Sunday morning. [He] flew into Andrews, came in to visit Muskie, left the country, nobody ever knew he was here, saying that the Iranians wanted to negotiate the release and they wanted to use the Algerians to do it. And then Muskie dispatched Christopher to that activity. But it was only after a sustained period of silence, and Muskie wouldn't talk about it at press conferences, he would not speculate on it, he

just left it alone, tried to take it out of the media.

DN: What was the date of, the approximate date when Arnie Raphel talked to him?

LB: Well, actually it started quite early, I would say it probably started in late May, early June, and then it took a while to, part of it was, it took a while for Muskie to fully understand how much power he had and how much responsibility he had. But it also took a while to shut down the, there were a lot of head gates out there that had to be closed through which water was leaking, or pouring, or flooding.

DN: And when was the Hans-Dietrich Genscher?

LB: I think that was probably in September.

DN: So that was after he started working full time, as you described it.

LB: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

DN: During this entire period, what was his working relationship with Harold Brown?

LB: Muskie, I think, felt he had a very good working relationship with Brown. You know, Brown was sort of single-minded, you know there's, I think Muskie felt that it was more likely Muskie and Brown versus Brzezinski than Brown-Brzezinski versus Muskie. I'm not sure that was always the case, however. Though I was never a part of any of those meetings, so I don't know.

DN: And the working relationship with Warren Christopher, you've mentioned his two principal roles, one sort of the chief operations officer for the Department of State, and the second was handling the negotiations with the Iranians ultimately on the hostage release. How did he and Muskie work out that, those two relationships?

LB: Well the, one just sort of, the chief operating officer was sort of a, was just acquired by the nature of Muskie's personality. The Algerian one was of necessity because Muskie thought he needed somebody who had the skills, and Christopher was uniquely skilled for that task. But the other, the, after the incident which I described to you before, Muskie began to talk to Christopher as opposed to anyone else. And they developed a fraternal if not paternal relationship in that period subsequent to that incident where Christopher was serving not only as deputy secretary of state, but also as executive assistant and personal advisor and so on. He, and Muskie was extraordinarily deferential, from the first day he went to the department he was extraordinarily deferential to Christopher.

On the other hand, you know, one of the interesting fallouts was one day in perhaps October, Chris called me into his office and was, had this look on his face like he'd just been beat to death with a baseball bat. And he was begging me for help in dealing with the senator, because not only had he taken over most of what my responsibilities were, he began to realize that that wasn't entirely a week in the country, much less a day at the beach. And he wanted me back into the

fray as insulation with the senator on a lot of this stuff, and that's when things started to turn around. But he was, he was not prepared. I mean, Muskie was extraordinarily short tempered at times when he was secretary of state, not really any different than when he was United States Senator. But, you know, you had to have a fairly flexible personality to deal with that and I don't think Christopher's personality was nearly as flexible as some others, including me. But there was an admiration.

DN: Now, throughout this period, both at the beginning of the time in the State Department and through the various tumultuous events, you and Carole and company were dealing with the State Department. How did you find the responses from the Foreign Service staff and some of the support staff?

LB: Well, it took the career people a little while, not long, to appreciate the value that the Muskie people brought to the table. I don't think any of them were prepared for either the intellect or the volatility or the complexity of Muskie, and so my relationship with them was, with the career people, was excellent. The executive secretary and the career Foreign Service officers, the spokesmen who started out being Connie Carter and then became John Trattner. And to a degree, to a very great degree, a good deal of the business of State that came to me because either Muskie wasn't accessible or wasn't interested in being accessible on a lot of the minutia so. And that's not meant to denigrate his role but there were so many things going on, so many big picture things that, you know, necessarily it devolved to someone to handle the, those matters that didn't fall right into the big picture.

One of my favorite stories is, the State Department has something called guidance. Guidance is the information the State Department releases publicly to, quote, guide, unquote, the press on our posture on a given event or issue. And every day there are dozens of events, you know, from whatever part of the world you're in, something has happened that somebody wants to know what the Muskie position was.

Well, something happened in the Balkans. And John Trattner came to me and he said, "We've got to get some guidance out on this. I've got to get this to the secretary." And I looked at it and I said, "John," I said, "We're not going to do that. Number one, I'm not going to take it to the secretary; number two, you're not going to put out guidance on it. And what I want you to do is come back to me the minute you get a question about this. Then we'll put out guidance, but not until." And about three days later I said, "John, did anything ever come of that?" And he said, "No." And I said, "Well, one of the problems is we put out too much damn guidance around here. We provoke stories that we don't need to have." But then that's the way the State Department tended to work.

And then we had, you know, the other thing that, I mean Muskie had to deal with, he had people like Ben Read who was the undersecretary for management who was a strong, strong Muskie friend and supporter, probably going back to his presidential candidacy.

DN: Even before that, Ben was an assistant to the senator from Pennsylvania.

LB: Clark?

DN: Clark.

LB: Well, but he was a great admirer and a great friend. And his whole staff, Patrick Kennedy who was his chief administrative officer, I mean those people were great, and their egos didn't seem to get in the way. And Christopher, to the ex-, if he had an ego it didn't manifest itself. I mean, I know he had an ego, but he didn't.

But then you had the [Richard] Dick Holbrooks of the world who, we called him “back-door Holbrook” because at every chance he got he wanted to deliver somebody, something to the secretary without going through the process of the executive secretary and clearing it through the system. And Dick Holbrook was the first real friend I made in the State Department. I mean, he was in there making friends with us the first day we got there. And it took about a month for me to figure out why it was so important to Holbrook that we be, quote, good friends, unquote, because he wanted to use me to get to the secretary.

And so you had, you had to sort all this out because you had, you know, you had people, you had Richard Moose who had worked on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who was exactly the opposite, he didn't ever want to put anything up to the secretary because it was not his style to do that. So Africa sort of disappeared off the global map, while Asia which, where Holbrook was, was looming up as the largest part of the world. So you had to deal with these personalities, and quite frankly that's not something Muskie did. You know, he would assess the information he had.

I remember one time he walked in, we had this small group meeting every morning at seven-thirty, and it was the principal undersecretaries, the head of the executive secretariat, myself, and the Foreign Service officer. And Muskie padded out of his office, he didn't have his shoes on, he didn't have his jacket on. He sat down in his wingback chair and he had a piece of paper in his hand and, you know, everybody was sitting there with their notepads on their knees getting ready to take down the gospel according to Ed Muskie.

And I could see he was agitated, his hand was shaking. Muskie had a little bit of the shakes anyway, but this was clearly more pronounced. And finally he looks up and he says, “Who put this piece of shit on my desk?” And it was a draft statement that someone wanted him to make which would have put him in the position of supporting an authoritarian regime, something like that. I mean it was just, it was, I had not seen it, I don't know how it got in there. It was so antithetical to Muskie's view of the world -

End of Side A
Side B

DN: This is the second side of the November 13th interview with Leon Billings.

LB: It was a shock. I mean no one had seen anything but, and this was early on, this was like June, no one had seen anything but the deferential, polite, politic, diplomatic Muskie, and all of a sudden they saw Vesuvius erupt. And for me it was wonderful because the, there had been real

doubts about what my role was there, but very, very quickly after that a lot of these political appointees and pros and so on realized that there was, that this guy was more complicated than they had any reason to believe.

DN: Thank you very much, we'll continue this later.

End of Interview