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Billings, Leon oral history interview

Don Nicoll

Interview with Leon Billings by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee
Billings, Leon

Interviewer
Nicoll, Don

Date
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Place
Portland, Maine

ID Number
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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

Interview includes discussions of: anecdotes and description of the State Department; relationship between Muskie and Brzezinski; Iranian hostage situation; Afghan-Russian story; Cuban-Ethiopian story; description of Muskie during time as Secretary of State; Muskie during post-public office years; and the philosophy of the Constitution.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Thursday, the 15th of April 2004. Leon Billings and Don Nicoll are at 9 Highland Street in Portland, Maine and Don is interviewing Leon. Leon, when we last talked we were talking about the State Department year and particularly the early interaction between Secretary Muskie and his staff and the staff of the Department of State, the Foreign Service offices, and that was a tumultuous year, and you were dealing in part with the issue of the Iranian hostages. How did that play out, particularly as you got into the tense period following the election?

Leon Billings: Well, of course the hostage crisis dominated, interest dominated to a modest degree the entire tenure of Secretary Muskie. But after the election, it became obvious that there were going to be opportunities to end the crisis. The by this time the secretary had, since sometime in August, the secretary had moved to a point of devoting seven days a week and literally coming in on most Sundays and being there all day Saturday and trying, I think, to make sure that what he could do would be done. Plus the fact that there were others things going on that he had to take care of.

But in any event, the, we had had this overture from the German government that indicated that there was a potential for negotiating an outcome, and the secretary assigned Deputy Secretary [Warren] Christopher with the task of first going, I believe, to Geneva and then later to Algiers to negotiate with the Iranians through the Algerians. And the Secretary assigned [Arnold L.] Arnie Raphel, who was a, then a career foreign service officer assigned to the secretary who happened to have served in Iran, who happened to speak Farsi to, and who later became ambassador to Pakistan and was killed in a plane crash with [Muhammad] Zia [ul-Haq], the president some years later, to go with Christopher so that there would be someone in whom the Secretary had complete confidence working on and reporting back.

And every day was a, the primary focus was where are we in the negotiations, what's going to happen and when is it going to come out, to the point that finally all the i's were dotted and t's were crossed and we had an agreement, and then the only question was when would the hostages be released. And as everyone knows, the Iranians held hostages until the, President Reagan was

sworn in and Carter was out of office. Which, you know, I think the Secretary ended his term satisfied that we had done everything that we could do.

And Don, I'm a little hazy about where we were on this the last time, but when Muskie became secretary of state the hostage negotiations didn't exist. People were running all over the world talking to various Iranians and Iranian contacts, and everybody, all the key people at the White House had their Iranian contacts and it was just . . . . And you had the network news people who were doing stories every night, and particularly badly Marvin Kalb of ABC who did really, there was kind of yellow journalism on the crisis for a long time.

And so, what Muskie convinced the president that he needed to do, and this was on the advice of Arnie Raphel, was he needed everybody to shut up and stop talking publicly and stop acting independently, and to bring the hostage negotiations into the State Department and into the White House and out of the public eye, so that there would be a calm negotiation. And Muskie did this for two reasons: one because Raphel suggested that that was far and away the best way to deal with the Iranians who he knew something about, and Muskie agreed with it because he was absolutely sure that it was the only way for the president to survive the issue in the context of the November elections. Well, it worked in one way but it didn't work in the other, but it was, so that . . . . The problem with it, of course, was once you brought it inside then you also had responsibility for it, and it was a full-time preoccupation.

Though, though I'm not sure we talked about the Cuban deserters. There was, one of the more depressing moments in the Muskie tenure, two Cuban soldiers who were serving under the Russians in Ethiopia came over the wall into the American embassy. Actually, maybe it was three, I'm not, and the, and at the same time that we saw this, got this report, which was a secret report from the ambassador in the cable traffic, there was a story in the *New York Times* which, the implication of which was that we were going to give them back to the Russians, we were going to free them. Because we had a problem in Ethiopia, we couldn't defend our own embassy, and the, we believed that, and the Secretary believed that an assistant to the national security advisor had leaked this story, because one of the defectors' first name was Benjamin. And the assistant to the national security advisor, convinced that this guy was Jewish and that he had a personal responsibility to protect him even though it exposed the - - I'm sorry, this is Afghanistan, not Ethiopia - - and yeah, it was Russian, because there was a Cuban thing in Ethiopia too, and that's why I'm confused.

In any event, it became, our embassy in Kabul in 1980 was nothing more than an extraordinarily complex listening post for eavesdropping on the Russians and monitoring the battle between the Russians and the Afghans. As such it was known by those of us who were close to this and highly cleared, an extraordinarily important, sensitive listening post. And so the issue was did we create a circumstance in which the Russians came in and took out the deserters, or did we protect our own interests.

DN: Now, these deserters were Russian?

LB: They were Russian, one of whom's name was Benjamin. And this was leaked to the *Times* to stop us from being able to deal with it diplomatically, to be able to deal with it in the context

of American national security. It was one of the most egregious examples of putting other interests ahead of the United States' interests that I saw, and it epitomized the problem that the State Department and the secretary of state had with the national security advisor and the national security advisor's staff. And it also epitomized the relationship that the secretary had with the national security advisor, because there was, they were two totally independent camps undisciplined by the president, so.

DN: How was that issue resolved, the Afghanistan defectors?

LB: They were turned back over to the Russians and they were killed.

DN: As a result of this leak, and?

LB: Well, no, as a result of the fact that a decision was made that the embassy could not be compromised. And we were later advised they were probably executed, and it was not a pleasant outcome but it was not an outcome over which we had, I mean, the decision was made based on the best interests of the United States, at the highest levels.

DN: How was it determined that a national security advisor staff member was the source of the leak?

LB: By the number of people who were aware of the situation. I mean, this, there were probably only six or seven people who knew about it.

DN: And how did the Secretary deal with this in terms of the national security advisor?

LB: I don't think he dealt with it directly. I think that he, I think that he let the president know, and I think he let the national security advisor know that it wasn't a very good way to run a railroad. But ultimately, you know, these are the kinds of things that happen in government that you can't repair so you just go on to the next one.

DN: Was there any discipline taken against the leaker?

LB: No, no.

DN: What, you mentioned the Ethiopian-Cuban -?

LB: Well, we had a similar situation where some Cubans who were in Cuba had a complement of military in Ethiopia fighting in that Ethiopian civil war, and we had two or three Cubans come into the American embassy. And the interesting thing about that was that there was no back pressure to protect them at all, I mean the, and our Ethiopian embassy was not a critical installation. And the, but my recollection is that one of the Cubans went back out, and the other two were repatriated and I don't know what happened to them. But I don't think it, it didn't carry the same implication for what America was doing. I mean, we had, we had fairly deep engagement in Afghanistan in terms of what we were doing with the Afghan rebels, and what we were doing in Pakistan in the, in the, when we were supporting Osama bin Laden and his efforts,

and so in this case it was a huge compromise. In the Ethiopian situation, it was an unfortunate event.

DN: Raises an interesting question, particularly in the middle of the 9/11 commission hearings. Do you recall much about the role of the State Department in connection with the mujahadeen and Afghanistan at the time?

LB: Yeah, the national security advisor, it's important to put into context that the United States government policy in 1980, as it had been since 1946, was driven by Cold War realities, or whatever, but they were called Cold War realities. And the, I have this picture in my mind, it was on the front page of the *New York Times*, it was the national security advisor standing in the Khyber Pass with some of the mujahadeen, however you pronounce that, waving a Kalishnakov, a AK-47. And you know, we were providing the Afghan rebels with surface-to-air missiles and with all kinds of, I can't tell you that from classified documents, that's more from *New York Times* and the reports. But we were deeply engaged in trying to frustrate the Soviet Union's effort to establish Afghanistan as a client state, and as such we made friends with, you know, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and we had a lot of those in Afghanistan. It was a very, you know, I mean it's a fascinating turn of the wheel.

But the national security advisor, there was a dynamic between Muskie and Brzezinski which was not unlike the dynamic between Muskie and [Senator Henry] Scoop Jackson. Brzezinski was of the Scoop Jackson hot war theory; Muskie was a much more, much more like the president really, Carter was much more peace oriented. And the national security advisor, being more Polish than he was American, wanted to confront the Soviet Union, and Muskie wanted to co-opt the Soviet Union.

Muskie believed, long before Reagan proved it, that the Russian economy could not sustain competition with the United States. If one were to go back into the budgetary analyses that were done by the Senate Budget Committee when Muskie was chairman, they were looking at the defense expenditures of the United States in the context of the need to compete with the Soviet Union. And people like John Tillson, who worked for the Senate Budget Committee before Muskie, would tell you that they had open discussions about the fact that the Soviet economy, the Soviet system would collapse of its own weight if it tried to compete with the level of defense expenditures that were being considered by John Stennis before Ronald Reagan even upped the ante. And Muskie was a part and parcel to that debate. So his theory was you don't have to go to war with Russia to defeat them, you just have to keep the economic pressure on and they'll defeat themselves. And this is, a researcher, if someone were going back through this they would go, find it well to go back through the memoranda of the Senate Budget Committee to see that.

DN: You mentioned that Senator Muskie, Secretary Muskie and the president had a similar view on diplomacy and national, international policy of the United States. Was there any difficulty in convincing the president that the hostage negotiations should be focused within the State Department and outside should be damped down?

LB: I don't think so. I think that the president saw the departure of Vance and the arrival of

Muskie as an opportunity to change the nature of the effort. I think there were people in the White House and in other foreign policy branches of the government who may have been somewhat more reluctant, but the, it is my sense that the president very quickly deferred to this.

Though, you know, the problem with the hostage situation was that the president couldn't keep his own hands out of it. So I think that there was probably more general acceptance of the philosophy that Muskie espoused all the way up to the president. And his biggest problem was keeping the president from taking, in some respects it was the art of keeping information from the president so that he didn't overreact like they did in the Wisconsin thing, on the eve of the Wisconsin primary when they announced the imminent release of the hostages. Well, you know, he went way up in the polls but the problem was they did that about three times and then after that he never went up in the polls again, because there was too much wolf crying.

The president, Muskie found that the president was an incredible meddler. And it was, and what he eventually found, probably too late, was that he personally had to be attentive to the president if he was going to compete with the other sycophants in the White House, who were constantly attentive to the president. So that he had to spend more time with him, he had to go to, he had to take initiatives to be with him, he had to become an independent source of influence (*unintelligible phrase*). He didn't believe that was necessary when he became secretary of state.

The president ultimately told him that, when he complained about Brzezinski and Brzezinski's independent action and Brzezinski's hawkish tendencies, the president said, "I expect you to fight with him." And it wasn't Muskie's ken to have to fight with a peer or a colleague in order to present his views to the president. You and I knew him well enough, that wasn't the way he did things, and it rattled his cage to have to do that.

DN: Did he ever discuss the difference in the culture of the executive office and the culture of the Senate?

LB: No, but I think he did with [Senator Howard H.] Baker and [Henry] Jackson who he got to be quite close to in the State Department. They actually became friends before it was all over. But no, no . . . . The interesting thing is that for all of the sturm and drong, is that the term, of the eight months that he was secretary of state I don't think he ever looked back. I don't think it was until after he had been out of government for about a year that he began to look back and have some, and reflect on what the Senate meant to him.

DN: We've been talking quite a bit about the politics with a small 'p' of foreign policy in the executive branch. What about the politics surrounding the hostage crisis and the stories that have been around for years about Bill Casey and Reagan and company interfering with the negotiations? Were you aware of any of the maneuvering, or in retrospect does it seem to you to be a fair allegation about Casey and company?

LB: Well, number one, no, I was not aware of any chicanery, if you would. Number two, in retrospect we were, either the Iranians were playing us much more sadistically than even Arnie Raphel thought, or something else interfered with the process. Because there was a time in early September when we had reason to believe that the dam was going to burst and this was going to

be resolved. And all of a sudden, without any explanation, the door closed and the opportunity for resolution disappeared until after the election. And, I mean, I can't give you dates because, you know, I was working six, seven days a week myself, twelve hours, fourteen hours, sixteen hours a day, but I do know that there was a great deal of optimism. There was so much optimism that one of the tasks Muskie had was to keep the president from being publicly optimistic. And we believed that that was a combination of the quiet diplomacy as opposed to the noisy diplomacy that had been waged up until May, June of that year. So did the, was there an external force involved, a third party? Or did the Ayatollah say, "We're going to get Jimmy Carter?" Who knows? But I will say that if you talk to anyone who was deeply involved in that situation in September of 1980, they believed we were on the verge of ending the hostage situation.

DN: Go through the campaign period and all of the pressures that were on you. The president lost to Ronald Reagan, and then you faced the transition. And what was it like dealing with the incoming administration and some of their staff and helping them with the transition of January?

LB: The, it was interesting because, as you well know, I had no previous foreign policy background, not even academic exposure. So I guess I was less aware than I should have been that there is a real shadow government, and that there are a group of people in the Republican party who would be expected to show up at the door of the State Department and say, "We're here to begin taking over for you when you leave." I mean, it's something you see now with the [Paul] Wolfowitz, [ ] Perle, [Richard "Dick"] Armitage, these are people who have been around for thirty years, and Wolfowitz was in the State Department under Nixon and then came back and he was in the policy planning office.

So there was a cadre of professional foreign policy types, some of whom were ideologues, who were known to the people who were in the Carter administration, and it was just basically turning over the keys to the next guy that was going to occupy the House. Dick Moose, the assistant secretary for Africa, would talk to his counterpart, and Hal Saunders, and so that everybody sort of knew who was likely to come in. So from that perspective it was very cordial, it was very professional, and beyond that, of course, the State Department is far and away the most professional of government bureaucracies.

The career foreign service, you know, when, when we walked in the door of the State Department we, there's something called the executive secretariat. The executive secretariat manages the flow in the State Department, nothing goes in or goes out that doesn't go through that. And the, there were three people in the executive secretariat, one of whom was a fellow named Peter Tarnoff, who was a known Democrat, and later went on to various kind of foreign policy association jobs and so on. But his principal deputy was a guy named Jerry Bremer who we all know today as L. Paul Bremer. L. Paul Bremer, Jerry Bremer, was a career foreign service officer who was a protege of Henry Kissinger. He served in the State Department the entire time that we were there and just went into another job when Reagan became president. So it was, you know, it was very orderly.

Now when Haig was appointed, which was later in the process, he brought with him a fellow named Woody Goldberg. Woody Goldberg was, had some kind of career relationship with Haig,

it may have been military but it wasn't foreign policy, and it wasn't politics but, and Woody knew absolutely nothing about the State Department. He probably knew less about the State Department the day he walked through my door than I did when I walked through that door. So, you know, I spent a number of hours with Woody talking about how the department worked and where it worked and who it worked and so on. And he was a very organized kind of fellow, and I told him the single biggest problem he would have would be the attempt of the career foreign service to obstruct his access to the secretary. And I also told him that if he really wanted to protect the secretary and have access to him, he needed to put a door between the office that I had and the office that he would have, and the secretary's private inner sanctum. And, would you like the rest of that story?

DN: Yes.

LB: He said, Well, he needed to talk to the secretary about it because Reagan had imposed a moratorium on any remodeling in any of the Cabinet offices, which every secretary except Haig seemed prepared to violate. And so he came back and he said, no, Haig says you can't spend the money, because the president said, "No." So I said to him, I said, "Well, I'll tell you what," I said, "I really think this is important. What would you say if I signed the work order and it was done under Muskie's order so it happened before you got here?" He says, "Well, I'll go back to Haig." So he called me back and he said, "Al said that's fine." So when I, the door wasn't in when I left, but the work was started shortly after I left, and now every executive assistant secretary of state is able to have direct access to the secretary and the secretary's able to have direct access to his staff, which was simply not available before.

DN: So among other things, that door is a contribution from your service.

LB: That's right, the Leon G. Billings Memorial Door. But you know, the State Department, when Muskie, Muskie was frustrated by the State Department to a degree because, you know, he had spent in his previous twenty-five years of public life ultimately in control of his own schedule, and complained bitterly and vociferously when he wasn't in control of his own schedule. And he suddenly found himself in an environment in which not only wasn't he in control of his own schedule, there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. And more than that, he was, a, a good part of his schedule was governed by matters that were extraneous and irrelevant and which he didn't think were worthy of his time. And so he was very frustrated by the, the inability to get control of the department.

And we talked on a couple of occasions about what a second term would be like, what it would be like if he were appointed, reappointed by Carter, or kept there by Carter and he had a chance to make the department in his own way and what he would do with it. Of course, unfortunately that never occurred. But at least he understood that he was in many respects a caretaker, but he, unfortunately he was also a caretaker who had enormous responsibilities, because of the hostage situation, because of the situation in Afghanistan, because of the situation in Poland, because of the situation in Ethiopia, because we were changing government in Japan with the death of Ahira. We had a presidential election. We had Brzezinski who wanted to change the, Brzezinski wanted to change the basis for nuclear response from mutual assured destruction to respond on warning. We, we, and this was a huge battle between Muskie and Brzezinski. Have I talked

about this?

DN: No.

LB: There was a group called MBB Group, Muskie, Bzrezinski and Brown, Brown being Errol Brown, the secretary of defense, and they met once a week and they talked about the nexus of national security policy, diplomacy and defense. And not too long after one of the meetings, we were getting ready to go out to, Muskie was going to make a speech someplace in Kansas. We were going to have a visit with Governor Al Landon who was then in his nineties, then we were going on to Los Angeles to do a speech to the steel workers. And that morning there was a story in the *New York Times* that reported that Muskie, Bzrezinski and Brown had agreed to this change in our nuclear response policy.

Warren Christopher, the deputy secretary, was floored by this report. There was a intense internal discussion of the report which involved Christopher, myself, Tarnoff, Muskie and a few other people, in which Muskie denied that he had ever acceded to this concept. And it, I guess I'll leave it historians to analyze the difference in the policy which says that you have these nuclear weapons so that if you, if somebody strikes you then you have enough capacity to strike them back no matter how good their strike is, from, to a policy which says well, if we think you fired a missile we're going to fire back at you. Because it changes the strategic relationship.

And so, as I said, this was in the *New York Times*; it was an embarrassment to Muskie. I went to work to correct the record, and this was right before the Democratic convention. And so all of a sudden, and the State Department wasn't terribly used to this, the White House was totally unused to this, suddenly there were a spate of news stories about Brzezinski sneaking this thing out and so on. And it made the Carter administration look very uncontrolled, disorganized and so on. I mean, they were terrible stories. And these were largely Bob Rose and myself talking to the press, backgrounding the press and so on.

The State Department didn't approve of this. It would be unfair of me to say that Muskie approved of it, but I can say with reasonable certainty he didn't disapprove of it, as was often the case with things that I did for Muskie over the years. But in this case he was aware of it, because he and I had a long discussion on this trip out west that what was happening here was that he was going to, if this was allowed to stand, his integrity would be lost. I mean, this was huge. And so we, after this trip he went off to Maine and, he went to Maine and I think we've covered this, the fact that he stayed in Maine during most of the Democratic convention because of all of the (*unintelligible phrase*).

And I was called to a meeting with Walter [Fritz] Mondale and Jim Johnson and Warren Christopher in which Mondale said, no, well, I came back from the convention and I was called to a meeting with Jodi Powell who was the president's press secretary. The first and only time I've been in that part of the White House. And Powell asked me what it would take to cool the battle between Muskie and Brzezinski. And I said, “That's easy, Jodi, fire the son-of-a-bitch.” He said, “Well, we can't do that.” And I said, “Well, get him to shut up.” I said, you know, “This story wouldn't exist if he hadn't leaked it, that he'd gotten this change in policy, because nobody would ever, those are secret documents.” I said, “What you've done,” I said, “you know,

Muskie brought one thing to his job, and that was his personal integrity." It was that personal integrity that allowed Jimmy Carter to put him in there and make Cy Vance disappear just like that, because everybody saw Muskie as a strong, powerful, and honest man, a great deal of integrity. And I said, "Muskie is not going to lose that, and I can assure you he will not serve out this president's term if this continues. He will leave." I had discussed this with Muskie; I'm not sure ultimately if he would have, but he understood how serious this was for his own reputation.

So I got a guarantee from Powell. Then at the same time I got this call to come up to lunch at the State Department. I walked in and here's Mondale and Johnson and Warren Christopher, and they'd invited me to lunch, but what I didn't know was I was lunch. And I got this lecture, this battle between Muskie and Brzezinski's hurting the president. And I said, "Where's Zbig? Why isn't he at the lunch?" Muskie's in Maine. Anyway, so it was eventually resolved, the issue was, I think that policy was pulled back and Brzezinski was pulled way back, and he was pulled way back, from the time this occurred which would have been late August until November, we never heard another peep out of Brzezinski. As soon as the president lost the election, he then became a very visible and active antagonist to the secretary of state.

DN: What kind of an answer did you get from Messrs Mondale and company when you asked where Zbig was?

LB: Well, you know, I knew Fritz pretty well, I've known him for a long time. In fact, I knew Fritz better than either Christopher or Johnson, and I was pretty blunt with him about . . . . And Mondale said, "Brzezinski is a fool. We'll take care of that end of it." But I, it was, 'Brzezinski is a fool'. And that took care of it as far as I was concerned.

DN: And what was Christopher's role in that conversation?

LB: You know, I had a lot of meetings with Christopher, he very seldom said anything. His, I think his role was to host the lunch. You understand that when I came into the State Department, and I may have covered this earlier, when I came into the State Department I was viewed as some, it was sort of like Muskie had an extra limb they didn't know what to do with. They hadn't had a United States senator as secretary of state since John Foster Dulles. They hadn't had a political person in the secretary's office in anyone's memory, much less four or five. They hadn't had, they had always been able to have a career foreign service officer be the executive assistant to the secretary, so they always were in control of the processes. So the initial decision by Tarnoff and Christopher and Bremer was to isolate me and to just, you know, essentially pretend like I wasn't there. And as the, and they were very successful. You know, I went to all of the small group meetings and I was presence but I was, they largely ignored me, and Muskie was largely responsible. Well then, and then sometime in the early summer they began to realize that Muskie had a bit of a petulance tendency, and that they weren't necessarily -

End of Side A
Side B

DN: This is the second side of the April 15, 2004 interview with Leon Billings. Go ahead,

Leon.

LB: Christopher called me into his office and I think it may have been the first and perhaps the only private meeting we had, and it was an interesting meeting. In the first place Christopher, like Ed Muskie, never sat down with his coat on, he always took his coat off and very carefully hung it up. I'm not sure that his father was a tailor, too, but in any event, I walked in and he didn't ask me to sit down.

We walked over and stood by the window and he said, "I've got a problem with the secretary that I think you can help with." And I said, "What's that?" And he said, "Well, you know, from time to time the secretary reacts to things in a way that I simply don't understand." And I said, "Yeah?" He said, "Well, I have a hunch that you do." And I said, you know, "Maybe." And he said, "Well," he said, Awe really need you to be a part of the team." And I said, "In other words you want me to be insulation between you and the senator's reactions to some of the things that you put in front of him." He said, "That's right." I said, "Well that's all I ever wanted to do, Chris." And after that, until the (*unintelligible phrase*) it was a very good working relationship, you know, I took the heat and everybody else was happy, and Muskie was able to vent when he needed to vent. And he needed to vent, you know, you know him and I know him and that not being able to vent would have altered his personality irreparably.

DN: During this period -

LB: Oh, I just want to, the finishing point on that is that Christopher hosted the lunch, the lunch was requested by Mondale, he asked Christopher. And I don't, if Christopher said anything at that lunch I don't recall it. I know Johnson didn't say anything at the lunch, it was a discussion between Walter Mondale, my friend the vice president, and me, about how to cool the public pissing match, which is I think is what he, the term he used, between Muskie and Brzezinski.

DN: After the election and the transition, there have been stories about difficulties on the final day and the way the Muskie staff was treated on the way out the door. Did you encounter any problems there?

LB: Well, first let me set the scene. It wasn't, there wasn't really a final day. We had, we knew in the last two weeks right after the first of the year that the hostage situation would be resolved. We hoped that the hostages would be out of Iran before Carter left office; we had no assurances of that, but we knew that the, you know, accounts were being unfrozen, spare parts, we held up all the spare parts for their F-15s, their F- whatever their combat aircraft were, we started releasing the spare parts, and everything was moving along. And so we used that time, in addition to the transition and in addition to doing a whole lot of things like, you know, Leslie [Finn] and Gayle [Cory] and Carole [Parmelee] and others getting Muskie's papers in order and so on.

We had a couple of major events. I think I've told you that when Muskie was in Venice at the G7 meeting with the president, one of the evenings that he had free he hosted a dinner for all the working staff of the State Department plus the diplomats that were there, about twenty-five or

thirty people. And I learned later that that had never been done before, that the secretary had never had, just invited all of the secretaries and the cable clerks and all that to a dinner. Well, then, this may have been Jane's [Muskie] idea, it was decided that he should do the same thing for the same kinds of people who worked in Washington. So we had a banquet on the eighth floor to which all of the support people and their spouses, drivers, secretaries, you know, clerks, plus the key, more senior people.

DN: These are associated with the immediate secretary of state's office?

LB: Yeah, yeah, but you know, by the time you get all the security people, which is a crew of about thirty plus spouses, and you know, it ends up being two or three hundred people, with . . . . And had this dinner party for them and he thanked them. And for days after that I heard, you know, about how this had never been done before, many of their spouses had never been in the State Department, certainly had never been to the eighth floor. But it was Muskie the small "d" democrat, and it was done in such a personal, personally warm way by Jane and Ed that, Jane and the Senator, I can't call him Ed yet.

So while all that was going on, of course, he was going back and forth to the White House. He was spending a lot of time in the Oval Office in communication with Christopher and Raphel who were, you know, I got the feeling of this, this sort of like, you know, before the final game in the NC double A's [NCAAs], all of the players and the coaches are sitting around in a room waiting for the game to start. Well, because he would go over and then he'd come back, and he'd go over and he'd come back, and he spent a lot of time with the president, a lot of time talking to the president. So then, and then when we finally got down to the last seventy-two hours, I never went home. I'd go home for an hour or so, change clothes and take a shower, come back, I slept in the office, and we were waiting for the countdown.

And at about five o'clock in the morning I was having a drink with Barry Dunsmore of ABC News and Hamilton Jordan called me and he said, "The hostages are on the plane, you better get the secretary." So I called Muskie and woke him up, I said, "I think it would be well if you'd get down here now." And, I mean it was amazing, he made it down there about as fast as I've ever seen him. And Barry was, he said, "Well, look, I gotta go, it's been a long night." And I said, "Barry," I said, "I can't tell you anything except don't go home." He said, "Are you telling me something?" I said, "I can't tell you anything Barry," I said, "just don't go home." At six o'clock in the morning Barry broke the story, which is a nice other story that, he appreciated me a lot after that.

Anyway, so the, about ten o'clock in the morning we were waiting and waiting and waiting, and the hostages had been on the plane, they'd been on the plane, and no reports. And so the people that run the secretary's dining room brought out Bloody Marys and so on, and we all had a drink around eleven o'clock. And at noon, we, we walked over to the secretary's private elevator and one of these career administrative types came running up to me and she said, "Give me your keys." And I said, "My keys will be on the floor of the elevator when they come back up." And then we left. Muskie loves that. So, anyway, you know, that was the only unpleasantry. It was just a, but it was, you know, it was sort of a 'don't let the door hit you on the butt on the way out' from her, but everybody else was . . . .

And there were tears shed when Muskie walked out. There were these two African-American drivers who had, you know, we spent a lot of time in cars with those guys, and the younger one just stood there, tears were running down his cheeks as Muskie left. There was, this was not Henry Kissinger. This wasn't a, I mean, Muskie was not a easy going, back slapping, grandstanding kind of guy, but because of the things that he did, he established a rapport with these people that was very warm and very heartfelt.

DN: You mentioned the dinners, both in Venice and back at the State Department, and you mentioned the reaction of some of the support staff when he left. Was there a palpable impact on some of the foreign service officers?

LB: Yeah, yeah, the, it sort of depended. There's a great deal of superiority among a lot of these people, they're extremely well-educated, they're very bright, and they don't necessarily interact with the hoi polloi. So among those I think that probably there was some, they weren't terribly impressed, but on the other hand there were a lot of the people who worked with the secretary day-to-day, like Ben Reed who was the deputy secretary who just, when we told him we wanted to do it he made it work well because, and Patrick Kennedy and Ray [Sykes or Sites] and people who had some sensitivity for other people really thought it was a wonderful gesture, and observed as such. And the thing in Venice, I mean, that was just, we, Muskie said, "Why don't you just get the staff together and we'll have dinner," you know. That was his initiative, that was not mine, that wasn't Jane's or somebody else's. He said, "Well let's," you know, "there's a lot of staff people in here, why don't we get them together and have dinner." Now, I have no idea what account that ever came out of.

DN: You mentioned Jane Muskie a couple of times in connection with staff and insights. You told me a story about Jane and the UN telephone that I think is worth recording.

LB: Well, maybe it tells you as much about Ed Muskie as it does about Jane. When we, the secretary of state every year goes to the UN and usually stays there about ten days, and during that time in this particular case Muskie met with the heads of government or the heads of state of fifty-five different countries. And I accompanied him on probably three fifths of those, and Bob on a number of them. And they set the secretary up on a floor of the UN Plaza and, you know, every, it's just, you pick the State Department up and you move it from Washington to New York for ten days. In Washington he had a phone that he could pick up, push a button, and it would ring on the president's desk, push another button it would ring on my desk, it had about twenty numbers and just, it was automatic.

And, you know, I'm sure it'll come out in other interviews, but Muskie liked gadgetry. He had, I remember years before we were at a hearing in Detroit and somebody pulled out a pointer that was about that long and, stretch it out and it was a full length pointer and it had an electric eye on the top of it, and Muskie coveted it and it was given to him. Anyway, and so he was a gadgetry (*unintelligible word*).

But he said to me, he wanted to call somebody and he couldn't do it, and he had to get Carole in to make the phone call. And he said, "Why the hell can't I have a phone like I have in

Washington?" And so I called the admin people in and I said, "The secretary wants a phone like he has in Washington." So every day, at least once and usually two or three times, Muskie would say, "Where is my phone?" And I'd say, "Well, they're working on it." "Well, shit a goddamn, why can't I have my phone." And this went on every day for eight and a half days, and finally on the ninth day they got it installed. And, I mean I had, he had just beaten me bloody over it. And I mean, you know, it was, it's very humorous in retrospect but it wasn't terribly humorous then.

So that last, that ninth night we had, there was a dinner at 21 Club with Bill Soule and his wife and Berl Bernhard and Jane and Ed and I don't know who else, and I came in and Jane says, "Leon, come over here, I've got a present for you." And there's this nice little present, I open it up, and it's a little toy telephone with walking feet on it. I mean, it was very cute and it was very well received. I still have it. But it also said something about Jane, because Jane knew that I was the guy that was sort of on the front line of getting the guff from the senator.

Now, Jane was another, you know, she was a very, very good state department wife, she was a very, she handled, she was . . . . Esther Cooper Smith took her under her wing. Esther Cooper Smith is a long time Washington matron. She's been involved in all kinds of charitable and social stuff and she, you know, a socialite of some significance, but also a good Democrat. And she took Jane under her wing and got her into sort of the diplomatic wives kind of environment. And Jane was just an absolutely superb performer, just, no, you know, no airs or anything like that, but she dealt with that particular task just gorgeously.

DN: I'd like to take you back, one of the references you made in talking about the issues that confronted the secretary during that eight month period was what was going on in Poland. And given Muskie's ancestry, I think it would be intriguing to get a sense of what those issues were and how he responded to them.

LB: In 1979 Muskie was sent to, I think I've discussed with you the meeting he had with Helmut Schmidt.

DN: Yes.

LB: In behalf of President Carter. And after we left Bonn and the meeting with Schmidt, we flew to Warsaw and there we met with some Catholic and some intellectual dissidents. And then we went to Krakow where we met with the successor to the current Pope who was then archbishop whose last name started with an 'M', very impressive guy. And we spent some time in the country, we spent several days there. This is sort of by way of background, because as you know, Muskie lost the language before he even got it, never learned the Polish language. In fact he probably learned more Polish campaigning in Chicago in 1970 through '72 than he did as a kid growing up. But he was, when he went to Poland he was treated like a, treated like royalty, he was the highest ranking Pole in American government.

Well, when he was secretary the Solidarity thing blew up, and the issue was: how do you keep the Russians out? But, and I, you know, I'd have to really think longer back about that. The, he didn't view, from what I recall, he did not view what was going on in Poland from a nationalistic

perspective. He didn't view it as if he were a son of Poland. He viewed it from the perspective of an American secretary of state. Brzezinski on the other hand viewed it as a Polish national. And so the, he had, I believe, some, some, I would say difficulties comes to mind, in dealing with Brzezinski over Poland and not getting the United States to overreact and to, you know, we had a . . . . I believe Carter's reaction to Poland was that we ought not to do anything direct and we ought to just keep the pressure on the Soviet Union. And of course, because the Soviet Union was so bogged down in Afghanistan, their moving into Poland was questionable, but there was a lot of talk about a repeat of Czechoslovakia and so on. But it wasn't, I have no recollection whatsoever that Muskie in any way, shape or form said, 'Well, this is important to me because I'm Polish'.

DN: This calls to mind -

LB: Oh, let me just make one other observation, and this is for the purpose of history. The, after WWII, we had a program that was started by Truman I believe, that had labor attaches that were in embassies all over Eastern Europe. And they were almost without exception American labor union people who were, whose family had been native to the country in which they were assigned and they spoke the language. That program was decimated by Richard Nixon, because Richard Nixon hated organized labor.

And, so that when we were in Poland, and this, we discussed this, when we were in Poland in '79 we talked to the Catholics and to the intellectuals and to the dissidents. We never met or heard or knew of anybody from organized labor in Poland who was concerned about the government. When the Gdansk uprising occurred, it was a labor uprising, shipyard workers. The intellectuals and the Catholics and the dissidents weren't involved in any way, shape or form. And it was a, in the context of what's going on today, it was a classic example of the failure of U.S. intelligence. There was absolutely not one peep about this. In '79 when we were there, or in any of the cable traffic I ever saw in the State Department. Our intelligence services were not engaged at that level.

DN: Nor were the regular State Department officers, apparently, foreign service officers.

LB: Oh, no. In fact, when we were in Poland the, Bob and I, it was John McEvoy, Bob Rose and myself, we'd sat down and had a few beers one night with a State Department political guy and this person was so disdainful of the, arrogantly disdainful of the working stiffs. I mean we just started kind of, sort of, I mean, you know, what are the Democrats like conversation. And, I mean, this guy, he was dismissive of their existence, much less their importance. That's a very real problem we have, one of the reasons for our intelligence failures. If you're not talking to people you're not getting it. But that's another subject.

DN: Your description of the secretary's reaction to the Polish situation, in light of his own ancestry, calls to mind the way he dealt from time to time with issues affecting or affected by the Catholic church. As a Roman Catholic, he was intensely devout, privately, personally, but arms length when it came to public policies in the church. Did you encounter that? I saw it, but I wondered whether you (*unintelligible phrase*).

LB: Yeah, well, I think I told you once that I didn't even know he was a Catholic until he and Bill Hildenbrand snuck off and went to Mass in Montpelier, Vermont in 1968, '69, something like that. He was, on the abortion issue, he was adamantly anti-abortion but he never expressed his views on abortion in religious terms. If, there's a story that you can't even tell on tape about his view of abortion, but it was, for him, he saw abortion as a form of birth control for people who didn't want to take the effort to avoid getting pregnant in the first place. And he underscored and exclaimed that view in the most colorful language. Had nothing to do, I mean if you ever talked to him about it you would never, if it had anything to do with religion you would never have known. When it came to a Constitutional amendment on abortion, he was opposed to it, because he didn't want to amend the Constitution for any purpose, and he just thought that was, so, and again, I'm not sure how the Catholic church came into play.

I do know that he became sensitive to the fact that there were some clerics in Maine who were becoming irritational. Well, I think the prime example is I don't think he ever supported federal aid to parochial schools. And there were people like Tip O'Neill, speaker of the house, who strongly supported federal aid to parochial schools. My recollection is, in the one discussion we had about it that I recall, it was one of those "if you start down that road" discussions, you know. He had decided that there were good and sufficient public policy reasons not to do it, so that it wasn't a religious, you know. But at the same time it was my sense that he was under some pressure from Catholics in Maine on that subject.

But again, I, the only time he and I ever had a discussion that even approached that was, I had picked him up one morning in my pickup and we were driving down to Massachusetts. And just as we were going around Dupont Circle I said to him, I said, "Well," I said, "you know Senator, in my view the best thing we could do in America would be to abolish all parochial and private schools, if you really wanted to have a good public school system." And he looked at me and he says, I'm trying to remember exactly what he said, but if it had been my mother it would have been, you know, 'you're talking like a man with a paper ass', but it was something like that. He was so utterly disdainful of my comment. But that was the closest I ever got to, you know, and that . . . . I would fully ascribe to the fact that I was so far out on the left that he didn't have to be anyplace else.

DN: Being in the middle instead of the other end, eh?

LB: But he did not, he did not like, he didn't like priests being in Congress. I mean it was, he liked Father Drinan a lot, but he thought that there wasn't, he really, I believe, was more committed to the Constitution than to anything else. I mean, it was much more, he could take, my religion is over here and my Constitution is over here, and in an elected office the Constitution is my bible, and when I'm, in my private life -

DN: We've got to the end of the State Department year, or eight months, and he went back to private life, as did you. And let's first deal with your transition. Where did you go from the State Department?

LB: I went to set up my own consulting business. Berl Bernhard offered me an office and part-time secretary and got me a client and I took off on my own business, and then sort of

bounced around doing several other things including running the Democratic senatorial campaign committee in '82-'83, and then running for Congress and losing in '86, which he was extraordinarily helpful, and then serving in the Maryland legislature for a dozen years.

It was an interesting situation for both of us. He went to a law firm, he selected the law firm he went to, because it provided the greatest security for Jane should something happen to him. He didn't pick the law firm because it was going to be the place he would be happiest in. We discussed, on a number of occasions, how much happier he would have been had he gone with Berl, Harry McPherson and that crowd, because the law firm he was with just wasn't fun. There were a couple of people there he got very close to, but he never had a sense of camaraderie like he had at, at least it was my sense that he didn't.

And over that period of I guess almost fifteen years we interacted on a couple of occasions professionally. We had, he was actively involved in my congressional campaign. He helped me raise money, he let me use his name, he showed up at events. I mean it was, I was quite frankly amazed at how, considering how our relationship as staff and senator or secretary had been extraordinarily professional and impersonal, not personal at all. I mean I didn't, you know, except for the occasional office party or the occasional dinner, because Jane was out of town or something like that, we didn't have any nonprofessional relationship, and even those were largely professional until at least the second martini. But when I ran for Congress, I mean he just was, he was there every time I asked him, and he was there the night I lost and he was very solicitous of my endeavor.

And by the same token I was his resident memory, because all of the detailed stuff that he'd done over the years, you know, his capacity to recall all of it, you know, from Budget to war powers, so I at least, in the environment stuff, I knew all of that, and a hell of lot more than he did, and he relied on me. And we made a deal. I told him that I would help him with those issues, writing speeches or whatever, as long as he agreed that he wouldn't do anything that would endanger those laws because they were his legacy. And he really believed that. He really believed that they were his legacy and I don't think he needed my admonition to -

DN: I was going to say, what was his reaction given that admonition?

LB: Well, I think he said something like, “I know that Leon,” or stronger. But I just said, you know, it really wasn't put that way because I said, you know, “I've been thinking about this and I could make a lot of money if I turn myself into one of these guys that go out and work against what they did.” And I said, “I can't do that and I don't want to do it, and I hope that I can survive without doing it.” And he said, “Well,” he said, “we shouldn't do it.” But anyway, so we had this deal. And so I gave him free speech writing, for the most part, and he would call me, or Carole would call me, and he'd talk to me. I'm not sure he ever got over not being able to punch the single phone number. And, you know, I'd go over and visit him, I'd have lunch with him periodically at the Madison Hotel and we'd talk about things.

One of my favorite stories, at sometime in the mid to late eighties we're at lunch at the Madison, Jane and Carole and Anita, myself, the senator, and I think Bob may have been there, Bob Rose, Anita Jensen. And Muskie said, “I was always pro-choice, wasn't I?” And Anita says, “Bu-u-u-

l-l-shit!" It just echoed across this restaurant. And I said, "Well," I says, "it's a good thing, Senator, that you keep us around to remind you of these little things." Of course, you know, in Congress it was always Medicaid funding of abortion in those days, and he was opposed to that for the reasons that tried to spell out.

But, you know, he was, I don't think he was terribly happy. There were a couple things. Not too long after he was in private life, he, I guess was it, no, I know what it was, he was asked to take over the Center for National Policy and became the chairman. And a guy named Kirk O'Donnell who had worked for Tip O'Neill was the president and he ran it. And Kirk O'Donnell, God bless his soul, died of a heart attack at fifty-three years old jogging, one of the best and the brightest in Washington, gave up the presidency in maybe like '83. Have I told you this story?

DN: No.

LB: And I got this call from a person named Madeleine Albright who was working at the, as vice president, Center for National Policy, and I think also teaching or working on her Ph.D. or something, and she said that she really wanted the job to succeed Kirk. And about the same time, an embarrassingly close time, Muskie calls me and says, "I want you to become president of the Center for National Policy." And I had just finished taking a year off my consulting firm to run the Democratic senatorial campaign committee and I said, you know, "Senator," I said, "I just gave up this year." But it was one of the few times that he actually picked up the phone and called me himself, I think I was (*unintelligible phrase*) when he called. And so I demurred and I said, "But you know," I said, "Madeleine's there. She'd be great for the job, she wants the job, you ought to hire her." "Well, I don't know about that." And then he came back to me, and so I told him I'd think about it and so then the next week I went back and I said, "Senator, hire Madeleine." So he did. If there's any one person who's responsible for Madeleine getting that job it's me, not because he hired her because I told him, but because I didn't take it.

Anyway, so that, and then in '87, late '86, Reagan asked him to serve on this Tower Commission. And he called me and he said, "I want you to staff me on the Tower Commission." And I said, "Well, when does it start?" And he said, "Right now." It was, my recollection, and this could be wrong, recollection is it was right around the first of December. I mean, I'd only, or maybe it was earlier than that because I'd lost in the primary in September. Anyway, I said, "Senator, I promised my family in recompense for all they gave to me in this congressional race that I would take them to London for Christmas and we're going to be gone for ten days. And it appears you need somebody right now so, and I just can't do it." And it was interesting, he absolutely understood that.

DN: He couldn't understand the other reason.

LB: No, he couldn't understand the Center for National Policy because that was just me giving up something, but he understood fully that I had to keep that commitment to the family. I said, ABut why don't you hire, bring in Karl Braithwaite, he's down in Los Alamos, he's got all the clearances. I actually had talked to Karl about this. And so he brought Karl up to be his staff guy, and Karl was the guy who was responsible for uncovering the fact that Ollie North couldn't really erase his computer stuff, because they had the same system at Los Alamos and Karl was

able to get his computer guy to point out, so it worked out extremely well.

And so then, you know, again, we continued to interact through that and then we had our periodic lunches. And I, you know, I don't know whether I've told this story for this oral history, but the story I told at the funeral really was true. That we were sitting at the Haye Adams Restaurant, and this may have been, this probably was the last lunch we had before he had his, before he got killed in the hospital. And I said to him, I said, "Well, Ed." "Oh, it's Ed now, is it?" Here we are, I'm what, this is '95, he died in '96?

DN: Ninety-six, he died.

LB: Yeah, it was '95, I'm, let's see, how old was I in '95, fifty-eight years old, you know, I'm sitting there, "Oh, it's Ed now, is it?" Anyway. And he, you know, that was an interesting conversation because in that conversation he talked a lot about his family, taking care of his family. And I looked at him, I said, "You know, Senator," I said, "you're really old fashioned, you know, I said, you're the most old fashioned person I've ever met." I said, "Your kids are all adults, you have no obligation to them. They have an obligation to you." I said, "But for Martha and her illness, Steve and Ellen and Ned and Melinda are going to do quite fine, and they're not dependent on you any more so stop worrying about it."

DN: What was his reaction?

LB: His reaction was he couldn't do it, he just was, he was, he said, "I'm just nice." And I think, you know, part of it was, he alluded to this a couple times, that his public life had drawn down on his ability to be a full-time father, and I think he, a little bit of good old fashioned Catholic guilt was motivating him. Because he really, it just was not, it was not within his power to say, 'yep, they're adults, they take care of themselves'. You know, he was very much the patriarch This goes, it really is the Catholic father, the patriarch. He didn't see himself as a patriarch in a, in a dictatorial control sense, but he saw himself as a patriarch in an obligation sense, which was something I wasn't really familiar with.

DN: And that traces back to his father who had the same perspective and then was the patriarch. I'd like you to talk more about your congressional campaign and his involvement. One of my favorite quotes about Ed Muskie is the remark he made, and I heard him make to several Democratic candidates who got in touch with him to ask him to help them on the campaign. And his standard -

End of Side B
End of Interview