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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

October 23, 2003

Place

Portland, Maine

ID Number

MOH 417

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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: Clean Air Act and the 1977 amendments; Secretary of State from 1980 to 1981; Budget Committee; travel abroad; 1976 to 1980 anecdotes; staff changes in the Muskie Senate office; trip to China; Leon as Administrative Assistant; trip to Bonn, Germany and meeting with Helmut Schmidt; Muskie relationship with Carter; and Budget Committee work.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Thursday, the 23rd day of October 2003. We are at 9 Highland Street, Portland, Maine, and Leon Billings is being interviewed by Don Nicoll. Leon, we were getting set to talk about an incident involving Senator Muskie and lobbyists on behalf of pulp and paper industry in Maine.

Leon Billings: Yeah, I have a tape recording someplace of a meeting that the senator had in the summer of 1976. We had just completed, I believe my recollection is quite correct, subcommittee action on a, on Clean Air amendments, the so-called mid-course correction. And one of the most controversial items in that bill was the provisions with respect to prevention of significant deterioration, because the courts had now upheld the Muskie view that the purpose of the Clean Air Act is to enhance air quality. The Chamber of Commerce said, "Well, air quality could get worse." Muskie said, "No, you can't have air enhanced and more dirty at the same time, so therefore all roads lead to enhancement."

The Supreme Court, I think unanimously, in the Sierra Club case, upheld Muskie's position. There was a regulatory process under way; Congress stepped in to give substance to the regulatory process rather than allow the agency to write rules *ab initio*. The bill came out. The electric utility industry had formed an air quality group and they had come up with these, what we called "dog dish" maps, which were maps which showed, had these big red, round plots on them which showed areas of the United States in which no development could take place under, quote, Muskie's bill, unquote. The, and they mounted a national campaign that they were going, over the August recess, to get this bill changed before it got out of full committee.

Muskie came to Maine and the paper workers union asked for, and I think demanded, that he meet with them. And I wasn't there. He told us when we left town that we should work on this bill over the recess, and by then I'd been with him for ten years and I said, "Fat chance, Senator, I'm leaving for Maine tomorrow, too." And anyway, so somebody at this meeting had a tape recorder, and it was a marvel. What happened was Muskie came in and here was several union members, unidentified, though he knew them by name: Dan Boxer with, what's that law firm?

DN: Oh, I forget which one he was with. Verrill Dana? Or Pierce Atwood?

LB: Pierce Atwood, Pierce Atwood, which represents the paper industry. And a guy named Mahoney who was a Harvard professor who ran something called, I think, The National Economic Research Associates or something, but they were an industry stooge group that did

studies for the electric utilities, among others. I think he's now by the way in the Bush administration. Anyway, so the meeting starts out and the, Boxer makes a presentation about Muskie's bill and what it will do. Well, apparently, you can't see this obviously because it's an audio tape, they have these maps and Boxer says something like, "Now Dr. Mahoney's going to tell you why this bill doesn't work."

He [Muskie] says, "In the first place, this is not a bill, this is a draft, and I haven't signed off on it," which was patently false. He says, he said, "That's still a work in progress. What do you mean coming up here and telling these people that I signed off on this draft?" He said, "This is a staff product." And so then, Muskie then just beat the hell out of Mahoney and Boxer, and these union guys said, you know, "Ed, we knew you were our guy and were going to stick with us. I mean, he just totally, he never let them get a word in edgewise. The tape's about a half an hour long and it just was a, it was a tour de force of, with a little touch of disingenuousness about whether or not the draft was real.

DN: Oh, my. Well, I want to take you back to 1973, and then we need to come up to your time as his administrative assistant. And we've covered much of the territory before in earlier interviews, but I wanted to go back to your encounter with Arthur, not Arthur, but James Schlesinger in the midst of the energy crisis and the Nixon administration's effort to change the air pollution control program.

LB: In 1973 the Nixon administration proposed the, something called, I believe it was called the Energy Supply and Environmental Coordination Act. And this bill, this was one of those, the first time where we really saw the Congress begin to come apart at the seams. Because there were, in the Senate, the Senate Commerce Committee, the Senate Interior Committee and the Senate Public Works Committee were all jointly involved in the legislation, as were the numerous committees; there were fifty conferees on the House side. It became apparent, and this is background leading up to Schlesinger, it became apparent that the primary objective of this legislation had nothing to do with energy and everything to do with clean air. And it was seen by the Nixon administration as vehicle to reduce, if not eliminate, controls on power plants.

And the Schlesinger argument, an argument he made in public forum before our committee, was that there were massive energy benefits if we could convert power plants that were currently burning oil to coal. And the implication of his argument was that there were a great many plants in the United States that had the capacity to burn coal and only the Clean Air Act was stopping them. And we had very little data to counter that argument. Schlesinger invited Muskie to a meeting at the White House, to a lunch at the White House mess actually, and it was one of those lovely opportunities, I may have not, may have been at breakfast. I picked him up at the house in my pickup truck and we parked the pickup in the presidential lot between the old executive office building and the Capitol, and he just loved that. He loved the idea of coming in to the White House in this pickup truck.

But anyway, we went in and we sat down and we began to talk about this. And Schlesinger, while puffing on his pipe and looking the proper pompous ass that he was, was telling Muskie about the hundreds of thousands of megawatts that could be converted from coal to oil if we just relaxed the Clean Air Act. Well, it turns out that about the time of this meeting there finally had

been a report, and it may have been a GAO report or it may have been a Federal Energy Administration - was that? Maybe the Energy Department had by then been created, I'm not sure. It must have been, because Schlesinger was secretary of energy - which showed that in fact there were only about six plants in the United States that had dual use capacity. That is, the capacity to use both coal and oil and switch back and forth, and that the other hundred odd plants that they were talking about that burned oil, simply didn't have the technical capability to burn coal.

And I don't think when we sat down that Muskie was aware of this. And so I turned to Al Alm who was Schlesinger's deputy, and said, "Al, how many of the power plants that the secretary is referring to currently have the capacity to burn coal, to immediately switch?" And Al said, "I think six or seven." And I looked at Muskie and I said, "But the secretary is saying that there are hundreds of plants that can switch from oil to coal." And Schlesinger quickly said something like, I mean he seemed to be taken aback by what Al said. He said, "Well, but if we could switch these plants from oil to coal we could save millions of gallons of oil imports."

Well, the meeting ended, I mean it just, there was nothing more to say. Muskie got up and left, and he said, "Obviously the secretary was ill informed. And I said, "Maybe, maybe not." He said, "Yeah," he said, "he may not have been telling the truth either." But it was a, it was an interesting and embarrassing moment, because it's not the kind of thing that Muskie expected to receive from . . . Muskie had a, to an extent Muskie always believed the best in people in these jobs. Or at least if he didn't, he didn't say it. And I think he was truly shocked that a Cabinet secretary would lie to him.

DN: Now, you continued working on environmental legislation as the staff director of the committee until what date?

LB: March of '78. I had asked to become administrative assistant in 1974, and Muskie told me that he had decided to focus on foreign policy because that's the only thing that really interested him and therefore he wanted Maynard Toll to be his AA. And while they were both lovely people, it was a match that was not intended to endure. And then the opportunity presented itself again to be AA and I didn't seek it for two reasons: one, because we were in the middle of the revision, of the mid-course correction on both the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act; and two, Muskie had a reelection campaign coming up.

And unlike '70 when he was basically anointed for reelection after his '68 campaign, '76 we were genuinely concerned with the prospect of Bill Cohen being the opponent. And Phil Merrill and John McEvoy and Al From and I all agreed that, a) we had to do a modern campaign which Muskie'd never done, b) that we really needed somebody from Maine to be administrative assistant, c) that, Charlie Micoleau, who I don't think was in the meetings, so therefore he was nominated, and that he would serve through the election.

And so then we got through the rewrites of the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act in '77. And then in late '77, early '78, Charlie indicated to Muskie that he wanted to come back to Maine and Muskie actually asked me if I would be his AA. And I said, I said I didn't think that was a particularly good idea at that point. And I said he was bored with the Senate, I was bored with

the Senate, and we sort of were like oil and water on a lot of things. I said, maybe he ought to pick Al From because he was going to have to give up a subcommittee anyway. And he looked at me and he said, "No," he says, "Al won't fight with me." And I said, "Is that your criteria?" He says, "It's one of them." And so I said, "Well, if that's, that's a good enough criteria for me if you accept that aspect of my character and personality." And so I went over to be AA in March of '78. And, I mean, it was a very interesting time, it was, you know, it was, there are a couple of interesting stories. Have I told the story about how he became secretary of state?

DN: No, we haven't gotten to that.

LB: Well, first, one of the first things he did was he sent me to the Law of the Seas meetings in Geneva, because he knew that they were negotiating the Law of the Seas Treaty. And he was absolutely convinced that they were going to put environmental issues second, make environmental issues secondary to development issues, deep sea mining and so on. And he was concerned about Elliot Richardson who was the ambassador, and he was concerned about the He didn't think the Carter appreciated the importance of an international law of the seas agreement. So he asked me to go over there and, which was sort of rare and interesting. I spent twelve days there for him.

And then later we, Frank Moore who was Carter's director of Congressional Relations and I, well, in 1979 Carter asked Gaylord Nelson to head up a mission to China. It was to be the first congressional delegation visit to China after normalization. And Leonard Woodcock was by then the ambassador, and just even arranging a CODEL [congressional delegation] was difficult because, while the Chinese wanted normalized relations, they didn't want them that normal.

DN: What was their resistance to the congressional delegation?

LB: They were taking baby steps in terms of how they dealt with the Americans. Well, for reasons that I have never understood, Nelson either couldn't or didn't want to go. In any event, so they turned to Muskie and asked him if he'd head the delegation and he agreed to, and he asked me to go. And I said, "Well, you can't ask me to go," I said, "you're going to have to get approval from the State, from the White House for me to go." And we were scheduled to do an honorarium speech in Las Vegas set up by Gerry Tabenken. Remember Gerry Tabenken? Not my favorite person. Anyway, so, and then Muskie was going to fly from Las Vegas to Anchorage to join the CODEL, and I was going to accompany him to the Las Vegas trip.

And I said, "Well, you know, what am I going to do? You don't have permission." He says, "Well, you know, we'll have to get the shots, you know, we'll find out about it." I mean, he strung me along. I, today, am absolutely certain he knew I was on the trip, but he didn't tell me until he, until we left for, Las Vegas for Anchorage, that I was actually going to be on the trip. And that was a, he said to me, in 19-, just a minute, I'm trying to, I've got my, I may have my dates, at one point, I guess it was (*unintelligible word*) but it must have been '78, must have been November of '78 because I had my forty-first birthday while we were in China. He said to me, he said, "Leon, if you take a trip like this and you don't have a report, it's a junket. If you do have a report, it's a fact finding trip. I have told the president that I needed to have staff because we have to prepare a report on this trip, because I'm not going on a junket." Which basically, I

think meant, telling me that I had to take notes.

So he led this, this was a fascinating CODEL, we were there for I think seventeen days or something like that. Pat Leahy was still in the Senate, Dick Stone. Pat Leahy and his wife Marcel, Dick Stone and his wife from Florida, Bob Packwood and his wife Morgan, Butler Derry from South Carolina, Dr. Tim Lee Carter from Kentucky, Tom Bevill and his wife from . . . , Wyche Fowler [Jr.] and his father from, Wyche was from Georgia. Anyway, it was a fascinating trip throughout China. And I don't know why I got off on this story.

DN: Well, you're leading up to the, Muskie's selection as secretary of state and you had, now that, your trip to Geneva for the Law of the Sea negotiations was when?

LB: That was in, right after I became AA, it may have been in March of '78, and then we went to China in November of '78. And then in 1979, Carter was having some real public relations problems in Europe brought about by Helmut Schmidt. And Carter asked Muskie if he would go to, and these were largely economic related problems, if he would go to Bonn and meet with Schmidt and try to improve relations. So it turned out I was, this was a fascinating trip. I took, Bob Rose who was the press secretary at the time, and John McEvoy who was the budget director and myself, and Jane - - did Jane go? No, Jane didn't go, Jane was home buying a house. And so it was the three of us and the State Department types that were going, plus a security detail.

And we went to Spain where Muskie met with Juan Carlos in Spain. And we went to, well first we went to Portugal where we met with the new socialist government of Portugal, then we went to Spain and we met with the king and we met with the government. Then we went to Bonn, Germany and we got to Bonn, Germany on May 1 which means, you know, that's May Day, all of Europe's closed, so we took a trip on the Rhine.

And then the next day he and I went to meet with Schmidt, and this was when the Red Brigades were very hot in Europe, and you cannot imagine getting into the prime minister's offices, you went through the most elaborate security arrangement I've ever seen. And every place you went there were guys with Uzis wandering, so it was an armed camp. And we met with Schmidt, and then we left there and we flew to Poland, and I'm not sure whether that was Muskie's second trip to Poland.

DN: Only the second, yeah.

LB: And we spent several days there, and then we flew back to the United States. But I think, you know, that his, he, oh, I know what I wanted

Frank Moore, the president's director of congressional relations, was on the China trip. And because of the nature of where the salt shaker is, I ended up at the same end of every table with Frank Moore who, frankly, he thought he was quite important and he thought he was in charge of this trip. But in protocol terms he was below the salt with me because he was just staff, he wasn't an elected official. So we spent a lot of time together and we became good friends.

And I, it turned out that Frank had a terrible reputation on Capitol Hill. It turned out that my office was one of the few places where Frank could just sort of come in and collapse late in an afternoon and have a beer and bullshit without feeling recriminated or discriminated against or whatever. And, you know, Frank was a, he was a boy from Georgia who had no experience in Washington. And to be thrown into a job like that, his only claim to fame was he was very, very, very close to Jimmy Carter, probably personally closer than anybody in the White House but Burt Lance.

So we got to be, we got to know each other and one day he came into my office, a Friday afternoon, Muskie was gone and so we went into the Senator's office. And he says, "You know," he says, "the president and Ed Muskie need to get to know each other better. It would be very good for the president to know Ed Muskie." And I said, "Well," I said, you know, "how do we do that?" And he said, "Well, maybe we could get Muskie to call him." And I said, "Muskie would say, 'Why the hell should I call the president?'" And he said, "Well, I can't, the president would say the same thing, 'Why should I call Ed Muskie?'"

So we actually orchestrated a phone call, or I went in and I said to Muskie, I said, "The president's on the phone." And he went in to the president and said to the president, "Muskie's on the phone." And they, neither one of them ever knew who called who. And they had a pleasant exchange. And then shortly thereafter Ed and Jane got invited to the fourth floor for dinner and as I undB, I was told, it was a dinner that involved martinis all around for both the president and the senator and they had a great time.

DN: Now, was this between the China trip and the Bonn trip?

LB: And the Bonn trip, yes. And I believe, though I have, this became social, not political, and I didn't do social, you know. I was on, Muskie was peculiar in the degree to which he made a clear distinction between his social life and his political life. So, you know, like he, all those summers he went to dinner with Phil Hart at a Chinese restaurant up on Wisconsin Avenue, what was it called, the Blue Moon or something.

DN: Yeah, the Moon Palace.

LB: Moon Palace. I mean, nobody ever knew about that, you know, *you* might have, but you were unlikely to know unless something occurred that was your business. It's like, I didn't know Muskie was a Catholic until we did a field hearing in Vermont in '68, '69, something like that. And he and Bill Hildenbrand had gotten up early and gone to church. It would no more, I don't think it would ever more have occurred to Ed Muskie that his religion was any of my business than anything in the world, but that, you know, that was sort of his style. The privacy thing was very important to him. But I believe there were other events between the president and him.

DN: One footnote question in connection with the Bonn trip: when he went on that trip, was he going as a member of the Senate or was he going as an emissary of the president?

LB: He was going as a member of the Senate who was an emissary of the president, and he was known to be an emissary. Schmidt knew he was there because President Carter asked him

to be there. He wasn't there as a senator playing the middle man, he wasn't like Bill Richardson going to Korea.

DN: And did the White House pick up the tab, or was -?

LB: Oh yeah, we had the, we had Lyndon Johnson's Air Force One at our disposal. It was quite a delightful trip from that perspective.

DN: And how did he, you were with him in the diplomatic meetings.

LB: Yeah, I was with him. Bob Rose attended the meeting with Juan Carlos. And John McEvoy, he met with the finance minister of Germany who happened also to be of Polish descent, and John McEvoy attended that meeting. I attended virtually all of the State meetings except the Juan Carlos meeting and the finance meetings.

And, you know, the meeting with Schmidt was not friendly. It was very blunt, it was, you know, Schmidt used the meeting to send a very strong message to Jimmy Carter. And Muskie was very blunt with Schmidt. I mean it was, it wasn't one of those, I attended fifty-five meetings with heads of state and heads of government with Muskie when he was secretary of state at the United Nations. With one or two exceptions, every one of those meetings was a cordial exchange. This was very frank, very direct. You know, Schmidt was an economist, he didn't like the way that Carter was running the economy, and he didn't, he was very concerned about what we were doing in the Middle East. He did not, he was very angry about Carter.

And I think there was more to it than met the eye. But it was a tough meeting, at which I, you know, I took the notes and wrote them up. Those notes, I don't believe, I believe that Muskie gave the president an oral briefing on his return. I wrote up that trip, but I did not write up the details of the private meetings, I did not, nor did I preserve those notes. Because that was Muskie's style, as you know, he didn't like notes. Anyway, so, is that good enough?

DN: Yeah, and did Muskie appear intimidated by Schmidt?

LB: No, no, no. Muskie was appropriately deferential but, in these kinds of endeavors he had a lot of class. And it was a different kind of class than you ordinarily saw with him because he clearly was a little bit uncomfortable with his own station. I think he, number one, he respected the offices that these people held, his meetings with the finance minister and so on, but when he got up to the kings and the -

DN: Chancellor.

LB: Yeah, it was, it was a little bit different. I remember the dinner we had with Margaret, or luncheon we had with Margaret and Dennis Thatcher and how he was very, it was a wonderful event but it was just, you know, he wasn't nearly as relaxed and as easy as he was in a lot of the other events.

DN: And that was when he was secretary of state.

LB: Yeah, right.

DN: Now, the meeting with Chancellor Schmidt was about the first meeting, if I'm correct in the history, in which he was there as an emissary and not simply as part of a study delegation as in your trip to China. It was a diplomatic mission as distinct from -

LB: That's right, because when he, yeah, it was a special mission and it was because when you're supplied with the president's back up plane you know it's a different kind of deal. The China mission wasn't anything like that. The China mission was important because it gave a feel for the relationship that was evolving with China. Too, there were several people on that trip, Muskie and Packwood being the most obvious, who were of some influence in the United States Senate and in the government. So it had, and being the first it had some importance, but nothing like this. This was a, this was Carter asking Muskie to do him a favor in meeting with a head of state.

DN: Now, this took up obviously quite a bit of time and attention and energy during that '78-'79 period.

LB: But, you know, the great thing about Muskie was you give him the three inch, three ring binder, and he would read it and he would know it. That we had a guy named Tom Weston in the State Department who was on the trip with us, who was the German expert; Reggie Bartholomew who later was assistant secretary of state during the Carter administration for, well later it would have been, one time he was secretary of state for terrorism, but he was with us. We had some good people who knew, unlike McEvoy, Billings and Rose, who knew what they were talking about and who understood the countries that we were, you know. And we had good, we had very good briefing documents on the various countries that we were visiting.

DN: Did the Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff play any role in the briefings?

LB: None, none, none. I don't even think they knew we were going. I, my, I'm trying to recollect, no, we had no dealings with anyone on it except the State Department and the White House.

DN: Did this have any effect that you knew about on Ed Muskie's relationship with his colleagues on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee?

LB: No, not to my knowledge. And he was not the kind to use something like that. As I said, I don't know how many of you would have known he went, you know. Somebody like Howard Baker might have because they might talk about it, because of a shared interest in foreign policy, but no.

DN: During that two year period, you talked about his involvement in foreign policy, what else was transpiring in the office?

LB: Well, he was Chairman of the Budget Committee. And, you're going to do an AI From

interview, or have you done one already?

DN: We've done one with Al.

LB: I mean, the Budget Committee was his primary preoccupation. We were, there was a little bit of stuff going on on the environment, mostly, he actually had, had had crafted in his name and was aware of it and so on, the original Superfund legislation, which we sort of left on the table when we went to the State Department.

But the, working out . . . ah I'm just trying to think of the State Department word, with Henry Bellmon of Oklahoma, the ranking member. Muskie, unlike today in Congress, Muskie believed that his first obligation was to co-opt his ranking minority member. And he believed that you did that by giving up things in his, you know, my recollection was that his One of his first major fights on the floor as chairman of the Budget Committee, which was either '77 or '78, was over the Food Stamp Program where he had to oppose and defeat George McGovern in order to demonstrate to Henry Bellmon and to John Stennis that he was serious about not just limiting their programs, whether it was agriculture or defense, but he also was willing to limit programs he cared a great deal about, like food stamps. And it was an enormously effective specific event, that Food Stamp debate with McGovern.

It got everybody's attention. And that, it was about that time Muskie was very concerned about Stennis, was very, he was chairman of the Armed Services Committee and I think he was on, no, he wasn't on the Appropriations Committee, well maybe he was, and may have been chairman of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee also. Stennis came to see him after this McGovern affair and basically said, "What do I need to do to have you not fight me on the defense budget?" and walked out with an agreement that the defense budget would not increase more than three percent per year. Muskie was flabbergasted, number one that Stennis came to see him, number two that Stennis so readily agreed to a three percent increase. And it basically removed a several year fight over the defense budget from his series of problems as budget chair.

Then what turned out, what he didn't expect, he may have expected it as he crafted the Budget Act but it wasn't really a part of the original debate was, it turned out that Russell Long in the Finance Committee was the problem because, well, they had the ability to limit expenditures - - they couldn't limit tax cuts - - so it became very difficult to balance. Now that's in some respects, you know, rectified technically, but it hasn't been rectified politically.

DN: What was his relationship with Long during that period?

LB: It was stormy. I mean, I, again, you have no idea what the private relationships are, you know. What most people don't know is there's a Senate dining room, and then there's a Senate dining room. There's this little room that these guys go in and, that only senators, no staff, only senators and waiters are allowed in. And, you know, it's one of those inner sanctums where they never If you're in there and you don't want to be disturbed, you never get called out.

You remember when we used to try to chase down where is Muskie? The first idea was that he would be at the gym, well first would be his hideaway, then would be the gym, and then after

we'd exhausted those we had no idea where he was, and he could have been in that inner sanctum. And there are other places to hide, in the sergeant at arms secretary of the Senate office and so on. But anyways, so he may have had other relationships.

What happened was, and this is a story you should get from McEvoy if he can recall it, there was a revenue fight on the budget resolution and the, and Long outmaneuvered him parliamentarily. And it had, I mean, it was a, one of these amendments in the second degree type thing where basically there were a potential of five motions and it ended up with Muskie being control of the fifth, Long was in control of the fifth. And I don't know how angry Muskie was with Long, though he was not, did not speak well of him after that particular event. His frustration with the Budget Committee staff was significantly greater, because he'd been out-parliamentaried by Russell. And I mean, Russell, a sober Russell Long was one canny senator, but otherwise.

One budget story, though, that's important, and I'm not sure I haven't told this one already. During my tenure as AA one of my, I asked Muskie for three things when I became AA. Number one was I wanted to have the maximum salary that an administrative assistant could have. Number two, I wanted to be able to make the necessary personnel decisions, which would include letting some people go which he was most reluctant to do. And I explained to him why, and he admonished me to remember that they were human beings. And then the third thing was I asked him for, I told him, I would like to be able to wander in and out of any particular meeting you have unless you have told me in advance that you don't want me in there for some reason. And he agreed to all of those things.

And the, as AA, because I had been around so, I had been around longer by that point than any of the other professional staff, senior professional staff, I knew what was going on in these other committees. And, you know, I tried to step back from the environment subcommittee and let Karl take it because, number one, I felt least comfortable second guessing him, and I felt it was most important that he had an independent access to establish his own working relationship with Muskie, though he already had somewhat of one because of his role in the Campobello issues. And by then, of course, From was gone, he was off the IGR committee as chairman and he was on Foreign Relations and that was internalized, we didn't have a separate staff. So then we only had, we had this massive Budget Committee operation of sixty-five people, and they were, they tended to be what I called brown chair economists, you know, they -

End of Side A
Side B

DN: This is the second side of the interview with Leon Billings on the 23rd of October 2003. And you were talking about the staff of the Budget Committee.

LB: They were not terribly sensitive to who Muskie was politically or personally, they were very sensitive to who Muskie was as chairman of the Budget Committee. And I saw my role as making sure that the senator from Maine, the progressive Democrat from Maine, the senator who was a New Deal liberal, was represented in the thinking process of staff. And it was a, it was a difficult task because the staff director of the Budget Committee I think, from time to time, thought that I was having conversations with the Senator that were undermining his efforts.

DN: This is John McEvoy.

LB: John McEvoy, yeah. And the incident, the particular incident in question was on Social Security. And they had a proposal in to see him and I said to John, I said, "You need to get your people together and come over here and make your case for this proposal, because we in the Senate staff, (as opposed to the committee staff) disagree with you. And I would never do that behind your back, but you know, the Senator and I have had a discussion of this and it's only fair that you come in and make your presentation." So he brought Porter Wheeler and Roger Schlickheisen and Karen Williams, a cast of thousands, over to the Senate office.

Well, the conversation that Muskie and I had was, when this memo came in on Social Security, I had said to him, I said, "You know Senator, my parents are retired on Social Security, it is their sole source of income. And when someone tells me that we have to limit Social Security income for people whose sole source of income is nine thousand dollars a year, to balance the budget, I'm a little troubled by that." And I said, so I said, you know, "I think that probably you are, too."

And so John and his people came in and they made their pitch on Social Security, and I can't remember what it was, I think it was to hold down the inflation factor. And Muskie had listened as he was wont to do, he was just sort of slumped in his chair like he was on some kind of narcotic, just listened. And when they got all through he said something like, "Do you think nine thousand dollars a year is enough to live on? Do you think that the eighty percent of people who receive Social Security are making too much money? Do you think - -?" You know, he did one of those. He said, "I think that you ought to go back and find another way to cut the deficit." And I don't think John McEvoy ever forgave me for that meeting, but I honestly believe that he would have said exactly the same thing in exactly the same meeting, perhaps not using the nine thousand dollars a year point. Because, I mean he really, when it came down to tough choices, he didn't want to make the tough choices which cut out people in Maine.

And the Budget Committee, it was, for Muskie it always struck me as being an obligation that he had to perform, and it wasn't a power trip. It was to establish, you know, he thought there were important precedents to establish for future budget committee chairs and so on. But I don't think he really liked it. Which takes us back to the secretary of state.

Frank Moore came over one afternoon and we were having a beer and he, actually, let me step back. I think it was the, it may have been '78, it must have been '78, the Senate was in right up to New Years I believe; I could be wrong. And Muskie and I had had dinner in his hideaway, and the Senate was in very late. He wasn't doing anything but he couldn't go home and it was, my general habit was to require one staff person, myself and one other person to hang out until he left, and many, many nights I did that duty and, because that was clearly his preference. And, so we had a couple of drinks and. Oh, I know what, I know, we had, the night before, he had gone to a fund raiser for Warren Magnuson and, so this was earlier because Magnuson I think, Magnuson was defeated in '80.

DN: In '78 he was defeated.

LB: In '78 or '80? I thought he was defeated in '80 [Leon's recollection is correct; Magnuson was defeated in the '80 election cycle and served from December 14, 1944 to January 3, 1981]. Anyway, he'd gone to this fund raiser for Magnuson and I was giving him a ride home and he said, "I have to stop for Magnuson's party." And I said, I said, "Okay, but," I said, "I'll sit here and wait for you, but I'm not going to wait for more than ten minutes, because I got to get home to my wife and my kids." So he went in and he literally, he was back out in ten minutes. And we're driving home, he said, Jesus Christ, he says, I don't know if he said Jesus Christ, he says, he said, "Here's Maggie standing in there like this, and these people are coming through the receiving line, he doesn't know any of them, who they are, and he's shaking their hands." He says, "You know, don't you ever let me run for reelection if I'm in that condition," he says, "I don't want to be in that condition."

And so then, this later night we'd had a couple of drinks and had dinner and were sitting around waiting for something not to happen in the Senate, and we started talking about how do you gracefully exit the United States Senate. And, you know, you die, you're defeated, you quit. And I said, "Well," I said, "you could take a presidential appointment." He said, "Oh, Jimmy Carter would want to make me goddamn director of OMB." I said, "Well," I said, "he could make you secretary of treasury." And he says, "Yeah," he says, "I could do that." And I said, "Or he could make you secretary of state." He says, "That I would really like to do."

So later in '79, before the Bonn trip sometime, Frank was in the office. And I said to him, I said, "Do you think that Vance will hang around for the second term?" And he said he didn't know, and he wanted to know why I asked. I said, "Well," I said, "it struck me that Muskie would be a great appointment to be secretary of state." And Frank says, "Do you think he'd take it?" And I said, "Well, Frank," I said, "I think I have a way of finding out, but you know, it would be easier to find out if there was a potential of it occurring." And Frank said, "Well, let me talk to the president." So Frank came back to me a few weeks later, he says, "The president sort of liked that idea if Vance doesn't stick around for a second term." And I said, "Well, Muskie sort of likes that idea, too. In fact, Frank," I said, "Muskie would love to be secretary of state."

So that was it until the night that Vance resigned. Muskie was someplace in Tennessee, Jim Case was traveling with him. The White House had called me and, trying to find him, and I told them where he was. And he called me and he said, "I need you, Leslie and Berl in my hideaway at eight o'clock tomorrow morning." I said, "Are you going to take the job?" And he says, "What job?" And I said, "I assume the president was calling you to offer you the job as secretary of state." He said, "That's none of your goddamn business and you can't say anything about it! You just keep your mouth shut!" He just was . . . ha, ha, ha, . . . , Jesus Christ, you know. So, unfortunately, transcribed it's not as funny a story, but . . .

So the next morning we had a meeting with Berl and Leslie and Jane and me, and the purpose of the meeting, the first part, purpose of the meeting was to determine whether or not he could afford it. And Leslie informed him that he'd already made all the honoraria that he could take that year anyway, and so there wouldn't be any loss there. And so then the next purpose was to talk with Berl and with me about just whether it was a good thing to do. I mean, he pretty clearly had made up his mind, but he really valued Berl's opinion. I don't think he cared a damn

about mine. And then he wanted to talk to Jane about it from the family perspective. And I'm not, they were not necessarily in that order, because I mean obviously he and Jane had talked the night before.

And so I said, "Well," I said, "If you're going to do this there's a couple of things you have to do." I said, "The first thing you have to do is you have to talk to Joe Brennan about your successor; secondly, about your successor and, I said, you know, you got a hundred people up here working for you who depend on you. The day you leave, they're unprotected. So when you talk to Joe you've got to ask Joe if he will try to protect the staff for as long as he can." And there was something else, I can't remember what it was. Anyway, so he said, "Well, get the president on the phone."

So I picked up the phone and called the White House and said, "Senator Muskie's calling the president." And he got on the phone with the president, he said, ah, "Mr. President, I need to go to Maine to see the governor to tell him that I'm considering taking this job so he won't be surprised. There are some things I have to work out." And I'm not sure, I think at that point he told the pres-, he had not yet told the president he would accept it. So the president said, "Go out to Andrews Air Force Base in the morning, there'll be a plane to take you to Maine."

So I called Joe who fortunately, you know, during that '76 campaign when, no, '78 campaign when Phil Merrill was running against Joe, I issued an absolute ukase that no one on the staff was to get involved in that primary campaign. Now, I know that people like Jim Case and so on did some stuff clandestinely, but by God, that office was neutral on that campaign. And, which, you know, I told Joe, you know, I love Joe, he's my good friend, and I said, you know, "I can't help you but I can try not to hurt you," and he never forgot that.

But anyway, so I called Joe and I said, "Joe," I said, "Can you get down to Brunswick Naval Air Station tomorrow around eight-thirty, Muskie needs to see you." And he said he could. And I said, "Well," I said, "I'd like you to do that, I'd like you to get down there, the commandant will be expecting you, please don't tell anybody and don't bring anybody with you."

So we got there and got off the plane and Joe was there, and he and Muskie had a private meeting, and they discussed the implications for Maine of him taking the job. It was a, it was a truly wonderful meeting. I mean, Joe was so thrilled that Muskie felt it important to talk to him personally about this, and Muskie really did want to make sure in his own mind that this was the best thing for, in addition to him, for Maine and so on. So then I think that's when Joe asked Muskie if he had anyone who he thought might be appropriate to succeed him, and Muskie said, "Ken Curtis." And Joe looked at him, he said, "You know, Ed, I could never do that. After what Ken did to me in the campaign, it was complete- . . ." I mean what, I mean Ken really did have no business doing what he did. He said, "I just couldn't do that."

So they sort of sat there and they muddled over it. And it disappointed Muskie, because Muskie really loves Ken Curtis, but I mean, he didn't push it, once Joe said 'under no circumstances'. And I think I've told you before, another former senator's name never came up. And so then I said, "Well, what about George Mitchell?" And Muskie said, "Oh, he'll never take it, he, I just made him a federal judge." And Joe says, "Yeah, you know, George is a federal judge, he

wouldn't be interested." I said, "Well, wait a minute, wait a minute," I said, "why don't we ask?" And Muskie said, "Well you can't do that." And I said, "Well," I said, "you know, I could call Gayle and ask her to call George and say, 'look, you know, I don't have any business asking you this question, I haven't got any authority to ask you this question, but if Muskie were to leave the Senate would you be interested in being appointed to his seat?'" And Muskie gave me one of those, you know, you're a seven year old trouble causer looks, and then said, "Well, can't have my fingerprints on it, can't have Joe's fingerprints on it." And Joe said, "Well, yeah, I'm not even sure I want to do it, but I'd like to know."

And so I called, I went out and let them talk, and I called Gayle and I told her what the circumstance was, told her how delicate it was. And then we left and came back to Washington and by then Gayle had talked to George. And George was, was, to say he was interested would be a gross understatement. And so I went in and I told Muskie and he said, "Well, you better call Joe and tell him." So then I called Joe and told him and then, of course, I guess every other day, as soon as the word got out, George was calling Gayle saying, you know, "What's going on? What's going on?" I one day called Joe and I said, "Have you made a decision?" And he said, "Well," he said, "I think so but I'm not going to say anything until Muskie's been confirmed, sworn in, I think that would be inappropriate," which was, we loved it, you know, because we were getting the credit as it was.

So then, just to finish up this story, Muskie told me, he says, "Get Nordy Hoffmann." So I called Nordy and I asked to come over, and this was around noon and we'd gotten back from Maine. And Muskie called the president, told him he'd take it, he, but it was embargoed until two PM. So he called Nordy and, which was sweet, because he wanted to tell Nordy personally. And then he said, "Well, you better get the staff in here." So I got the staff in and he told them.

DN: And Nordy was at that time?

LB: Sergeant at Arms. And he'd gotten the sergeant at arms job because of Muskie. And Nordy was his usual, you know, I don't think Nordy thought for two seconds about any implications it had for his own career, he was so thrilled for Muskie. And the staff came in and there were tears and all that. And while they were, I was fielding phone calls, trying not to answer questions, and Scotty Reston called, and Muskie was in there with the staff and he told me to just hold off telephone calls. And so Scotty called and I said, "Oh, Scotty, he's tied up with the staff right now, but can he get back to you?" And he said, "Fine." So about fifteen or twenty minutes later I walked in and I said, "Oh, by the way, Scotty Reston called." Boom! He went through the roof. "You mean Scotty Reston called and you didn't put him through? Do you know who Scotty Reston is? I'm going to be secretary of goddamn state and you told Scotty Reston I didn't have time to talk to him." [laughter] Anyway.

DN: And that was the beginning of the new venture. And I think we'll stop right there because we don't have time to go into more detail.

End of Interview