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Issues and Answers - Senator Edmund S. Muskie Interviewed on ABC Television

Edmund S. Muskie

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I S S U E S A N D A N S W E R S

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 1971

GUEST:

SENATOR EDMUND MUSKIE (D. Ne.)

INTERVIEWED BY:

Bob Clark, ABC News Capitol Hill Correspondent
Bill Gill, ABC News White House Correspondent

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MR. CLARK: Senator Muskie, welcome back to ISSUES AND ANSWERS.

South Vietnamese forces have entered Laos in force in the last few days according to the latest reports from the scene and appear to be poised for a major invasion. Do you think this sort of military operation with the American support it is receiving is justified to protect the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam?

SENATOR MUSKIE: Well, I am not so certain that the movement into Laos has actually taken place as your question implies, but nevertheless I would oppose American support and involvement

1 in that kind of an invasion with all of the risks that it
2 poses for an enlarging of the war, a widening of it, and an
3 increase in American involvement in the war.

4 MR. CLARK: Senator, on an allied subject, and one that
5 certainly intertwines with the question of whether we go into
6 Laos, last year you supported the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment
7 to set a definite cut-off date for the end of the war. This
8 year so far you have not given the new version of McGovern-
9 Hatfield your support. Why not?

10 SENATOR MUSKIE: I am committed to the idea of a publicly-
11 announced deadline for withdrawal. I have been for a year,
12 long before the McGovern-Hatfield amendment. I am still commit-
13 ted to that objective. I co-sponsored McGovern-Hatfield last
14 year; voted for it, spoke for it, and indeed, persuaded the
15 Democratic State Convention in Maine to adopt it as part of its
16 platform. So the objective of McGovern-Hatfield or any
17 other resolution which would be a commitment to a deadline for
18 withdrawal would have my support.

19 As a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, and I might
20 say a new member this year, I expect to be giving consideration
21 to probably more than one formula for implementing that object-
22 ive. I think questions that we must consider as we consider the
23 implementation of the objective are such questions as these:
24 To what extent should we, by legislative enactment, seek to
25 freeze tactical moves aimed at implementation, into legislation?

1 Secondly, to what extent would the legislation advance
2 the objective of bringing our prisoners of war back?

3 To what extent would any legislative enactment affect
4 our potential for the safe withdrawal of the remaining troops?

5 These are three of the fundamental questions that are
6 involved as we consider a formula for meeting the objective
7 of a deadline for withdrawal. I am committed to the deadline
8 for a number of reasons, not the least of which is this. I
9 think only when we do that do we lay the basis for the safe
10 withdrawal of our troops and the return of our prisoners of
11 war.

12 MR. GILL: Well, Senator Muskie, there have been several
13 ideas of what the problems all are in that area as for our
14 disengagement, our getting out; how we should do it. You have
15 just restated some of the problems that have been pointed out
16 by yourself and by others, but you have said that any move
17 into Laos would be a false move by the Nixon Administration.
18 Now, that is a hard criticism of what seems to be contemplated,
19 so it is now fair to ask you, do you have a plan of your own
20 that you would follow as President, or do you have a plan of
21 your own that you would and will present as a Senator to expedite
22 the withdrawal and to get out of the problem in South Vietnam?

23 SENATOR MUSKIE: Well, as I have said, the key to it in
24 my judgment, is the establishment of a deadline, an announced
25 deadline for withdrawal.

1 I think that in addition to the advantages I have already
2 mentioned such a deadline would have had following additional
3 advantages.

4 First of all, it would put Saigon clearly on notice that
5 there is a termination date on our involvement and that they
6 must gear themselves to it.

7 Secondly, it would put Hanoi clearly on notice that there
8 is an end to our commitment and that there is a basis then for
9 negotiating the return of our prisoners of war, of negotiating
10 the safe withdrawal of our troops and conceivably a basis for a
11 political settlement of some kind.

12 ~~Thirdly, it would be a clear notice to the rest of the~~
13 world, including the Soviet Union and our allies in Western Europe
14 and elsewhere that our commitment in Southeast Asia, with all
15 of the drains upon our resources and our influence elsewhere,
16 is coming to an end and that we are in a position to exert our
17 influence elsewhere in a more effective way.

18 And then finally, of course, I think such a clear commit-
19 ment would tend to begin the healing of our divisions here at
20 home.

21 For these reasons I think that the deadline is a key to
22 any effective policy of withdrawal.

23 MR. GILL: Moving within the framework of such a deadline
24 then, would it be fair to say from what you have just told us
25 that you now seem to indicate more flexibility in tactics within

1 that framework before the deadline should expire, such as air,
2 possibly even combat support, to South Vietnamese troops in
3 Cambodia, Laos and so forth?

4 SENATOR MUSKIE: Within the objective of limiting, restrict-
5 ing out involvement to South Vietnam -- I wholly endorse the
6 objection of those who say the war ought not to be allowed to
7 widen into Cambodia and Laos -- within the limits of South
8 Vietnam, obviously, so long as we are withdrawing, we are going
9 to have to take military steps to protect withdrawal of our troops
10 and we are going to have to take negotiating steps of some kind
11 to arrange for the return of our prisoners of war. So the
12 tactics within these limitations ought to be left to the dis-
13 cretion of the President.

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1 MR. CLARK: Well, Senator, are there conditions under
2 which you would approve the use of American air combat forces
3 in Laos, or Cambodia?

4 SENATOR MUSKIE: I think that the use of combat air
5 support, in the sense that that is meant by the military --
6 support of ground forces, South Vietnamese or Cambodian or
7 Laotian, to support their military activities, goes
8 beyond the spirit of any policies that Congress has
9 endorsed, or any policy that the Administration has
10 in a clearcut way defined, and I think before we got
11 involved in that kind of activity in Cambodia and Laos, the
12 President ought to come to Congress, ask for its support,
13 define his proposal, so that we can consider it on its
14 merits.

15 Now, we are limited, as I understand it, and should be,
16 to the withdrawal of our troops from South Vietnam
17 and to tactical air activity that may be necessary to interdict
18 supplies and to protect them.

19 MR. CLARK: Senator, just to get absolutely clear on your
20 position, you do not object to the use of tactical air
21 forces to interdict supply lines through Laos or Cambodia
22 into Vietnam?

23 SENATOR MUSKIE: Well, let me say that some of the
24 things that might be done or have been done in the name
25 of interdiction I think go beyond that. So one has to be

1 careful about agreeing to a label here. For example, the
2 recent air activity on Highway 4 between the old Sihanoukville
3 and Phnom Penh in my judgment bordered close on combat air
4 support of a Cambodian military activity designed to enhance
5 its position. I suppose anything you do with air in Cambodia
6 has some relationship to our troops in South Vietnam and it
7 is a question of judgment as to whether one has gone beyond
8 the interdiction of supplies into actual air combat
9 support of the Cambodian war effort. I think that we ought
10 to avoid.

11 MR. GILL: Isn't that really academic though in that
12 Secretary Laird has said that we feel free now, that he is
13 free now to use American air power in whatever role may be
14 necessary, whether it is combat support, logistical
15 interdiction or whatever that in their judgment, in the
16 Administration's judgment, is necessary to protect the
17 withdrawal of troops?

18 SENATOR MUSKIE: In the briefing which the Foreign
19 Relations Committee received from Secretary Rogers, it is not
20 my impression that the Administration is proposing that
21 broad a concept of the use of air power. As a matter of
22 fact, the purpose of the briefing was designed to try to
23 persuade us that what was done on Highway 4 was within the
24 limitations imposed by the Administration itself, and by the
25 Congress, on our military activity in Cambodia.

MR. GILL: Were you satisfied --

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SENATOR MUSKIE: So if that argument was being made, then I take it the Administration was not quite ready at that moment to embrace an unlimited concept of the use of air power in Cambodia.

If the Administration were to move in that direction, then I think you will see very loud and vocal criticism and opposition from the Congress.

(Announcements)

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MR. CLARK: Senator, you have said you agree in principle with the idea of setting a specific cutoff date for getting all American troops out of Vietnam, yet you are withholding your support, at least for the time being, from the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment.

Is there a question in your mind as to whether December 31 of 1971 should be the cutoff date? That, of course, is the date set in McGovern-Hatfield.

SENATOR MUSKIE: Not at all. That is the date that became the symbol of this objective and I think it is as good a date as any. I understand, of course, if we were to actually get down to the process of agreeing on a date in Paris with the other side, that there might be some change in that deadline, but I think as a vehicle for expressing the concern of many of us in the Congress, that there ought to be a

1 deadline. I think that deadline is a good one and a good
2 target.

3 MR. CLARK: Well, do you have some other reservations
4 about McGovern-Hatfield? Are you considering phrasing your own
5 withdrawal amendment, or just what?

6 SENATOR MUSKIE: I introduced a resolution of my own last
7 May geared to that deadline. Senator McGovern is not here
8 to endorse that one and is not giving me a reason for not
9 doing so. I don't have any questions about the objectives
10 of the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment. As I said earlier,
11 the three questions I will consider as I review a
12 reintroduction of my own proposal, the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment
13 and other proposals that I am sure will be considered in the
14 hearings by the Foreign Relations Committee, three questions
15 that I reviewed -- three considerations that I reviewed
16 earlier -- I don't think we ought to take the time to review
17 them now.

18 MR. CLARK: Is Presidential politics getting involved in
19 this at all? Is this a sibling rivalry and are you both
20 regarded as contenders for the Presidential nomination?

21 SENATOR MUSKIE: It doesn't enter my mind in considering
22 a serious question of this kind. It is a tough, complex
23 problem and I think it ought to be decided on its merits.

24 MR. GILL: Again, Senator, I want to clear up one aspect
25 of an earlier question. You say that Secretary Rogers

1 came before the Foreign Relations Committee to explain how
2 his interpretation would indicate that the Administration has
3 indeed stayed within the limits that it put upon itself
4 for the use of air power in Cambodia. In view of the President's
5 statement last June that there would be no combat support to
6 Cambodian troops or South Vietnamese troops inside Cambodia
225 7 did the Secretary during his explanation satisfy you that
8 they have indeed lived up to their own restrictions?

9 SENATOR MUSKIE: No, I think he went beyond the spirit
10 of that self-imposed limitation by the Administration, and
11 indeed the spirit, although not the letter, of Cooper-Church.
12 ~~It seems to me that what the Administration has been engaged~~
13 ~~in many times since last June is a straining at the limits~~
14 ~~of Cooper-Church and its own imposed limitations on the use~~
15 ~~of air power and it is that straining at the limits that~~
16 ~~creates concern in the Senate.~~

17 MR. GILL: Senator, there has been some confusion by
18 news reports about your talks with Russia's Premier
19 Kosygin. Now you reportedly said during that conversation
20 with Mr. Kosygin, / ^{that} there was a large body of opinion in
21 this country that would favor cuts in military spending.
22 To clear up the confusion about that conversation, can
23 you tell us what you did say to Mr. Kosygin on this point?

24 SENATOR MUSKIE: First of all I did not say what
25 you have described in your question. I made it clear to Mr.

1 Kosygin as I did to every head of state I met on the trip,
2 that I was there as an individual Senator, that I was not there
3 in any official capacity, that I did not represent the
4 Administration, that I was not there to criticize the
5 Administration, that I was there to exchange points of
6 view and to express my own in the process.

7 Now, with respect to the question of armaments, I
8 launched this discussion in terms of the long term. I
9 pointed out that I believed that unless we found a way to
10 reach meaningful agreements with the Soviet Union that what
11 we would see would be an escalation of arms, the commitment
12 of ever greater proportions of our material resources to
13 the cost of arms, a diversion of those resources away from the
14 problem of dealing with human needs of our people and those
15 of other people ~~XXXXXX~~ ^{around} the globe, and that the end result of
16 this kind of movement would be an increased risk of war and
17 the end of life on this planet. And so that in terms of
18 the long-term, I wanted him to understand how urgent
19 was my feeling that the Soviet Union and the United States
20 find some way to stabilize the arms race.

21 Secondly, I said that because we each had the power
22 to destroy each other, we each understandably feared the
23 ultimate intentions of the other, that that fear and the
24 distrust which it breeds are real problems that we each
25 must deal with and that these fears are exacerbated by such

1 problems as the Middle East problem, the continually-arising
2 problem of Berlin, and others. That in addition there were
3 internal developments from time to time in our countries
4 that raised doubts as to the ultimate intentions of the other,
5 problems such as the treatment of Jewish minorities in the
6 Soviet Union, problems such as the continuing speculation now
7 that hard-liners are taking over in Moscow and the Soviet Union.
8 I mean this was the frankness with which we discussed
9 developments.

10 So my whole objective was to emphasize my feeling of
11 urgency about the importance of working out agreements wherever
12 we could identify our own national interests, and wherever
13 those national interests coincided. And the three areas of
14 possibility that I outlined or tried to were the
15 areas in which we are now engaged in talks: the Middle East,
16 the Change in Status talks on Berlin, and the SALT talks.

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1 MR. CLARK: Senator, if we can refer again to Senator
2 McGovern, who is the only announced candidate for the Democratic
3 presidential nomination -- and we may quote him a little more
4 frequently because of that point -- he said recently, talking
5 with a group of political reporters, that you tend to wait for a
6 consensus before taking a position on major issues, and that
7 seemed to carry the implication that you might be lacking in
8 certain leadership qualities essential to a President.

9 What would your response be to that?

10 SENATOR MUSKIE: Well, I would not expect George to be
11 complimentary at this point, but let me say that I understand,
12 of course, that public life involves above all the question of
13 making decisions. I have been involved in public life for a
14 quarter of a century and I understand if there is any character-
15 istic of the Presidency which is dominant it is that it is a
16 place where decisions have to be made; decisions involving not
17 easy problems, but tough and complex ones; that instant decisions
18 are not likely to solve them, but that decisiveness is important

19 This has been, I think, the measure of my public life and
20 it is because the presidency offers kind of a challenge that I
21 am interested in it and I am perfectly aware that a man must
22 make tough and decisive decisions and I am prepared to do so.

23 MR. CLARK: Senator, the latest Harris poll shows you leading
24 in a test heat, leading President Nixon I think at this point
25 43 to 40 per cent. Would that seem in your judgment to amount

1 to a consensus that you should run for the presidency?

2 SENATOR MUSKIE: I would not say so, Bob. Polls go up and
3 down and these will. They are interesting and we all follow
4 them and I suppose those of us who are the subject of the polls
5 follow them especially, but I think it is easy to be seduced
6 by them and I try not to be.

7 MR. CLARK: They are not going to influence you into a
8 precipitant announcement?

9 SENATOR MUSKIE: Well, I don't know what you mean by "pre-
10 cipitant."

11 MR. CLARK: As today, for example.

12 SENATOR MUSKIE: I am going to make my own decision in my
13 own way in my own time.

14 (Announcements)

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16 MR. GILL: Senator, you have indicated you could cut back
17 on military spending. Now, you have had the President's budget
18 proposals for a week of study. Having looked at them, can you
19 tell us where and how much you would slice that military spending?

20 SENATOR MUSKIE: First of all, I'd like to make the point
21 that for the first time in three years the budget represents an
22 increase in military spending which suggests that all of the
23 Vietnam dividend has been used up. Because the President says
24 we are winding down the war, the cost is being reduced, and
25 yet that reduction is not reflected in reduced military spending

1 overall but, rather, we have an increase of "x" billions. I 15
2 haven't actually identified, because the Vietnam costs aren't ve
3 carefully identified in the budget, the extent to which Vietnam
4 savings have been now plowed back into new military spending and
5 it is that figure that I think we need to concentrate on as we
6 contemplate reductions in the President's military budget.

7 MR. CLARK: Senator, we want to talk a little more of polit
8 with you. Just down the street a block or so from this studio
9 there is a big Muskie political headquarters with a staff of
10 about 30 full-time paid employees I believe, and a number of
11 volunteers. Is this just reconnaissance in force or what is
12 all the action about unless you have really made up your mind
13 to run for President?

14 SENATOR MUSKIE: There is a great deal of preparation that
15 goes into this kind of an effort and you have to start making
16 those preparations well in advance, I think, of normal candi-
17 dacies and formal campaigns or you won't be --

18 MR. CLARK: You are an informal candidate, but not a formal
19 candidate at this stage, is that it?

20 SENATOR MUSKIE: You are going to find many ways, Bob, to
21 try to convert what I say into an announcement and I appreciate
22 your solicitude, but I don't think I am going to rise to that
23 bait on this program.

24 MR. CLARK: Senator, if you do become a formal candidate,
25 will you go the primary round that Senator McGovern has already

1 said that is the way he is going to win; he is going to con-
2 front you in all the major primaries and face you down?

3 SENATOR MUSKIE: I think the primary route is one that one
4 ought to take in the present context of public concern about,
5 you know, participation and involvement. It is a very costly
6 one. The extent to which a candidate could become involved
7 in the primaries, the number of primaries he might be able to
8 get involved in, that would depend a great deal upon the re-
9 sources, the money. It is very expensive.

10 MR. GILL: Senator, as a presidential candidate unannounced,
11 one of the most interesting issues before the people now seems
12 to be that of economics. We have a Revenue-Sharing Plan by the
13 President. It seems to be based upon projections and revenue
14 income that is highly questioned by a large segment of the
15 Democratic party.

16 How realistic is that Nixon program? Will the revenue
17 match that? Is the economy indeed improving as he claims that
18 it is now? What are your analyses?

19 SENATOR MUSKIE: Well, answering the last part of your ques-
20 tion first, I think the indicators are too ambiguous at this
21 point as to whether or not the economy is improving. The fact
22 is, we are operating \$60 billion below our production potential.
23 That is, machines and men are idle to this extent and that \$60
24 billion represents about \$20 billion in federal revenues if we
25 had that capacity going.

1 Secondly, unemployment is at six per cent and that is too
2 much. That is five million Americans who are out of work.

3 Thirdly, inflation is at a 5.5 per cent annual rate. That
4 is too much in terms of the impact upon the capacity of those at
5 the lower end of the income scale especially, to sustain them-
6 selves and their families in a decent standard of living. So
7 the economy is in bad shape and the President's projections
8 for improvement over the last year exceed the most optimistic
9 projections of outside economists.

10 So I would not guess that the President is going to achieve
11 in 1971 the kind of economic improvement that he is projecting.

12 MR. GILL: Well, with that doubt in mind, will you offer
13 proposals of your own in Congress that might correct some of
14 those ills?

15 SENATOR MUSKIE: Some of the things that need to be done
16 cannot be done by the Congress as effectively as they can be
17 done by the President.

18 For example, we need an incomes policy. By this I don't
19 mean the official hit or miss, ad hoc, jawboning as the Presi-
20 dent describes it, to discredit it, designed to bear in on par-
21 ticular wage and price decisions; what you need is a structured
22 mechanism in which management and labor participate for setting
23 performance standards in the price-making and wage-making decision
24 of the country and the President has backed away from this, has
25 refused to do it and apparently continues to refuse to do it and,

1 without that, any expansion of the money supply which is intend-
2 ed to stimulate the economy and the President has proposed to
3 do this, could run into real trouble.

4 MR. CLARK: Senator, one of the problems in having some
5 Democrats in the Senate running for President is that they tend
6 to try to upstage each other on any given issue whether it is
7 the economy, or Vietnam, or pollution or anything else.

8 How do you get the Democrats in Congress together behind any
9 coherent alternative to Nixon programs?

10 SENATOR MUSKIE: Elect a Democratic President. I don't
11 know of any other way to bring all these Democratic voices
12 together.

13 MR. CLARK: Doesn't he have to be elected on a democratic
14 program of some sort?

15 SENATOR MUSKIE: Well, you remember, Bob, in 1960 there were
16 at least eight potential Democratic candidates for President.
17 Finally Jack Kennedy was elected and only then did Democratic
18 voices rally behind a single spokesman. I don't expect that
19 to happen in this Congress.

20 MR. GILL: Thank you very much, Senator Muskie, for being
21 with us on ISSUES AND ANSWERS.

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