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Interview with Warren Christopher by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Christopher, Warren

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

June 30, 2003

Place

Washington, D.C.

ID Number

MOH 402

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Biographical Note

Warren M. Christopher was born to Ernest and Catherine Christopher on October 27, 1925 in Scranton, North Dakota. He received his bachelor's degree from the University of Southern California in 1945, served in the Naval Reserve from 1943 to 1946 and received his law degree from Stanford University in 1949. He was a law clerk to Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas from 1949 to 1950. He had a private law practice in Los Angeles, California from 1950 to 1967. He was the U.S. Deputy Attorney General from 1967 to 1969. He returned to private practice in Los Angeles from 1969 to 1977. He was U.S. Deputy Secretary of State from 1977 to 1981. He returned to private practice in Los Angeles from 1981 to 1992. He was Transition Chief to President elect Bill Clinton in 1992. He was the U.S. Secretary of State from 1993 to 1997. He is married to Marie (Wyllis) Christopher and has four children.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: first meeting Muskie; Muskie campaign; hostage negotiations; Muskie's selection as Secretary of State; working relationship with Muskie; Muskie and Vance; Brzezinski and Muskie; rumors of a second run for presidency; negotiating in Algiers in 1981; and changing administrations in the state department.

Indexed Names

Billings, Leon
Brzezinski, Zbigniew, 1928-
Carter, Jimmy, 1924-
Christopher, Catherine
Christopher, Ernest
Christopher, Marie (Wyllis)
Christopher, Warren
Clinton, Bill, 1946-
Haig, Al, 1924-1982
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996
Muskie, Jane Gray
Nicoll, Don
Vance, Cyrus R. (Cyrus Roberts), 1917-2002
Ziffren, Paul

Transcript

Don Nicoll: . . . It is the 30th of June, 2003. We're in the [law] offices of O=Melveny & Myers; Don Nicoll is interviewing former Secretary of State Warren Christopher. Mr. Christopher, would you give us your full name and your date, place of birth, and the names of your parents?

Warren Christopher: My full name is Warren M. Christopher. I was born in Scranton, North Dakota on October 27th, 1925. My parents were Ernest and Catherine Christopher.

DN: When did you first meet Senator Muskie?

WC: I can't be sure when I first met him. In 1967 and 1968 I was deputy attorney general, and I think I met him at that time in connection with my service at the Department of Justice and with his role on Capitol Hill, but it was only a glancing relationship at that time. I, of course, followed the election campaign in 1968, but since I was still in government I could not take any public position on it. My first contact with him that I recall was in 1972 when I had returned to California. By then he had been much admired as a candidate for vice president in 1968 and was a front runner for the nomination, Democratic nomination, for the presidency. Here in California one of my friends, Paul Ziffren, who was a Democratic National Committeeman, involved me in the campaign as his co-chairman for southern California of the Muskie for President campaign in 1972 and I met him briefly in that connection.

DN: Did you do much work as co-chairman, or was that an honorary position?

WC: We did some work here in California by way of fund raising and organizing the campaign, but of course that campaign was aborted before it got very far and the California

primary was toward the end of the primary season as I recall, so our work was only beginning by the time the campaign really ended.

DN: And in that campaign, did you gain a sense as to why the Muskie campaign didn't take off?

WC: It was a very troubled time, of course with the Vietnam War still raging, and I felt that the Muskie campaign still was likely to win if it had continued. Nevertheless, there were detractors, mainly from the left side of the Democratic Party, who wanted a stronger anti-war stance than was being taken. But of course my principal recollection is the tremendous surprise at the incident that caused him to, caused Senator Muskie to drop out.

DN: You're speaking of the so-called crying incident in New Hampshire?

WC: Yes, I'm speaking of the crying incident, and I've thought many times since then what a superficial reason it was that forced him out, and how unlikely it would be repeated in the present day and age when emotion seems to be so much easier accepted now than it was then.

DN: Did you have any contacts with him between '72 and your arrival at the Department of State in '77?

WC: If I did they were only very glancing contacts, I can't summon up any recollection during that period.

DN: And by 1977 he was a member of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, so I assume there were some encounters in that four year period before he went to State.

WC: Were you thinking of 1977?

DN: Yes.

WC: Yes, I would call him as a leading senator during that period, and I recall briefing him, among many others, in connection with the hostage rescue mission and the negotiations for the release of the hostage, hostages in 1980 and 1981.

DN: And did he stand out in terms of having an impact on you in the course of those briefings, or was he simply another member of the, senior member of the Senate?

WC: I recall Senator Muskie, at that time, as being a leading exponent of environmental causes. I was interested in the environment, as I continued to be during my time as secretary of state, but I did not have a close relationship at that time with him because he was mainly working in the domestic sphere, mainly working on budget matters and environmental matters. The best recollection I have of him, in connection with the hostage negotiations in 1980 and '81, was his probing questions that he asked sometimes when I would come to Capitol Hill to brief people on the House and Senate.

DN: He had that terrible habit with his staff, too.

WC: Well, they were never impolite or tendentious, but after you got back and reflected you were reminded that he had put a lot of thought into his questions.

DN: And you went through the difficult times of Secretary Vance's departure and then the arrival of Senator Muskie as secretary. How, were you surprised at his selection as secretary?

WC: Yes, I must say, I was surprised. As you recall, Secretary Vance resigned in April just after the rescue mission had been aborted. For a few days the press rumored that I was going to be selected as secretary of state, in the way that the press has of nominating people in Washington, D.C.. And I had really not focused on Senator Muskie until a few days after Secretary Vance had resigned. President Carter asked me to stay for a minute after a meeting at the White House and he said that he had selected Senator Muskie to replace Secretary Vance, and I was somewhat surprised by that and told him I thought he'd made an excellent selection.

DN: Did he indicate is reasons for selecting him?

WC: He did not.

DN: And Senator Muskie was a different personality from Mr. Vance. How did the members of the State Department staff, the foreign service officers, react at this shift in personality?

WC: I think the State Department was accepting of him as a senatorial leader and someone who had a sense of values that people in the department liked to espouse themselves, so the first reaction was very favorable, as mine was. A few days after the president told me of Secretary Muskie's selection, he asked me to go up to Camp David with Senator Muskie and our wives. And we spent the weekend there, or at least stayed overnight, and discussed foreign policy and how we might work together and I was very optimistic about the likelihood of our having a very positive and friendly time together.

DN: You were in the midst of the hostage negotiations at the time. How did Senator Muskie deal with the question of assignment of, not assignment of responsibilities but division of responsibilities?

WC: We never had any difficulty with that question between us. I understood that he was in charge of the State Department and had to be in charge of negotiations. I think he accepted my role as being the person on the firing line who came to be regarded as the chief negotiator.

DN: And was that working relationship different at all from Secretary Vance and you?

WC: Well, they're quite different people. Secretary Vance is a very, was a very directive person who gave you assignments and expected them to be carried out. Whereas Senator Muskie, as you implied he did with his staff on Capitol Hill, led in many respects by asking questions. And so it took some adjustments for me and for the people in the State Department, I think, to understand that quite different style. Vance had been at the Pentagon for many, many

years and I think was accustomed to giving directions, not in a peremptory way but in a firm way, whereas Senator Muskie was a product of Capitol Hill and his style was a different one. His style, I think, had been formed as a member of important committees over the years in the Congress where he would be questioning administration witnesses.

DN: And the other aspect of that period it seems to me was the question, the relationship between the national security advisor and the Department of State, and all of the indications have been that it was not easy between Mr. Brzezinski and Secretary Vance. Was there any shift with the arrival of Mr. Muskie?

WC: The relationships continued to be strained, not outwardly but as a matter of fact. There was a considerable difference between the styles of Secretary Muskie and Dr. Brzezinski, the National Security advisor. By that point Zbig was a very competent and confident exponent of American foreign policy. He felt he had the president's confidence and he, in the press and in public, did not hesitate to express American foreign policy. Senator Muskie, somewhat new to the position was less, I would say less forthcoming in his willingness to outline American foreign policy. Senator Muskie was, in my recollection, never critical of Zbig publicly; I can't say the same for Dr. Brzezinski. He either publicly, or perhaps more accurately semi-publicly, let it be known that Senator Muskie didn't yet seem to be on top of foreign policy issues. And that was, I think that reflected the tensions.

DN: You were very much engaged, obviously, as the negotiator on the hostage crisis; did you ever have time during those months to sit down with Senator Muskie and talk generally about U.S. foreign policy and its direction?

WC: Yes, we had several discussions, but they would relate to specific issues rather than general. My wife and I had dinner with Secretary Muskie and his wife Jane on several occasions during that period; he was very generous and courteous to us. But those meetings were more personal than they were foreign policy directed.

DN: And as you wound up those months with him as secretary and you as deputy and also as the chief negotiator, were there other issues that you were consumed by? I know you had a lot to do with the China policy.

WC: Yes, under Secretary Vance I had been involved in the China normalization that took place at that time. My recollection of that period was that Senator Muskie was a very stalwart supporter of President Carter and carried that issue forward very effectively. Washington is a very special place in a presidential campaign year, it's a city that's not given to ruminations in the six months before a presidential campaign, I'm sorry, presidential election. And so we were basically carrying out our duties and I do recall that I was preoccupied with the hostage negotiations.

Don, I recall one particular moment in September, early September of 1980, we received a message from the Germans that they had received a message from the Iranians. Now, that sounds like it would be a normal thing to happen, but it was very unusual, we'd never had a contact, an authentic contact with the Iranians of that kind. And what was transmitted to us by

the Germans was that they wanted to send an emissary, I'm sorry, the Germans said that the Iranians wanted to send an emissary to Germany to meet with an authorized representative of the United States to discuss the conditions for release, and they outlined four conditions for release. This was a striking development.

And as soon as it came in over the State Department wires, I conferred with Secretary Muskie about it and we immediately knew it was an important development. He and I then went to the White House, to report this to the president who was following this issue of course, with enormous interest. And we did tell him that this was the first contact of its kind that we'd had after, by then it was ten months, maybe nine months, and that since it came through the Germans in whom we had great confidence, we wanted to, we thought it ought to be fully explored. Well, President Carter responded very rapidly to that and he and Senator Muskie agreed that I would be the one who would go to Germany to meet with this representative of Iran. I remember President Carter saying to me, "Chris, I want you to go wherever you have to go, whatever you have to do, and don't leave any stone unturned." And Senator Muskie was fully in accord with that. So we went back to the State Department and I set up a back room group that basically managed the negotiations from that point forward. We took some steps to confirm the authenticity of this probe, and then we set about responding to the four conditions that had been laid down by the Iranians. And I recall going over our responses with Senator Muskie before I left for Germany, and reporting to him when I came back.

It turned out to be a very disappointing endeavor, because two days after I arrived in Germany and met with the Iranian representative the war broke out between Iraq and Iran and that preoccupied the Iranians, and so that particular probe never went anyplace. We were stalled until two days after our election, when the Iranian parliament met and curiously enough, coincidentally enough, laid down the same four conditions that had been set forth in this abortive endeavor that I was on with Senator Muskie's conference in September. But all through that period, you know, I was consulting regularly with Senator Muskie on what we were doing and the steps were taking, but for me it was a preoccupation and for him it was only one of many, many duties he had.

DN: But from your perspective he treated that as your primary responsibility and he would keep an eye on it at the general policy level.

WC: Yes, I think that's correct. You know, a secretary of state really can't become, or it's probably impossible for him to become a negotiator to the extent that I was. And it was, as I say, a preoccupation with me and it was a matter within his broad range of responsibilities.

DN: My recollection is he was very glad that you were preoccupied.

WC: Well that's good. Don, there's something that went on during this period that probably ought to be mentioned for the historical record. Ever since Secretary Muskie was nominated in April and promptly confirmed, rumors kept emerging in the Washington way that Secretary Muskie might be a candidate for the presidency. And that rumor mill was, of course, fomented by the press that was always looking for some story. And some of Senator Muskie's supporters, I think, were unhelpful in this period. And I recall those rumors persisted up until one week

before the convention, which probably was in August. And that, I don't think it affected Senator Muskie in any way but it did, I think, tend to create some uncertainty within the State Department.

DN: And I assume at the White House.

WC: Probably at the White House, too.

DN: Did he deal with that directly in his conversations with you or with other State Department officers?

WC: Not with me. I didn't think it was my place at all to talk with him about political matters. We were good colleagues, but they were on foreign policy issues.

DN: And you felt that way, even though it had some effect on at least the comfort level of people in the State Department?

WC: You know, Senator Muskie was a wonderful man, very thoughtful, insightful, very profound, and it certainly would have been, I would have felt quite intrusive if I had advised him on a subject like that. Of course, Senator Muskie as you know was a very private man, I had a sense that there was an enormous amount going on in his, in his thinking process, that sometimes he shared it and sometimes he didn't.

DN: This raises the question of whether any of his staff at the State Department were involved in those rumors or the way they were dealt with. I'm speaking of his personal staff now.

WC: I would have no reason to know about that. Leon Billings was the one who I dealt with there, he was always very considerate and helpful to me, but I was really not in that part of the orbit.

DN: We mentioned earlier Zbigniew Brzezinski and the relationships with Secretary Vance and Secretary Muskie. Were you affected by his attitudes and behavior, as it were?

WC: There was a certain amount of competition between the State Department and National Security staff. And Secretary Vance instructed me on more than one occasion to tamp that down to not becoming any kind of issue, and I periodically did that. I tried to maintain a working relationship with secretary, with Brzezinski because I knew that's what Vance wanted, but there was a continuing tension.

DN: At the end of the Carter administration and the closing hours literally, of the administration, I've been told by others that the way the incoming administration, or at least the people coming into the State Department, dealt with the Carter team was less than courteous and less than helpful.

WC: Don, the last thirteen days I was in Algiers. I think it was the fourth or fifth of January of 1981, a message came from Algiers that indicated there was considerable confusion about what

the United States could do and what we couldn't do Constitutionally as far as making the property of the former shah available, and there were other Constitutional issues. So I recommended to Senator Muskie and to the president that I thought the time was too short to try to deal with this by messages, by telegraph messages, that I ought to go to Algiers and try to convince the Algerians as to what we could do and what we couldn't do and hope that they could persuade the Iranians. Parenthetically, and this is not about me but [*sic*] it's about Senator Muskie, but parenthetically, we've never been able to have a face-to-face conversation with the Iranians, they refused to negotiate directly and all the negotiation was done through the Algerians.

DN: And this included your trip to Germany, in that situation?

WC: Well that, I did have a face-to-face meeting with that person who was an emissary, but I can't say it was negotiations at that point. And that was the only time as far as, as far as I was concerned. So I went to Algiers on the fifth, approximately the fifth of January expecting to stay two or three days, and stayed through the inauguration. So I missed whatever unpleasantness -

DN: You missed the fun.

WC: I missed the fun. I do know that Secretary Haig told me afterward that there was a very strong suggestion in the White House that they ought to denounce the agreements that I had reached in Algiers for the release of the hostages and refuse to enforce them. Secretary Haig said that he and others persuaded the president not to go that route, so that may be some reflection of the unpleasantness during that period. There was a tendency that, in any changeover administration where the parties change, for the incoming party to want to do everything different than the outgoing party, whatever it was.

DN: Are there any other observations or incidents that you remember from your days as deputy secretary and Senator Muskie's service as secretary?

WC: Don, I could not think of anything with the passage of time that really is illuminating. I would say that Secretary Muskie was well-received in the State Department in the sense that people naturally were sympathetic to him based upon his superb record on Capitol Hill and on his run for the presidency, that many were sorry had been aborted. And that earned him, I think, a very favorable reception in the State Department. There was this difference in style that I've commented on before, and as time passed perhaps a sense of people in the department wanting to have a firmer hand in terms of instructions. But it was such an unusual period in the, you know, the six months before the election and the two months after the election that I often have regretted that Secretary Muskie never had a chance really to be secretary of state. I think many hoped, no doubt he hoped and the president hoped the president would be reelected and he could have a full chance to be secretary of state.

You're very experienced in politics and you know what a terribly unusual period that period, just with the conventions and all the run up to the election and how, in a sense, things come to a standstill in Washington as far as new policy. And so I have often regretted that Senator Muskie never had a chance to really put his imprint on the State Department in the way that he would

have if he'd had a full term.

DN: A related question - in addition to the uncertainties created by the political circumstances, is there a problem created by the difference in expectations of Foreign Service and the style of a politician who is used to working through negotiation and indirection?

WC: Not necessarily. I think if Senator Muskie had been there for a longer period of time there would have been a, a closer feeling would have developed. Foreign Service people are, I think respond well to people in public life. One thing I do remember that I haven't mentioned before is what a superb speaker Senator Muskie was, how with relatively little preparation and not very much material he could make just a stunningly interesting and persuasive speech. And I think over time, in a different time, that would have been a very effective tool for a secretary of state to have.

DN: After the Carter administration and then when you came in as secretary of state in the Clinton administration, did you have any opportunities to work with or collaborate with Senator Muskie in his post public office period?

WC: Let me go off the record and ask you to remind me when he died.

(Pause in taping.)

WC: I maintained some contact with Senator Muskie after we both left office in 1981. And he had an active practice with a New York firm and I recall he was on the, was it on the Nestlé board of directors, or he was, had a close contact.

DN: Headed the commission, the audit commission for the infant formula for Nestlé, he wasn't on the Nestlé board.

WC: I remember talking with him about the problems that Nestlé was having in Africa and around the world. And I saw him a time or two after becoming secretary at meetings of former secretaries or, and sometimes the current secretary was included in those meetings. But I have to say and to my regret I saw relatively little of him during that period. He was, he had not continued to be active in the field of foreign policy except I think as his practice took him in that direction, or I know he had a practice that did involve some overseas contacts. So I can't say that I saw him frequently, although I did remember seeing him a time or two as former secretaries or former party members would gather.

DN: Is there anything else you'd like to add for the record?

WC: I don't think so, Don, I think that pretty well drains me dry.

End of Interview