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Senator Edmund S. Muskie Interviewed for KNXT, Los Angeles

Edmund S. Muskie

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KNXT TRANSCRIPT

Reporter: Senator, there's been a certain amount of uproar over a statement about what you said about the acceptability of a black Vice President. Could you explain what your feelings are on that subject and what was said at the meeting yesterday with the local black leaders?

Muskie: Well, you'll have to excuse the fact that I don't have a transcript of the meeting because it was a private meeting designed to promote a frank, direct discussion with black leaders about questions and problems that were on the minds of black people in this community. And we got into a discussion of how do we deal effectively with these problems. How do they relate to the next election? And I was there to make my commitment to deal effectively with these problems if I should seek the Presidency and if I should be elected - so it was in the context of this the question was asked - could you consider a black running mate if you were to be a candidate for President. And I said it was not possibly in my judgment to consider such a possibility at this time because he wouldn't be elected and to put together a ticket that wouldn't be elected would not serve the purposes that we were discussing. Now when the question was raised, of course, I understood it was a private meeting but I also understood that when such questions are raised behind closed doors _____. So I had to decide very quickly how frank and honest I should be. And it seems to me that one of the great questions

that troubles the American people in public life today is the lack of confidence and the credibility of public officials in government. It seems to me that for my obligation was above all others was to be perfectly frank and honest in my critical evaluation of the problem raised by the question. So this is the answer I gave. Now this isn't the way it should be and I said so. Blacks should be on the ticket for this office and any other office in the land. One of the objectives, of course, that the meeting was to discuss ways to move in the direction of complete equality for the blacks and other minority groups in America. So we're talking about how fast we move, what steps we take, in order to achieve that objective. So it was in the context of that discussion and that philosophy - the question was raised and that I gave the answer. My impression from reactions I got later including last evening from some of the black leaders. _____ is that they appreciated my frankness and my honesty and I really left the meeting feeling that we had the kind of discussion that I wanted - the basis for building communication and understanding and cooperation for the future.

Reporter: Are you concerned about a misinterpretation of your position?

Muskie: Oh, you can be misinterpreted on any controversial issue. You know Harry Truman once said about the Presidency that the buck stops here. You know, if you could run for President answering only the easy questions everybody would be running - sometimes I think everybody is in this electio

But it's the tough controversial issues that you've got to discuss. You've got to discuss the frankly and honestly. School busing, for instance, is another one that I discussed yesterday - several times in San Francisco and here. There are many many others. It's the top emotional questions about which people get aroused and about which they want enlightened and answers to which they want direction and guidance and leadership.

Reporter: Why can't a black man be elected Vice President? You say you don't believe that he can in the present climate of today - that he would not be electable. Let's talk about why not.

Muskie: Because the tradition of discrimination that the black is oriented in America today - still persists. This discrimination, this tendency to discrimination, the tendency to regard blacks as unequal, unfortunately persists in too many people at the present time. My plan is different from many Americans because of the color of skin - that isn't the way it ought to be. I happen to believe there are blacks who are qualified to be Vice Presidential candidates and those blacks ought to be eligible but the fact is that blacks have been regarded, you know, subconsciously if not consciously, as holding positions of inferiority so long that it's difficult for people to come to believe that he isn't inferior. It's a point of view that's is fading and disappearing, I think. There's another question that's involved. In order to give blacks equality as we must there are going to have to be changes not only in our attitudes but in our policies and our programs and in our

institutions. And a lot of people aren't comfortable with change. You know, the whole question of school busing, for instance, is an issue because people are uncomfortable about change that involves their children and which they feel, you know, brings danger to their children. And yet such change in the establishment of schools in which children of all races and colors can freely mix, must come and the people may think that a black in the Vice Presidency would bring changes too quickly and they would not be comfortable with it. That might be the background. I mean I can't possibly anticipate all of the reasons it would be difficult to, in my judgment not possible, to elect a national figure of black origin at the present time but I suggest that _____ and so we must use this election in great part to break down the resistance to ideas of this kind, to break down the resistance to integration, to break down the resistance to equality. And people, all Americans find it very easy to be for equality and principle in general it's when the establishment of that equality could mean some change in their own pattern of life that they begin to resist. That's what we must break down.

Reporter: Recognizing this political reality - do you find that a distasteful task in the political sense?

Muskie: Oh, of course not. I'm not a child in politics. I've been in politics for a quarter of a century and I've had to deal with controversial questions throughout that period and I've been involved mostly in working for the kinds of changes that we're talking about and I've found it possible.

to do so within the political system. I've seen great changes in my state of course my state is a relatively stable state compared to the nation as a whole but relative to Maine standards and traditions I've seen the great changes there - I've seen great changes take place. So I know that the secret of success of our political system is it's dynamism. It isn't through _____ change. It is the possibility for change that I believe exists within it and if a political candidate isn't willing to stand up as a candidate and stand for a change and to fight for it then he shouldn't be a candidate. I mean the Presidency of the United States isn't social security. It's a place to shape, or help shape the future of this country and the future of this country must be one in which every American is free and eligible without any limitations that don't apply to others to seek the Presidency, the Vice Presidency, election to the Senate, the House the Governorship, or state legislature. This is the kind of country we must have if it's to be a free place for everyone

Reporter: One final question - as a political realist is there not a concern on your part that the fact that a black Vice President can't be elected, the fact that it comes from you, the fact that you need those black votes to win the primary, to be elected, to be nominated, isn't that a concern, a realistic concern that this will be taken badly by some black voters?

Muskie: There is that political risk, yes, and I fully understood it from the questions asked and answered and the same risk exists for everyone else who expects or hopes to seek this office. I will be surprised if this question isn't asked in the next few days of every Presidential hopeful and each one of them is going to have to take the critical risk of answering yes, no, or maybe.

Reporter: Do you think there will be any who will say yes?

Muskie: I have no way of anticipating.

Reporter: What's the ideal Vice President?

Muskie: The man who is qualified to be President.

Reporter: I'd like to get on to another subject. Senator, this early it's almost obscene to be talking about primaries and what's going to be happening and so forth, but perhaps we could talk a little about some of the theories that are going around. The main one is that if you stumble in the primaries then there is perhaps a chance for Sen. Edward Kennedy. What do you think of that theory and how well do you think you have to do in the primaries?

Muskie: Well, I think it's a very valid theory. I happen to think Sen. Kennedy means it when he says he's not a candidate and he doesn't

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want to be a candidate in 1972. But he comes from a family that is public service oriented and if events would develop in such a way as to, well, in such a way there that were not clear cut choice among the rest of those who appear to aspire to the office and that the convention should turn to him, I think it's very conceivable that he might be under that impression. I'm not making an announcement for him because I don't really believe that's what he wants but I'm not poking into his private thoughts and I'm not making predictions. As to how well one must do in the primaries, the first question of course is how many primaries one can enter. There are 23 of them involving tremendous cost as well as conflicts in time and dates - on one day there are five primaries. So it's inconceivable that a candidate could do justice to all five primaries in five states in that case. So it's going to have to be a selective process. So the selection of primaries in which one makes an effort, a concentrated effort, is going to be important. Secondly, how well, how good the record is in those primaries that one selects is important. It isn't necessarily important that a candidate win all - I mean one of us may not be as acceptable in all parts of the country as in some parts of the country. So I think it's going to be a mixed bag I would guess.

Reporter: Which ones have you decided you must enter - California, obvious

Muskie: Well I don't - we haven't taken any irrevocable decisions because we don't have to at this point and the final decision depends upon how

much money we think we can raise as well as the political currently in the light of the situation which ones ought to be selected. But the important ones are very clear, easy to identify. You know, New Hampshire is a very important one - Florida is likely to be a very important one. Wisconsin is always an important one. Oregon is an important one. California is clearly an important one. And there are others. I'm not minimizing any of them I just can't list all 23 from memory. But these are clearly traditionally important primary states and any candidate must consider them seriously.

Reporter: Let's talk about you as a campaigner, as a candidate. It's said of you that you're bored by details of campaign organizing. Do you think that's accurate?

Muskie: Well except to the extent that those details impact on my own movements. I hate to have details get in my way when I'm moving through a campaign. But that's generally true, yes. I like to leave, you know, I believe in delegation of authority. It's not easy to do but I've been doing it for a quarter of a century now almost especially since I was first elected Governor. The secret to effective leadership is the ability to delegate, not just a willingness, but an ability to delegate. If the candidate were to get involved in all the details, the schedule-making, all of the details of organization, he could not conceivably devote the time he should be devoting to the issue problems and the more broadly political problems with which he must deal. There's a limitation on time.

For example, we are now getting 100 invitations a day, all of which usually are important. If I accepted, you know, 1% or 1 out of a 100, I would be accepting more than I could carry. That's another example of the pressures on the time of a candidate or potential candidate. So you must delegate - organization of detail is one thing that's very easy to delegate.

Reporter: Your wife has been quoted as saying - I hate to see Ed so undecided as he was a great part of last year. Have you been undecided?

Muskie: Not really. I think what she read as that was my restlessness over the question of how do you use your time. You see, I'm still a member of the Senate. It's two years before '72. And I love Senate work and I don't like to avoid responsibility and so I have a strong urge to devote as much time as I can to the Senate. But there is also this necessity of traveling around the country which is time consuming - the need to service my constituents in Maine, who, after all have just re-elected me - so, you know, in the apportionment of my time among these three pressing responsibilities that I was constantly undecided as to how fast I should move in the total involvement in the '72 question and so I was restless and unhappy about that and undecided about that. But not undecided about the direction in which I think I have to move now. I haven't made a final decision and I'm not making an announcement now. You know, events of yesterday might very well influence my decision. But I have no doubt and I intend to fully probe, you know, this privilege

and opportunity and duty of service that lies ahead. It may not get to the point of announcement. I don't believe that. I believe that at some point there will be an announcement. I don't know when. We like to fly by the seat of our pants up in Maine, as we call it. And my ^{when} instincts say the time is right and the events have developed, you know, circumstances have built up, I'll choose that point.

Reporter: Very few men have the opportunity to see themselves realistically as a _____ to even consider this. It would seem an awesome kind of contemplation. How has it seemed to you in moments when you think about it?

Muskie: Well, in all frankness as I see myself especially through the eyes of others, you know, now so much is being written about me and a lot of it is concentrated on my weaknesses and shortcomings as well as my virtues. You know, I become more conscious of my shortcomings and I do examine them, you know, in the light of this responsibility. I don't suppose anybody can really understand how total that responsibility is and how undellegatable the crucial decisions are until he occupies the office. But when one begins to have some appreciation one tends to measure that against one's human fallability and so I think I am looking at myself more closely than ever before in my life. I don't like everything I see. I'd like to be a better man, a stronger man, a more perfect man. But on the whole what I see hasn't deterred me from going forward.

Reporter: Not even a temper that has been described as Vesuvius-like?

Muskie: I think a President ought to have a temper. There's a great many things to be angry about in this country and in this world. And if a President doesn't have the capacity to be angry he doesn't have the capacity to be comapssionate either. The two go together, I think the President ought to feel very deeply about the responsibility, about the problems with which he must deal, about the people who are looking to him for guidance and help - and anger, I think, is part of the capacity - is part of the emotional make-up that is essential to a good President.