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Interview with David Johnson by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Johnson, David

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

April 10, 2001

Place

Washington, DC

ID Number

MOH 266

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Biographical Note

David E. Johnson was born July 20, 1947 to Evelyn Irene (Hale) and Frank Tivis Johnson in Hardtner Kansas. His father operated a grain elevator and died when David was two. His mother worked at a department store. He was raised in Enid Oklahoma, attending Enid High School, and excelling as a debater. He went on to the University of Oklahoma, graduating with a degree in journalism. He got involved in politics out of college, working for Ed Muskie's Presidential campaign. He worked in Muskie's 1972 "boiler room" and worked on his Intergovernmental Relations Committee from 1972 to 1978, and worked with Al From. He then worked for the Department of Health and Human Services, and as Administrative Assistant to George Mitchell from 1981 to 1984. He later became executive director of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. Since 1987, he has worked in a Washington, D.C. lobbying firm.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: 1969-1972 presidential campaign; Wisconsin and Pennsylvania primaries; 1972 convention; 1976 senatorial campaign; 1980-1981 Secretary of State; Al From; Intergovernmental Relations Subcommittee (IGR); low-income energy assistance; Sunset provisions; Muskie's relationship with Maine as a Senator; George Mitchell;

George Mitchell's senate offices; Muskie and Mitchell comparisons; and Gayle Cory.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Tuesday, the 10th of April, the year 2001. We are in the offices of David Johnson and are interviewing him for the Muskie Oral History Project. David, would you state your full name and spell it, and give us your date and place of birth?

David Johnson: Good, thanks. It's David Eugene Johnson, D-A-V-I-D, E-U-G-E-N-E, I don't spell that very often, Johnson, J-O-H-N-S-O-N. I was born July 20th, 1947 in Hardtner, Kansas, H-A-R-D-T-N-E-R. You'll have a hard time finding that place on any map, I think it probably doesn't exist any more.

DN: And what were your parents' names, David?

DJ: My mother's name was Evelyn Hale, H-A-L-E. Her middle name was Irene. My father's name was Frank Tivis, T-I-V-I-S, Johnson, another unusual middle name. And I grew up in Oklahoma. Enid, Oklahoma was my home town.

DN: So your family moved from Kansas to Oklahoma very early?

DJ: No, my family lived in Burlington, Oklahoma, which was a very small farming community in northwest Oklahoma, very close to the Kansas - Oklahoma state line. My mother was a pretty old mother for the times, she was thirty-eight when I was born. And I was about a month late. And in 194-, and in July of 1947 it's pretty hot and air conditioning wasn't readily available in that part of the country and the only way that my mother was comfortable was riding around in the car. And so she was out with my father riding in the car and they drove over the Oklahoma - Kansas border and she, according to the family story, they saw a raccoon run across the road, my mother got out of the car to chase it, and went into labor, and I was born in Kansas. So that's how I got to be born in Kansas.

DN: And the raccoon got away.

DJ: I guess the raccoon got away, where there's no further record of the raccoon in our family history. But I was born in a little teeny hospital in Kansas and I had a tooth when I was born, that was remarked on quite a lot in my family. I guess it came from being almost a month overdue. But we lived in Oklahoma. My father was a, worked a grain elevator, managed a grain elevator in Burlington, Oklahoma. And as I said it was a farming community and it was principally wheat farming in that part of the country, and subsequent to my birth, my parents moved to, moved around a little bit in Oklahoma and when I was about two years old my father was told that he had a life threatening heart and lung ailment and that he ought to move to a drier climate, to Arizona or some place like that. And my family had packed up the car and the trailer, and my brother and my sister, I had a brother who was seventeen years older than I was and a sister who was eleven years older, and they got about thirty miles up the road from where we

were living in Marshall, Oklahoma. They got to Enid, Oklahoma and my father became so ill that they stopped in Enid and never got any farther. My father died in Enid not too long after they arrived there.

DN: How old were you then?

DJ: I was two years old. So that's how I came to live in Enid, and my mother was able to, with some help from her family, buy a little house and I remember, or I think I remember, probably have heard stories that my grandfather came up and helped her turn part of it into an apartment which she rented and was able to help pay the mortgage. My brother went off to the Air Force, and my sister and I lived in Enid with my mother and my mother worked full time at Sears & Roebuck, and married my stepfather when I was five. So that's kind of my early history.

DN: Was your family at all interested in politics?

DJ: No, not really. I think my folks were probably Democrats but they didn't ever really, it wasn't something that was discussed much or not really part of what was going on in my family. My grandfather was a Democrat and he used to talk about it, and he was a farmer and carpenter and a kind of a jack of many trades. I think he had eleven children so he had to be available to do quite a large number of things, I'm sure. But politics were not, you know, a big thing in our family. And I guess my interest in it was probably unusual, or certainly seems to be unusual in my family. And I was the only one of my, in my family that went to college. And my grandparents had many, many grandchildren, I'm not sure how many altogether, but more than twenty, probably more than thirty grandchildren. So I had lots of cousins and was always part of a big family, but not many members of my generation in the family went to college and I was lucky enough to do so and it was really in that environment that my interest in politics grew, although I was pretty interested in high school I guess.

DN: You went to Enid public schools?

DJ: I went to Enid, I went to Monroe Elementary School, Emerson Jr. High School, and Enid High School. I was part of a graduating class of more than six hundred people, and there was only one high school in Enid, Oklahoma. We were AAA football champions for many years in the fifties and sixties, and those who were able to make such decisions thought that if you divided the high school in two, which probably would make some sense because it was so large, that it would have done great damage to the football team. So I went to school in the public school system there.

I wasn't involved in football; I was a member of the NFL, however, in fact, the National Forensic League. In fact, I have my NFL pin, I had it out here just the other day and we were laughing about the NFL that I was part of. I was part of the debate team and I think my interest in politics and the like probably grew out of my looking for some way to excel and to differentiate myself outside of athletics because I wasn't very good at all that, and so I was involved in debate and used to travel around with the debate team. And probably if you, if I thought about it, I hadn't really quite thought about it exactly like that, that's probably where my

interest came from.

DN: And you went on to college.

DJ: Uh-hunh.

DN: Where did you matriculate?

DJ: I went to the University of Oklahoma, in Norman, Oklahoma. That was considered to be a, it was about seventy-five miles away and it was considered to be going away to school, kind of a big step to go away there. My parents, my stepfather particularly didn't think I should go. He thought that it was too far away and that there was a little college in Enid that was affiliated with a church, the church we happened to belong to, and my parents, especially as I said my stepfather, thought that would probably be a good enough place. And I was really wanting to get out of Enid and get away and, boy, I thought going to University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma was a long ways away, and so I went OU and graduated from the University of Oklahoma.

DN: Now, I didn't ask you about your stepfather. What was his occupation?

DN: He was a, his name was Ray Frederick, F-R-E-D-E-R-I-C-K. He was a salesman in an automobile parts supply store, and worked for the same person in Enid for more than forty years. He was a delivery boy for the parts store in high school I guess and rode a bicycle around, and then went away to WWII and when he came back, came back to the same place as a salesman out on the road, working for the same person, and then finally he married and had a child, I had a stepbrother, started working in the store there and spent his whole working career in one store.

Kind of hard to imagine these days that kind of working relationship, but he had it and it worked for him. And he was the, a manager I guess when he finally quit of Silvers, S-I-L-V-E-R-S, Silvers, Inc. which was an automobile parts supply store in Enid. And Clarence Silver was the person who was the owner, and he used to buy lots of Army surplus gear, you know, and they'd bring it in and have it strewn all over the basement in this big store. I spent hours down there as a kid digging through stuff left over from WWII. Probably half of them belonged in a (*unintelligible word*) or ought to have been disposed in some way that was not, but pretty interesting kind of thing to do as a kid, so.

DN: Now at OU, what did you major in?

DJ: Well I think I ended up having five different areas of study. I started out with what they called pre-law in those days, and I don't really even know what that was. When I went there, that was an easy thing to say because it really didn't indicate much of anything. And then at various times I majored in English and History, and there was something else, I can't really recall what it was but it was an interest of mine and I had, and the major professor, whatever, got me interested in it, I can't even remember what it was, but I ended up in journalism. And I had a, with a speciality in public relations.

There was a guy at the University of Oklahoma who was a pretty interesting fellow that ran the journalism school and I was able to kind of mound up all my credits from all the other majors that I'd had, you know, as I worked my way through that place and kind of get enough of them in one spot that I figured out that I could graduate and get a degree in journalism and sort of graduate on time, although it took me five years to get out of the University of Oklahoma. It was a time of course when it was convenient and desirable to stay in school as long as possible, but I graduated with my good degree in journalism (*unintelligible word*).

DN: Did you continue your debating through your university time?

DJ: No, I did not. I wasn't involved in speech classes or the debate team or anything like that when I got to University of Oklahoma. I got, I was in a fraternity and kind of did all this stuff that a freshman does and mostly worked hard to keep my head above water and keep my grades up high enough that I could stay in school. But I didn't pursue, I didn't pursue that kind of thing when I was there.

DN: When you had graduated, did you go into journalism?

DJ: No, I got involved in student politics at the University of Oklahoma and was involved in the student senate and rewriting the constitution of the student government. And it was, it was in the late sixties and it was a time when university administrations everywhere, you know, were looking for ways to keep their students occupied and channeled into activities that they felt were acceptable and away from ones that they felt were less acceptable. The University of Oklahoma was not a place where there was a deal of activism about the war and the like, although there was certainly some.

And there was a pretty, you know, looking back, at the time I thought he was a pretty enlightened fellow, looking back he was a pretty cagey fellow named Herb Hollomon who was the president of the University of Oklahoma. And he contrived or set to work, set us to work in organizing ourselves in some ways that were by and large pretty constructive and interesting to us, and gave us a big old building on campus that had been an infirmary and said, "this can be your place and you write your constitution and organize yourself in a fashion that you want to be organized in and I'll give you a seat at the table in this kind of decision making and that kind of decision making." And, you know, it seemed like a, in fact it was, it was an interesting and time consuming set of pursuits, kept us off the street and kind of invested in some activities that probably improved our minds and fed into what we were doing in the classroom somewhat, and got some of us interested in politics.

So I didn't go into journalism, I got involved in student government and politics. I came to Washington with a fellow who was at the University of Oklahoma who got himself elected to an office in a national student organization, came. I was newly married, and I came to Washington in December of 1969 to work with that student group and thought I'd stay for about six months, and here I am, you know, thirty some odd years later.

So I never practiced journalism. I was involved in student politics as I said, and got involved in

the voter registration activities in the early seventies because as you'll recall except I believe for West Virginia and Hawaii, eighteen year-olds were not allowed to vote until the 1972 presidential election campaign. And so there were quite a lot of voter registration drives and the like going on around the country. And I got involved with an organization that Allard Lowenstein put together called Rolling Thunder, a name that's been used for a number of things, but we, but I traveled around and helped organize voters and voter registration drives and the like, and I was principally in the mid-western states of Wisconsin, and I was in Michigan some, and in Pennsylvania.

In fact I helped organize a big voter registration drive in Laury and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania at Point State Park in 1971. It was a thing that Lowenstein was organizing and John Lindsay was there and a couple of other sort of liberal political figures of the time, and we had a lot of college age people walking down the streets of Pittsburgh to participate in this voter registration rally. And I'd loaded up busses to, of students at some college or university there to get them down to the staging areas, and went from the voter registration drive to the Muskie campaign, the Muskie presidential campaign.

I came back to Washington after being in Pittsburgh. I can't remember exactly how it all went together, but some of the folks that I had been involved with in student politics had gotten interested in the Muskie campaign. And somehow I got down to the headquarters, the Muskie headquarters in, at 1976 K Street I think is where it was in those days. And they gave me a one-way airplane ticket to Milwaukee, Wisconsin and said, "go out and meet the guy who's running the state there and if he likes you, you can work in the primary, stay in that primary state, and if he doesn't, call us up and we'll send you a one-way ticket someplace else."

And I went out and met Harold Ickes who was running the, Wisconsin for Muskie, and in fact Harold is here, I don't know if you saw him this morning out in the lobby. Harold and I do some business together now. It's great to have that thirty year long friendship kind of have, it feels nice and whole, you know. But Harold was running the state of Wisconsin and hired me to work there. And I worked in the presidential primary from late 1971 until April of 1972 when the, a Wisconsin primary occurred and we got soundly trounced.

And in fact, in the little town that I was in doing poll work and GOTV, the day of the primary I think, Patsy Mink beat us in that town. So I went from Wisconsin to Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania primary was in May, so I went from working in Milwaukee for Harold, and then Harold and all of us kind of boxed up our stuff and went down to Pennsylvania for a fellow named Jim Johnson, who was running Pennsylvania. Jim, of course, was active in Walter Mondale's subsequent campaigns and finally and most recently is the head of Fanny Mae, you know. So we all went down and worked with Jim and for Jim in Pennsylvania.

We kind of got hit in the head in Pennsylvania also, and so I came back to Washington and it wasn't long thereafter that Muskie announced that he was pulling out of the race and... This is turning into a kind of a run-on sentence here. I don't know if it's going the way you want it to. I'll just finish the story then, the way I recall it or the way it seems to me that it transpired.

There were plenty of things that happened of course, but I came back to Washington, my wife,

that is my first wife, was working on Capitol Hill for John Culver who was a member of the House of Representatives at the time. I didn't have a job and was working really hard to find one, and someone suggested, and frankly it hadn't even occurred to me, that since I had put in such good duty in these primary election campaigns, that Muskie was still in the United States Senate, and I should go by there and see if anybody there would help me find a job.

And so I went down to the office and met John McEvoy and Leslie Finn, and probably Gayle. I don't recall meeting Gayle right then, but sure enough, John wrote some letters to other members of the Senate and to committee chairmen and the like, saying, "this is a good guy, he's a Democrat and helped us, doesn't have a job." And nothing really came of all that, but as we got closer and closer to the convention. The 1972 convention which was in Miami that year, as you will recall, it happened that there was an opening in what they called the boiler room. And so I was told that if I wanted to go to Miami in August, it was a great opportunity, to go to Miami in August and that they'd pay my way down, I'd stay in a nice hotel and I probably could get some of my meals paid for. Did I want to go work at the convention?

And as you may recall, there was a thing called the California challenge that year to the winner-take-all primary in California. And all of the forces, and they included Muskie and Wallace, and Scoop Jackson and probably some others whose names I don't recall now, were organizing themselves to challenge McGovern's delegates in California thinking that if they could successfully challenge the winner-take-all primary rules in California that would break the convention open. And maybe one of these other people who hadn't gotten as many delegates on the way to the convention had a chance to strengthen their position in the convention. So I went down to work in the Muskie boiler room as part of that effort, to challenge George McGovern at the convention.

And while all that fizzled out pretty quickly, I did get a ticket to Miami and I did get a place in a hotel, and they did pay for some of my rooms. And I ended up in, spending pretty much the working day which was from about eight till midnight every day, and some days longer than that, in the hotel room that the beds and the furniture had all been taken out of, and a couple of desks and three or four phones had been put on the desk. And I was the desk manager for, or the boiler room person, for several of the mid western states. And of course the way that worked was when the Muskie high command had a message they wanted to send out to the Muskie delegates, I'd work the phones. And it was all very low tech.

But as it happened, there was another person in that room with me working in the boiler room and working another part of the United States, her name was Ginger From. And it turned out that her husband was Al From, and Al was the staff director of the intergovernmental relations sub-committee of which Muskie was chairman. And at the end of the convention Ginger said, "you've got to meet my husband, I think he'll really like you." And we went to dinner the last night of the convention, and of course keeping in mind my theme here, I was very interested in who was paying for my meals and so, because I didn't have a job. And Al and Ginger took me to dinner and we kind of hit it off and came back here to Washington and about a month later Al hired me and offered me a job.

And there I was, I had transformed myself from a person with a journalism degree and no

particular prospects, to an employee of the United States Senate, with the name of counsel. I even learned how to spell it. And, boy, was it a miraculous transformation. And so that's how I moved from Oklahoma into the Muskie organization in twenty words or less. That was a long answer, I'm sorry it took so long.

DN: I'd like to go back and ask you about your coming from Pittsburgh, working with Allard Lowenstein to work in the Muskie campaign, because when one looks back at that period and you think of Allard Lowenstein and the student activist movement. It's associated with George McGovern and those who were opposed to Muskie.

DJ: Well, this all seems pretty farfetched at the time but, looking back on it. But there was a notion amongst some of us who had come out of Oklahoma together that we'd get involved in maybe a couple of the presidential primaries and whoever made it in would pull everybody else in. That really didn't work out, and it really turned out more like we all got involved in the Muskie campaign. And frankly, it was more about, you know, who we thought was going to win and how that was going to go than it was about in helping to elect a Democrat than it was about this issue or that issue.

And in a sense, the Lowenstein effort that I saw myself as part of, and I met a lot of people then. And I've already said some of their names, you know, that I've continued to know for my whole career here in Washington. The Lowenstein effort really wasn't, I think that if he were here, and sadly he's not anywhere, but, I'm sure that to him it was focused on issues and about the war and about moving that issue. But it was also about, and for me the exciting part about it was getting people involved that had not, that hadn't been involved before and having the chance to organize and motivate people to vote, and to get them on busses and get them to go down to the rally and this and that.

So, so I guess what I'm trying to say is that although those kind of big issues and ideas were certainly swirling around, and I'm sure the people at the top of these organizations were focused on them and thought about them every day. And I know that in my own heart and my own experience they were important to me, on a day-to-day basis I was, you know, stuffing envelopes and putting people on buses and thinking of how to, you know, move boxes of campaign materials from one place to another and get them distributed. And it was exciting and fun and I met a lot of interesting people and felt like I was part of something big that was happening.

And the move, so I guess my answer to your question is that the move from the Lowenstein voter registration to the Muskie campaign was a natural one for me because it was, because in the Muskie campaign I had an opportunity to continue to do the things that I wanted to do with people that I was interested in doing them with, and found it exciting and fulfilling. And I wasn't, so it didn't matter so much to me that Muskie wasn't at that moment, you know, the anti-war candidate.

DN: Now, you were working in the field through that campaign. How did the campaign look to you from that vantage point?

DJ: Crazy, just as crazy as it possibly could be. But I think that that's what campaigns are

about. And I was, I kind of hit it off with Harold and I did, it was really a fun and exciting opportunity, I got to do a little bit of everything. I was kind of his gopher or right hand man or whatever you want to call it, I was, or troubleshooter. I was involved in a very, very wide variety of activities all the way from renting the cars for a few people to drive around, to being the candidate's representative on the day of the caucuses in Wisconsin. Which was a really exciting and fun thing to do. So I had a lot of different jobs and every day I had something different to do.

I was living in the Thister Hotel in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, you know. And I'd never, I'd certainly never lived in a hotel, let alone stay in one, you know. And it was a big old, cranky old rusty place, kind of like Ed Muskie I guess. And, you know, I'd come to work every morning at six o'clock or six-thirty or whatever it was with a cork bottle of Coca Cola and a box of little white doughnuts, you know, that's what I ate for breakfast. And I was there in a room with, you know, forty or fifty other people my age. And we did stuff all day long and we didn't do it very well or effectively in Wisconsin at least.

But it was, it looked like there was a lot of money and a lot of professional expertise at the top, you know. And we'd kind of see these people kind of roll in and roll out from Washington, you know, and they certainly seemed like they knew what they were doing and had some notion of what Muskie was doing in Wisconsin, you know, on paper. When he was supposed, what he was supposed to do when he got there and what we were going to achieve by this or that. And we were at work, you know, every moment of the day trying to take that schedule and the theme and this and that and try to turn it into something that was going to motivate voters and, you know, ultimately.

And there were lots of slips between lip and cup as there are in every election campaign. But at my level, and believe me I was right at the bottom of a very big heap, at my level, it looked confused and kind of hard to know what was, what people were trying to achieve, and discouraging from time to time when we were not successful, as we were not finally. And, but you know, looking back on it I think we were well motivated, and we were, we were wanting to do something that we thought was right and important, and it was fun, too, so.

DN: Did you ever figure out why Patsy Mink beat you (*unintelligible phrase*)?

DJ: Oh man, I mean the things that happened in Wisconsin, you know. But as it turned out, I think you know, looking back on the Muskie campaign there were lots of reasons why it didn't go anywhere. I happen to think that he would have been a fabulous president and that the country would have been, you know, remarkably different if he had been elected. But, you know, I don't think that we ever really had a message about Ed Muskie and about what he stood for that people could kind of grab a hold of and that was meaningful to them. And as it turned out, I mean, you know, he was, as you know, he was, he stood for all the right things and was a remarkable leader and with huge skills at getting people to do, you know, what he wanted them to do. I don't think we were ever able to really translate all that into stuff that was important to people. I think mostly what we were, what we said to people was he's ahead and he can win.

And, you know, that was enough to kind of rolled the ball and to get money infusion and to get

people motivated, people like me, you know, kind of going in the direction. But past that, it wasn't really enough to get people to sustain the effort and to get people to the polls on Election Day and past the good people who were motivated for the variety of reasons that motivated us. We weren't able really ever to let people know what Ed Muskie was about in a way that caused them to vote for him.

DN: Was Pennsylvania different from Wisconsin, or essentially a continuation?

DJ: Nah, just a big mess, it was just a big, ugly... And by then, you know, Wisconsin felt like, you know, that it was achievable and it was, and for most of the time that we were working in Wisconsin it was like an attainable goal and thought that Muskie, you know, could get the nomination, that kind of thing. Of course that didn't, it didn't turn out that way. And by the end, you know, it was clear that that was never really going to happen. But by the time we got to Pennsylvania it was a deteriorating organization that was mostly about kind of limping toward the end, you know. And kind of holding itself together until he said officially he was going to get out. And, you know, there were questions of timing that would position him for subsequent, you know, maybe vice president or this and that, or how, you know, so there were larger questions I'm sure that drove that timing.

But the campaign itself by then from my point of view, and I'm sure that others would see it differently, it was really kind of going through the motions. And we had awful experiences with people. I was in charge of creating and designing and getting printed palm cards for the one zillion legislative districts in Pennsylvania. I can't even remember the arcane delegate selection process of Pennsylvania, but I do remember that there were like a hundred and fifty or a hundred and eighty separate... I'll have to call them... (*outside interruption*) a hundred and fifty, a hundred and eighty separate palm cards with delegates' names on them that had to be printed and then shipped out to all of these places to, so that they would be there on election day so you could give them to your people so they'd know who to vote for. Well, it was a huge logistical nightmare to get the names in because, you know, you were putting together these slates and people were, you know, it was kind of, at that point, you know, there was no particular prestige or panache associated with being a Muskie delegate and people were looking, scrambling around trying to figure out whose vote to get into.

And so just getting the names for the slates and the palm cards was its own chore. Getting them together in a timely fashion was its chore. Taking them down to the printer in New York, which is where I went to get them printed, getting them all printed, getting them back to Pennsylvania in a big truck, you know, and each, and I had boxes of these things, and each place had its own tin boxes. And then we had to distribute them. And by the time all that was happening, you know, the thing was just falling apart and we were hiring people to take them out and to deliver them.

And we'd get calls from police departments, you know, hundreds of miles away saying, well, you know, we found these tin boxes of pieces of paper and they have all these names on them and they say "Muskie for president" on them, are they yours? We just found them laying out by the road. Because people that we'd hired to deliver them, it was like, you know, these midnight dumpers, you know, like that have toxic chemicals, you know, they take them out and throw

them in the drain, you know. You pay your money to have them disposed of properly and they'd pour it down the drain. Well, we were paying people to deliver these damn things and they were taking them out and just throwing them away. And, you know, so Pennsylvania was a, we were a retreating army by the time we got to Pennsylvania, and, you know.

DN: In all those months that you were involved in the campaign, did you ever meet Ed Muskie?

DJ: I sure did. I met him in Wisconsin a couple of times. I met his whole family in Wisconsin. And, you know, 1972, I can't remember exactly how old I was, twenty something, you can do the math, it wasn't very old, twenty-five or something, and I met his whole family. And I remember meeting Ned who was just a little kid at the time and who I know now and find to be so much like his dad that it's just remarkable to me.

But I remember the first time I met him, it was up on the top of a hotel in Milwaukee and, it was like a hotel terrace or something and it was kind of cold because it was in the spring time. And I don't know why we didn't stand inside, but we were all outside, and it was kind of an event where you bring the campaign workers together with the candidate and his whole family was there. It was supposed to be this kind of touchy-feely, you know, and warm, and it was colder than hell, the sun was just kind of barely shining, and there he was with his whole family. And there's this tall, kind of aloof fellow that was kind of maintained by some big shots that I didn't know, didn't have any access to, and I'm sure I got to shake his hand and say hello to him, and I'm sure that I was impressed and honored to do so. But mostly I remember chasing his kid around the, you know, and that was probably my job, somebody probably said, "look, you know, don't let that little kid fall over the edge of the hotel, you know." So for some reason I was focused on Ned but, and we've talked about this subsequently because I've recalled the moment to him. And he didn't remember of course because he was probably in a zillion situations like that.

But I did meet him and, you know, he seemed like the big guy that could be president, you know. And, boy, it was exciting. I didn't meet him very many times. I went to a couple of events, I was responsible for a couple of events that he went to, or building a crowd, you know, to get him some places. And they were all just, you know, it was always snowing, it was always cold, never enough people came out to the damn things we were supposed to be doing.

And all the college campus events that we'd try to set up, now there's where the war and those kind of issues really, you know, felt like they were kind of grinding us down all the time, you know, because we could never get anybody at those big schools, you know, interested in the Muskie campaign. They were, in Wisconsin, those folks, you know, kind of knew what, they knew the McGovern angle I think and they probably were thinking that was where they wanted to be.

So I remember that a lot of times when he was coming it was a very, you know, it was very, to be at an event or something, and it was very anxiety producing because we had to get people out and make sure that it, this and that, you know, was correct, you know. And usually it was not. It was always cold and kind of crappy out, and he didn't have the right shoes and got his feet wet

and it was somebody, well, probably my fault. You know, so that's kind of what I remember of that.

DN: When you met Al From and then Al offered you the job, were you interviewed by Ed Muskie, or -?

DJ: No, no, I think I got to talk to him. I think they, I kind of remember, I think, I remember Al, Al hired me and I think he was, I'm sure he talked to [John] McEvoy about it or something. I pretty much remember meeting, Al taking me in to meet Muskie the first time. I had shoulder length hair, it was blond, it was not gray, and I was, you know, a kind of, was the young person that came out of the campaign, you know. And I remember Al taking me over to meet Muskie and introducing us, introducing me to Muskie and saying, "Senator, this is David Johnson, he's joining the intergovernmental committee, subcommittee staff. He worked for you in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania."

And Muskie looks up at me and he kind of, you know, focuses on me, he says, "well, I hope you do better here than you did in Wisconsin." So that was my first, you know, that was my first meeting with Muskie. And then it was just like, it was too perfect, you know. And I was thrilled, you know. He registered, you know, and I, and from then on I had, you know, increasing opportunities to be around him, and I traveled with him some, and I did some hearings, and I finally became his energy LA. Al never, I was like a peg searching for the right shaped hole there for a while.

DN: I was going to ask you about, you're not a lawyer and you were hired as counsel. What were the counsel responsibilities?

DJ: Oh man, well, Al, I first did some stuff on a, you know Al was great. Al was like, you know, he had a new idea every day and each week he had taken one of those five ideas and kind of developed it a little bit and packaged it. And once a month he'd taken those four ideas, you know, that he'd honed a little bit, and honed one of them up really great and he'd take them over to Muskie, you know. And some of them never went anywhere, you know, ninety percent of them never went anywhere. But some of the stuff that Al thought of, you know, Al was -

End of Side A, Tape One

Side B, Tape One

DN: This is the second side of the interview with David Johnson on the 10th of April, 1901 - 1901, 2001, Nicoll's betraying his age. The, you were just talking about Al From and his skills.

DJ: Right, yeah, I was saying that Al, you know, was... There's an old joke about the little boy that, you know, gets the pile of horseshit for Christmas, you know, and he's digging in it and his parent says, "you know, why are you digging in that?" And he says, "well, with all this horseshit there must be a pony somewhere," you know, and Al was always, that's what we used to say about him, "he was always looking for the pony." And he found it a few times, you know.

And he, like I said he was instrumental in the, in some, in some, in the big pieces of Muskie's

legislative program in the years that, you know, that I was there at least, from 1972 to 1978, the budget act and sunset and low-income energy assistance. I have the first memoranda that were written about the low-income energy assistance bill that I worked on, and I'm so proud of having worked on. And I remember Muskie selling it to his colleagues and to the Senate, it was a one-year program, you know, and that was in 1974. And here we are twenty-six years later, it's still going strong, you know. It started as a two hundred million dollar program and it's up to several billions if not more.

But Al had a lot of ideas and he was part of the, and he was really, at least from my point of view, he was certainly one of the generator of ideas in the Muskie organization, I think that was is great worth. And so what happened to a guy like me who was kind of in his orbit and worked for him was that the ideas that, you know, got some go ahead, a preliminary go ahead, were given then to me to develop and to work on. And so I kind of tried out two or three things and finally, and you know, life brings so many different circumstances. But after the OPEC oil embargo in 1973, everybody said, "well you know, Muskie needs an energy advisor," you know. And up until that time, that was, you know, the energy kind of (*unintelligible phrase*) cared about home heating oil and prices but that's about it. And, well Johnson's from Oklahoma, he must know something about energy, let's make him the energy advisor. And so I became Muskie's energy guy, and boy, it was exciting and fun.

And so From, Al came up with the idea of having a set of hearings in Portland, and then another one in Boston, another couple of days in Boston, and then culminating in hearings in Washington and, to emphasize the importance of the, and the nature of the energy crisis in New England, et cetera. So he sent me to Portland and I organized the hearing in Portland and got the witnesses together and, you know, worked with the local officials and the like. And it was pretty good and exciting, and I still remember riding up on the elevator that day, and I don't remember what building we were in. It wasn't the new, it wasn't the federal building on Forest Avenue where Muskie had his office (*unintelligible word*), and Mitchell had his, but it was a big old building downtown someplace.

And we rode in an elevator up to start the hearing, and I remember I was in the elevator with Muskie going up, and there was a guy in the elevator in a pair of overalls. And he says to Muskie, "every day that it's warm saves me, or, is money in my pocket." I don't know why after all these years that is, evokes an emotional response in me, but something about that was real. And something about Muskie was able to take that in and to grab onto it and he just, you know, he went in and he was great, he was just great.

DN: Did he use the statement that had been made?

DJ: Oh sure, oh sure. And that was a cool thing about him I think is that he, and I wasn't around him as much as I was around Mitchell of course, but you could see him grab on to things that worked, you know really worked, and then kind of tug at them and pull at them and chew on them until they, until he made them his and made it work. And, boy, that was, it was an exciting day and it really clicked. And you could see Muskie, I could see Muskie kind of, you know, he was often skeptical of new things, and didn't really, was able to see the potential but didn't often recognize, you know. How much potential there was, and I could just see it come on, you know.

In that moment in the elevator, he kind of went, “hmmm, there’s something here to have, you know, something to do and something to have.”

So we went from that hearing, which was pretty good, and we got on the evening news in Portland. And then we went down to Boston and I set up the hearing in Boston. I stayed in Boston for like two or three weeks, again I was in a hotel, somebody was paying for my meals. And Teddy Kennedy decided he’d come to the hearing, it got kind of big and everything. And I cut, I got my hair cut and so, and that was a big statement. And so we got national press, national TV came to our hearing in Boston and, boy, that was, that’s when it all changed. And all of a sudden, you know, here’s a subcommittee with absolutely no jurisdiction over energy in any way, the intergovernmental subcommittee, and a New England Senator, who certainly had an axe to grind and his constituents had concerns.

But, you know, it wasn’t apparent that it was going to work and all this, so, but when I came back to Washington the next day after the Boston hearing, I remember going over to the office and, man, it was like, “okay we got national TV, let’s go,” you know. And so it was really, that was my, that was my transformation from kind of a just another one of the long-haired kids kind of hanging around the edges to a person who... I really felt like I had a role and a place on the staff and a job to do, and something that Muskie was interested in.

So then we had a whole series of hearings here in Washington, got national press again, and gosh, you know, we had the head of the federal energy office and this person and that person, and it was really instrumental in highlighting the effects of the price increases and the shortages and the like in New England. And it was, you know, it was extremely exciting and obviously I still have a lot of feelings about it. But Muskie was, you know, he was able to take the experience of that moment in the elevator and turn it into something about government.

DN: Now when you were planning those hearings, before the Portland hearing, what was the planned focus for the hearings, what facet of energy policy?

DJ: Well, of course we were concerned about price and supply, about New England’s dependence on imported product, and because all of a sudden it became, you know, dangerously apparent to everybody how fragile that system was. And it was a fragile system, and in some ways remains a fragile system, but then, you know, it hadn’t been previously apparent. And all of a sudden, it became a huge political issue to responsible leaders in New England that what their people needed to stay warm in the winter time and for their factories to run and for people’s lives to occur there in those cold months was all dependent on decision makers elsewhere in the world. Both in terms of where the raw product was coming from and where it was refined and how it was shipped to the United States, and in some cases foreign ownership of the companies that delivered the oil right to the doors and to the tanks of the people in Maine.

So as a responsible, and a leader, you know, Muskie took that on and got a table, and got a seat at the table on making energy policy. And it was a time, you know, there were a bunch of really good guys from New England in the Senate at that time. Ted Kennedy, of course, who’s still there, Edward Brooks from, you know, a Republican from Massachusetts, gosh, some of the names escape me.

DN: Senator [John Orlando] Pastore.

DJ: Senator Pastore.

DN: Senator [Claiborne] Pell.

DJ: Pell, absolutely. And those guys worked together, you know, we would have meetings, and Muskie was at the center of this. We would call meetings of New England senators and say, you know, this is what is going on, we need to do something about it, what do you guys want to do, you know. And it was really, it was really cool. And so when the national, there was a national energy act in '75 I think that created the federal energy agency, the FEA, in law because it was established by presidential order and then. But this codified it and put it in law and all that kind of stuff. And Muskie was right in there and was participating in there.

And New Englanders really did have a role in setting energy policy in a way that they previously had not because it was typically the realm of southerners and, or people from producing states. Or from this person or that person who happened to be the chairman of a relevant committee or subcommittee, which often also related to whether or not they were from a producing state.

So New Englanders exerted themselves in energy policy on the subject of price and supply and distribution, all those kinds of things that were critically important. And he was really at the center of much of that, and as I said before would convene and participate in meetings of other New Englanders to make strategies and come up with ideas to influence the outcome of events that were taking place. Taking place on committees that they didn't have any membership on, so it was interesting.

DN: Did those meetings take place mostly after that series of hearings?

DJ: Un-hunh, yeah, the hearings were pretty early on because of course the effects of the oil embargo were felt in places in New England before they were felt elsewhere. And the immediate danger as much as real danger existed in terms of interruption of supply of refined product and the like, that danger was mostly, mostly existed in the New England states because we were importing refined product. Elsewhere, there wasn't a dependence on oil for heat as there was in New England, or it was domestically produced and refined.

So you might find that in places in the United States that were dependent on that kind of product but the difference was that it wasn't being refined elsewhere and brought to the United States as product. But, my point was that the effects were felt early in New England, it became obvious pretty early on in the so-called energy crisis that New England was going to be affected adversely and so he was pretty early in the debate.

DN: The work of the committee involved you first, I take it, in energy. Did you take on other tasks, or was that -?

DJ: Well, I mean, I was always kind of From's sidekick, you know, and so as he moved

around and we did sunset, you know, and I don't know if you remember what that was, you know. The notion was that federal programs ought to have an end as well as a beginning, you know. And Muskie was an early proponent of that kind of thinking about government, you know, zero based budgeting and, you know, and From's, you know, From has talked that, continues to talk that same kind of talk, you know. Fiscal responsibility, systems in place that cause you to look over, you know, what you're doing and so the budget act, you know, and all that kind of stuff. So, as, and privacy was another big issue that Muskie took on from a, and again from a very unlikely spot, you know, on the intergovernmental relations subcommittee. Property tax assessment around the country, I smile when I remember that because we had a person on the witness, testifying as a witness, who pretty much had a cardiac event while testifying, it scared him so bad, to death. And so we did a lot of stuff, you know.

From was really, was capable of ranging wide and far and finding these little jurisdictional hooks, you know, he was very clever about that and Muskie encouraged it, and the establishment around Muskie encouraged it. And so wherever they went I sort of went along and so I was involved in all of those issues.

When we were doing the sunset bill, we had a computer, we had a very early computer. I don't even remember what the heck it was, but big and bulky and had all, we had all these government programs on it. And we couldn't bring it onto the floor, but during the debate, somehow I would sit off the floor and during the debate feed Muskie information about specific programs, about when they would be terminated or some sort of thing, trying to run this computer and get the information to him in a timely fashion. I can't even remember what it was about now, but I did a lot of different things and it was really fun, and had a lot of great opportunities, you know, that you, that kept the job interesting.

DN: You mentioned earlier that Senator Muskie was not one to leap on an idea the first time he heard it. Do you recall any events, or what it was like coming in to present a new idea to him?

DJ: Yeah, yeah, I remember, I don't remember when this happened, but you know, Muskie had a, his hideaway was way down in the basement of the Capitol, like SB11 or something. And, but at some point in his career, pretty late on, forty, you know. I left in 1978 and I went down to the White House when Al did, and we all, and we both left because Muskie left government operations and went to foreign relations.

At some point he moved out of that basement office into an office up higher, had a window in it. And I remember going in there, I got on the schedule to go in and talk to him about something, and I went over to his office in the Capitol, and I went in. And I remember it was not the basement one, it was the one with the window. And it had just been decorated, you know, and had a big table in it for a desk and he was, you know, not (*unintelligible word*), you know. And I'm by myself, and one of those moments, you know, we're together by ourselves, and this big bull head swings around, you know, because he's sitting at the, sitting slumped down in his chair looking at stuff on his table and his head swings around and looks at me, he says, "well Dave," I said, "yes sir, good morning." "Did you bring your horse?" I said, "my horse, sir?" He said, "yeah, that dead one you've been beating on," he said, "are you here to try to sell me that idea again," you know, something that I had, you know, and here I was back on my third meeting

with him about it and he wanted to know if I was bringing in my dead horse to beat on.

And, so if you needed an example of how, of his resistance to, you know, and really what that, what it did was it made us go back and, you know, refine our ideas and sharpen our arguments and think through what it was we were trying to get him to do, you know. And that was all to the good. So when he did say, you know, he did sign that letter or did okay that set of hearings or whatever it was, we were way better prepared than we would have been that first time we went around it.

But going around with him was going around, you know, and it wasn't always pleasant. It was always exciting, you know, it was very exciting to be with him and to interact with him, you know. But that was an example, and I don't even remember which of the things it was. I remember standing there with my black binder in my hand, my briefing book, you know, and having him ask me if I'd brought my horse. So that's what that was like.

DN: Were you directly involved in the sunset provision legislation?

DJ: Yeah, we did all, I was there with Al, and you know Al was the guy, kind of the impresario, you know, directing me and Alan Schick over at the, I think he was at the Library of Congress or the budget office or something. But an outside expert in government process and programs, and two or three other staff people. And I did my little piece of that, you know.

DN: Was that a hard sell, too, with Ed Muskie?

DJ: Well, you know, I don't remember specifically how that started or when, but you know, it was a natural for him. From Maine, you know, I think that kind of, you know, use it up, wear it out, make it do kind of life philosophy was something that he embodied and characterized and felt comfortable with. And so the idea of looking at what money you're spending and how you're spending it and doing so on a regular basis and all that kind of thing, I think that was a natural for him. And I remember him embracing the notion, and then that kind of led to the budget act stuff. And again, and he made the first chairman of the budget committee and all that and finally got to be chairman of something.

But I think those issues were naturally attractive to him, ones that he could communicate about with people. He said to me one time, I had written something for him, maybe something to go on the floor, or I'd travel with him from time to time when he'd make speeches and he'd say, you know, he'd say, "Dave, you got to give them words they can eat." And that was the way that he would, you know, characterize what it was that he wanted. And, you know, but I thought, I think those issues were ones that he felt comfortable with.

DN: The, as you wound down your work when he decided to move to the foreign relations committee, did you know early on that that was in the wind, or did it hit you as a surprise?

DJ: Well, you know, no it wasn't a surprise. Al knew what was going on, and there was a great deal of respect paid to that part of the organization as it atrophied and became less important to Muskie. And I remember, you know, having plenty of notice that it was going to

happen, and I got a couple of raises on the way out the door to set me up, you know, for a higher wage wherever I went next. And I remember Al, you know, Al took me with him to the White House when he went to work for Fred Kahn, and boy, was I happy. But I'm sure that Muskie, well, I don't know whether Muskie helped Al get that job or not. But I do know and I do recall feeling, in answer to your question, I feel like we had plenty of notice and it wasn't a surprise, and maybe there was some sadness, and I remember feeling sad and then happy to leave his orbit and his organization.

I remember a party that we had at his house that I, that might have been a birthday party or something. It was a big staff party, it was out at his house in Bethesda or wherever it was, and it was the occasion of a kind of a goodbye to Al and people with Al, you know. It might not have been the express purpose of the party, but that all happened there. And I wrote a poem that I read to Senator Muskie that night, and the name of the poem was "I Am Not a Tube of Toothpaste" which, you may recall, was a saying that he would say from time to time when you would come in and ask him to do something, "I'm not just a tube of toothpaste you can come in here and squeeze out a little bit when you want some," you know. And so I wrote him a poem that had probably more stanzas than the subject deserved but about him not being a tube a toothpaste, that was my goodbye to him.

DN: Do you still have a copy of that?

DJ: You know, I think I probably do somewhere. I've got a whole box of, I've got several boxes of stuff that I brought with me from, you know, that I've accumulated over my service in government and I'm sure it's probably stuck in there somewhere. But I remember having a lot of fun in writing it and trying to make it rhyme, you know, and reading it and having a good laugh with him and others about it. But it was, but I do remember that was kind of the formal, or public goodbye that we had.

DN: You were on the staff from 1973 until 19-

DJ: Nineteen seventy-two to '78.

DN: Seventy two to '78, and there were several changes in the Senate office itself during that time. How did the working relationship between the subcommittee and the office change, or did it change over the years?

DJ: Well, you know, when I started there John was, John McEvoy, was AA. And I got along really well with John and John helped me, as I've already told you. John and Al were close, and I think you know, those guys were always good to me and I had plenty of opportunities when John was there. And then Charlie Micoleau came in '76, I think it, that's when I recall, it was in anticipation of the campaign and something. And also John went over to budget committee to be chief counsel or staff director or something. But I remember when Charlie came very well, and Charlie and I are very friendly now. In fact, Charlie's youngest daughter Jennifer travels with me and my family, I have three little kids now. And we're still close, but I remember Charlie coming in. The only thing I remember about that is that it seemed to me that then it was kind of Charlie and Gayle kind of running things.

DN: Tell us about Gayle.

DJ: Well, I'm sorry to have my emotions kind of get the better of me to begin here. Gayle was a very dear friend and she used to tell me, when I became Mitchell's AA, she used to tell me that I was like the third or fourth AA she had taken to raise and that she was kind of running out of patience but that she would do it one more time. She was really the, and as I started to say, I kind of remember Gayle all of a sudden kind of appearing on my radar screen when Charlie was there and I think that, I certainly know that Gayle was with Muskie, you know, from very early on if not the beginning in Washington. But when Charlie came I think her, at least from my point of view, you know, she kind of assumed some more importance there, and of course the '76 campaign was an opportunity for people who had close Maine ties to be at the center of things, and she certainly was that.

She was, she knew everybody, she knew everything about everybody, she knew everybody that Muskie had ever met and what they had done to him and he had done to and for them. And when Mitchell became, when Mitchell came to the Senate he asked me to get in touch with Gayle to see if she was available to hire. And, boy, it was the smartest thing that he or I ever did because she was such a wealth of information about people and how they interacted with one another, and who was a friend and who was not, and who could be one and who never would be one. And she was so generous and so loving to those that she worked with, and she gave so much of herself to the work place. She was a very, very dear friend and made it possible for me to do the things that I did, and I think probably for Charlie as well.

And that's kind of what we were talking about I guess, I think that she was the, if there was a soul in the place, you know, to me in a lot of ways it was Gayle I guess. And, I miss, I miss her and just talking to her. I used to talk to her a lot when she was postmaster. And of course when we worked together for George, you know, she was a big part of my life every single day for four years and a very intense period when he was running for election. But, as you know Don, she was a very special, important part of that office.

And when Charlie got there in '76 I kind of, I was pretty, energy was, you know, was an issue that was important in that election campaign and so I had things to do and I got to go. I was in and out of Maine a fair amount during that election campaign and I traveled around with Muskie some and did, you know, energy, well, speeches and stuff like that. And throughout all that I would, you know, Gayle was kind of the, she never was the top person in the office, but she was always kind of like the real unchanging kind of part of the organization day in and day out. And then she brought all that to George and just was so generous and, with herself and with what she had and what she could do, you know. Just a wonderful person.

DN: Gayle was from Maine and -

DJ: St. John Plantation, is that where she -?

DN: She came from St. John's originally and then grew up in Bath, and it was during the, I take it from what you said that it was during the work on the energy issue and subsequently that you

started visiting Maine. Had you had anything to do with Maine before?

DJ: No, no, never had. And I was lucky enough to be in and out, you know, and as I said before, you know, I felt like I was in every town in Maine for one hour, you know. And I remember going around during the, before and part of the campaign, you know, doing the kinds of things that Senate staff people could do. And I remember the first time I, one of the first times I went up I went up with Bob Rose who was press secretary and in fact we were driving around doing stuff, I don't know what we were doing, and we stopped and we went into a drugstore.

And I'll never forget this because, at a display right up by the cash register in this drugstore, in a kind of a little plastic pack, were hockey pucks, you know. And I've never been in a place in my life where they sold hockey pucks at the drugstore and I'm thinking, you know, this is like, you know, what's going on here, you know. And they had little steel flags, you know, that hooked onto all the fire hydrants so you could find them in the snowdrifts, another thing I've never seen from Oklahoma.

And I remember on that trip also I saw the northern lights for the first time when we were way up north. And so I was lucky enough to travel all around Maine, starting in probably '75 and then through '76 during that election campaign. And working in the offices and getting to know the people that manned those offices, and traveling around with Muskie some, and it was a great experience, you know, and I've learned to love the place and the people up there.

Muskie used to tell me, Muskie told me on a couple of occasions he thought that people from Maine and Oklahoma had a lot in common, and you know, I took it to be a great compliment and I think that he, you know, meant some things about the kind of hard scrabble life and the closeness to nature. Although nature in Oklahoma is a lot different than it is in Maine. I went to, I went out to the university, I went back to the University of Oklahoma with Muskie, I think it must have been 1977 or something like that. He gave a speech at the Kellogg Center which is a center for continuing education at the University of Oklahoma, he came out and he gave a speech. I think he was chairman of the budget committee at that time.

But I traveled out with him, and at that time David [Lyle] Bourne, who later came to the Senate, was governor of Oklahoma. And Boren's family had grown, lived, right across the alley or next door to the Muskies, and so he knew David Boren. And when Boren found out he was coming to Oklahoma, invited him to come over to the governor's mansion for lunch. So, boy, was I excited. I got to go back to the University of Oklahoma, you know, in the company of this great American, and then go to have lunch at the governor's mansion with him and with the governor of Oklahoma. It was pretty cool.

And it's one of those, during that trip I recall that he said something to me about that, that he felt some connectedness with the place and with the people there because he could see some common attributes between the, or the people in a place like Oklahoma and a place like Maine.

DN: Did he during that time talk much about his connections with Maine and what they meant to him?

DJ: Well, I mostly saw his connections with Maine in his interaction with people there. You know. I've already told you the story of the guy in the elevator. And I would see him with, mostly with officials, you know, with people in some kind of official capacity because at that time there was much less emphasis on this kind of retail politics, you know. That, I mean he did not go home to Maine every weekend like George Mitchell did, you know, by any means. In fact it was kind of a big deal every summer when the car, you know, was driven from Washington to Maine. I remember always kind of hiding in the woodwork when it came time to find a person to make that trip. Now of course I can't wait to drive to Maine with my own family, but, so when I was with him there it was, you know, it was usually in some kind of official capacity and most of the people he interacted with, you know, were at some level of officialdom.

But I saw him, you know, interact with those people and get something from them and give them something, and to take, to take out of that place, you know, whatever it was that kind of motivated him. And so I, I guess I'd see him, and George Mitchell in fact, as kind of two of the most kind of well motivated people in public life that I've ever, they're the two that I've been around of course the most. But, and I think that really comes from that place somehow. And of course I didn't hear only from him, but I heard all the stories about how he campaigned for governor and I met people. I met plenty of people, you know, when you'd meet people and they found out that you worked for him and with him, they would immediately either, you know, turn away in disgust, which many would do, or, you know, embrace you and, "oh, I knew Ed," you know, and this and that, "I knew him when he was running for governor, I rode with him in his convertible," or "I filled up that tank," or whatever it was.

So it was mostly like that, I mostly saw his reflection in people more than getting anything directly from him about it. You know, I was a staff member, I wasn't ever a very high member of, I mean I wasn't at the top of the staff by any means, I was always kind of an LA type, you know, and I was over with from. And they always treated me with respect, and there was a certain amount of dignity, you know, with which he carried himself, and so he was not, I didn't, well you know, what'd you have for lunch, you know, there wasn't a lot of small talk between us, you know. So I didn't get a lot of that from him directly, but I saw it reflected all around him.

DN: As you think about your experiences with Ed Muskie, what from your point of view were his significant qualities and contributions to politics and public policy, and what were the areas where you saw problems?

DJ: Well, I think that he was a, he was a large man, physically and spiritually and intellectually. And I think that he conducted himself with a certain, as I said a minute ago, a certain amount of dignity and kind of formality in (*unintelligible word*) situations in ways that caused people to respect him and the government that he was part of. So I think he really added a lot to any situation that he was in by simply being there. And then past that, you know, that's kind of a passive thing. Past that I saw, I always saw what his greatest contribution to be able to come into a situation and kind of size it up, and see a place where most of the people could be together.

And so by that you could say, well, he was a compromiser or a deal maker or a person who kind of lubricated the situation in some way and helped people see their common interest. And I saw him do that time and time again. Mostly it was about energy stuff, you know, that I was kind of involved in, but I think he was a guy who could help people work through what their interest was and then help them kind of figure out how to get it.

And so, and I saw him do that repeatedly on conference committees, in mark ups, in meetings with Republican and Democratic senators from New England. And I thought, and I think that's a huge contribution to make to any institution. I remember that, I remember the day that I went into a room with him, and I don't remember the occasion although I sure remember the experience where he went in and sized it up wrong and kind of hit an off note. And it was like, it was a very important day to me to see this guy who I'd seen, you know, who I'd been with dozens of times previously to kind of not get it right once. It was really, it helped me kind of get who he was, a little better that that he wasn't this, you know, perfect or larger than life character that he could easily be to a person with my relationship to him. So those are the things that I think that he contributed and how he contributed.

And it was fun being with him, you know, he was a power. People paid attention to what he said and how he said it, and a little of that could rub off on you, you know, and you could take a little bit and go over and do something with it. Shortcomings, you know, he was cranky, you know, and he was, I think he was focused on bigger things and I don't think that he was given the natural ability to focus so well on interpersonal relationships. He took that little gem from the guy in the elevator, in that moment he took it, but he probably wouldn't have enjoyed going to have lunch with that guy or getting to know him or something like that. And that's my impression that that was a place where he didn't either let himself go or have time or the interest to go.

So I think he probably missed out on some things that way, and maybe in some way that was a shortcoming, I don't know. But as I said, he was difficult to deal with from time to time and irascible and scary. But, you know, those kinds of things were really of little consequence if you kind of compare them to the places that he excelled and added. You know, I mean you could go on issue by issue and say, well, he should have come out against the war earlier, you know, and he should have taken on this cause and he didn't. I don't, it doesn't, I don't really think of those things when you ask me that question.

DN: Now, after you worked at the White House for a couple of years, George Mitchell was appointed and you became his administrative assistant. How did that transpire, and go back of that and tell us when you first met George.

DJ: Well, I remember it all very well. In fact, I worked at the White House for one year for Fred Kahn and then I went over to the Department of Health and Human Services to work for Patricia Roberts Harris who was secretary of Health and Human Services after Joe Califano left. I went there to work for a really good guy named Bill Welsh who was a union, an (*unintelligible word*) labor guy that was over there and had been involved in Muskie's campaigns and the like and, you know, Democratic -

DN: Used to work for Senator Hart (*unintelligible phrase*).

DJ: Exactly, sort of pro-Hart, really good guy, you know Bill. Got a house in Maine. And so Bill asked me to come. I'd run into him a couple of times when I was at the White House, and he was a friend of Al's, and he asked me to come over there and I was a deputy assistant secretary for legislation, paren, appropriations, end paren. I handled all the appropriations for the department. And I went to every appropriations hearing on the Senate side and the House side, and my job was to listen to see if the agency had toed the line on the department budget. And when they didn't I would come back and tell on them and they'd get throttled. It was a great job. And I had a lot of direct interaction with the secretary, it was pretty fun. She was very cool, a woman, I enjoyed being around her.

And I remember where I was the moment that Muskie went to the Dept. of State, and I was stunned. I was in Bill Natcher's. I was in the labor HHS appropriations subcommittee offices on the House, Bill Natcher from Kentucky was chairman, and I was in there at a meeting with some staff people and they had a TV on in the corner, and they announced that Ed Muskie was going to the Dept. of State. And I remember just standing there just, this was in May or something in 1980, and I remember just being stunned, I was rocked, you know. It was like my whole world, you know, and little did I know the consequences it was going to have for me, but, so that, so I remember that moment.

And then of course when Mitchell was nominated and everything I really didn't pay much attention to it frankly. I didn't know him. I never had met him. I wasn't slated to go to State with Muskie and all those people, so that all kind of receded into the near distance. And got all the way to the end of the Carter administration and was asked to turn in my resignation after the election, it was December of, early December of 1980, and I was looking hard for a job and it was just like it's been here recently. No Democrat, there were Democrats, you know, everywhere looking for work because it was the end of the Carter administration, and Ronald Reagan had just won that huge victory and Republicans had taken control of the Senate, and so it was pretty bleak. And I got a call from Jim Case who was -

End of Side B, Tape One
Side A, Tape Two

DN: This is the second tape interview with David Johnson on the 10th day of April, 2001. David, you were just talking about having seen the television report on Senator Muskie going to the Dept. of State, and subsequently getting a call from Jim Case.

DJ: Right, right, and Jim called me and said that he was going back to Maine and would I be interested in interviewing for the job as Mitchell's AA. I said, "boy, I sure would," and we went to lunch over at a little place on Capitol Hill, I don't think it's even open any more. And Jim said that if I was interested that Mitchell would be interested in talking to me and would I go up to Maine to meet with Mitchell. And I said, "sure," you know, I was desperately looking for a job and very excited about the prospect of being anybody's administrative assistant, and happy about the idea of renewing my ties to Maine and everything

But I knew nothing about George Mitchell and I'd never met him, as I said before. Or if I had it would have only been in passing in the campaign, you know, many years before, because he was involved in Muskie's '72 campaign. I certainly knew who he was and I'd seen him on TV a little bit, and I was very aware of the fact that he was going to have to run for election in 1982. And so, but those were the kinds of things that entered my mind and, would I go interview with him? Absolutely.

So I spent time talking with Bill Welsh who did know George and he talked about all the things I could do to be a great AA and this and that, and so I flew to... It being in December the Senate was out on recess and it was an election year and it was a long recess and Mitchell was in Portland, and so I flew to Portland to meet with him. And I changed my clothes in the bathroom in Boston, I remember, because I wanted to be sharp, you know, so I got to -

DN: Long hair was long gone.

DJ: Yeah, boy, I'll say. I was a guy looking for a job. And I got to the airport in Portland and the set-up was that somebody was supposed to come and pick me up and take me up to his house and I was going to meet him. And, but nobody was there, and nobody was there, and nobody was there. And pretty soon, in walks Mitchell. And he has on something he probably would be embarrassed to admit. And I don't know why he had it on, but he had on a tennis sweater and he had on some light pants, you know, and he was going to play tennis somewhere. I think he might even have had his racquet in his hand, although I don't know why he would have brought it into the airport. But he had on a white tennis sweater and with a, I don't know, I'd never even seen anybody with one of them on before, you know.

And he comes up to me and he says, you know, I'm the only guy standing there, you know, and he comes up to me and he says, "Are you David?" And I said, "Yeah," and he introduced himself. And he says, "Well, let's go talk." And he looks at his watch, I'm not kidding you. He looks at his watch, and he says, "I've got half an hour, let's go sit in the café and let's talk about this job." So I'm going, oh, man, you know, this was all not working out the way I thought. I had paid for the ticket myself, it was like two hundred and fifty bucks for a round trip to Portland, and that was out of my pocket. I'm thinking this is a total waste of time and a total waste of money, and I'm already thinking about, you know, what I'm going to do next.

So we go sit down in the café and the waitress is kind of stumbling over herself bringing coffee to the United States Senator, you know, and people are coming up and saying hello to him and congratulating him and everything. And I'm, I get about ankle deep into my rap, you know, about what a great AA I'm going to be, and he looks at his watch again and he says, "Listen, do you want to be my AA or not?" So, and I, I recall, I said, "yes," and my voice went up about two octaves, and I said, "yes I do."

And he says, "Well okay," he says, "can I give you a lift somewhere?" And I said, well, because, you know, it was the middle of the afternoon, I says, "well gosh, yeah, I'd like a ride." And he says, "Well where are you going?" And I said, "Well I'm going to Charlie and Judy Micoeau's house." He said, "okay," so we get out, drive out of the airport. He says, "where do they live?" I says, "I don't know," you know, I said, "don't you know where they live?" And he

says, “no.” So we stopped and we looked, I had to get out and go to a phone booth, and in those days you could find a phone book, you know. And I looked up their address and I said, “well they live at 38 Coral Street,” and he’s kind of looking at me, he’s thinking, “I just hired this guy to be my administrative assistant and he doesn’t know his ass from a hole in the ground, doesn’t know where in the hell he’s going.”

So he drove me over to 38 Coral Street and I got out and just kind of stood there because I hadn’t, you know, I think I sat on their front porch, it was freezing, you know, waited for them to come home for an hour, you know, because I thought I was going to be busy all afternoon with George Mitchell.

And there I was, I mean he had hired me to be his AA and it took about thirty minutes, and I came back to Washington the next day and, which I think was like a Saturday or something, and on Monday morning I went into the office and walked in, and they said, “yes?” I said, “well, I’m your new boss, I’m the new AA.” And I had the, and he hadn’t even told anybody. And so, you know, that was pretty fun.

And Jim was around for a month, you know, and I kind of, and finally Jim came out, you know and, or came in because I think I was there probably about eight-thirty, you know, or eight o’clock or something, I was probably waiting for the door to open to go tell them that I was the boss. And anyway, so Jim stayed around for a month and I was Mitchell’s AA and we went through the ‘82 election campaign which he, which my main job was running staff in Washington and raising all the money for the campaign, and never had raised a nickel in my life. And I remember we put together the first fundraiser, Gail and, obviously got to be careful because there were only, there were a couple of us allowed to raise money, (*unintelligible phrase*), and I was the one who did it but I had a little help, people’s personal time. And they had it over at the Monaco, and I remember I went over to see Joe Stewart who was secretary of the Senate, or Democratic secretary of the Senate because we were in the minority at the time and got some names from him of people who might be interested in giving money. And Joe’s one of my business partners now as a matter of fact. And we had this fundraiser at the Monaco and we raised thirty thousand dollars. And man, it was the most exciting thing you can possibly imagine because none of us, including George Mitchell, had ever, you know, raised anything, ever had done that. And we were all so excited and happy that we could do it. I remember during the event itself I took all of the, I had a hat or something to put the money in, I took all the checks and went into the bathroom, and I was standing in the bathroom. I was leaning up against the door so nobody else would come in and see me, and I was in there counting the money just to see, you know, because it was so exciting.

And anyway, I ran his office here and raised the money nationally to run that campaign. And of course he won, you know, a huge victory over David Emory and, you know, had stunning successes in the Senate. I was his, and then I stayed in his office until 1984, probably June or July of 1984, and then went to the Pharmaceutical Manufacturer’s Association for about four or five months, and Mitchell became chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.

And I’ll never forget, I was sitting in my office at PMA and Gail called me. She said, George, said the caucus just, you know, “Byrd just made George chairman of the DSCC and he wants

you to be executive director, and he's going to call you and ask you." And I said, "oh my God," you know, I was getting a divorce and I was finally making a little bit of money and, you know, I was thinking this is going to turn my life upside down and I said, "you got to tell him that I don't know, tell him I don't know, tell him not to call me." I hang up the phone, one minute later he calls me. "Well, did Gail call you?" "Yes." "Well, will you be executive director?" And I said, "well, you know, Senator, I've just got to have a little time to think it over." He said, "well take all the time you want but just make sure the answer is yes," and he hung up. And I thought about it over the weekend, and then became the executive, you know, left the PMA and became executive director of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee of which he was chairman. And he had spectacular success in raising money and doing politics for his fellow Democrats.

And in 1986 thirteen new Democrats were elected to the Senate and Mitchell got a lot of the credit for that, as he deserved, and that of course led to subsequent appointments and finally his election as majority leader. And I left his employ and the employ of the DSCC in February of 1977 and started my business that year, and I've been in business here since then.

DN: That was 1987.

DJ: Eighty-seven, yeah, I'm doing what you, I'm sorry, yeah. Nineteen-oh-seven. Nineteen eighty-seven, and been in business since then. And I had, you know, I guess maybe to kind of wrap it up, you know, those two senators from Maine were the best public servants that I've ever been around. And for a guy, for a young guy from Oklahoma who had lost his father at a young age, you know, a huge personal opportunity to be around Ed Muskie and spend my growing up years, which is really true, as a young man here in Washington and starting my family, and being around a guy like that is an opportunity that I never imagined that I would have and that I'm eternally grateful for.

DN: I want to take you back just a minute to your first encounter with George Mitchell. What was Charlie Micoeau's reaction when you told him?

DJ: Great. I lived in Charlie and Judy's attic for that whole winter and spent the whole campaign, you know, going in and out of Portland and when I could stay with them I would, and they were gracious hosts and very good friends. But they were very excited about it of course because it kind of drew them back into what was going on. And, you know, Charlie's an optimistic kind of up kind of fellow. He was very excited and I think he was, I was more stunned and he was more excited that first night that he came home and found me sitting on his porch and let me in.

DN: All right. It would be a good idea at some point to sit down with you and have you spend some time talking about the evolution of your relationship with George Mitchell and your observations. Just one quick question, you have spoken highly of both men and you know of George Mitchell's history of working for and then with Senator Muskie. How were they alike and how did they differ?

DJ: Well, I think the first thing that I have to say in answering that question is that, is my, I

was different, you know, I was a young man and Ed Muskie was an old man by the time our lives kind of came together. It certainly seemed like that to me. And as I've already said, you know, so that's who I was to him and I never was, you know, much of a big shot on his staff or anything, I was always kind of one of the folks around. And then of course, for George I was his chief of staff and our ages were closer together, he's just thirteen years older than I am. So the first thing I'd say to you is my own situation in life and my own age was so different for each of them and that my perspective on each of them is completely different.

They are alike in a surprising number of ways. And in fact, I think that Mitchell was very, very much like Ed Muskie when he first came to the Senate. He was methodical and studied, and closed in some ways that I think Muskie was that I've already mentioned. And sought to add to, to do his job in a way that was, was probably pretty much like the way Muskie did his job. And their attitudes were very similar about public service and about where they had come from and what motivated them. I think that their perspective on Maine as a special and great place was a lot the same. I think that their experience as sons of immigrants cast them in a largely similar mode. I think the fact that Mitchell worked for Muskie and in fact modeled himself on Muskie in some ways caused them to be alike. So in a lot of ways I think they were alike.

I think, though that the circumstances of politics had changed so much by the time Mitchell rose to leadership and was beginning to rise to leadership. And even the way that you got elected had changed so much between the last time Muskie was elected in 1976 and the time that Mitchell sought the election in 1982. I mean, as I said before, you know, there's a, it was a pilgrimage back to Maine in the summer time for Ed Muskie, and he would go occasionally, you know, over the course of the legislative year.

But Mitchell went home every single weekend that he was running for election, every single weekend. He used to leave on Friday afternoons and he'd walk by my desk and he'd look at me and he'd said, "well you have it a hell of a lot better than I do. You're going to go home to your family, you're going to spend the weekend," he said, "I know you're going to work, but I'm going to go up and just beat my brains out," you know.

And not only had that, not only had the politicking changed, the inside dynamics of the Senate were just roiled up in so many ways. The change of Democratic domination of the majority to Republicans in, Republicans out, the change of leadership from Mike Mansfield to Robert C. Byrd, and the change in the importance of seniority and the availability of national press to any one of them that wanted to walk out on the Capitol steps and say something ridiculous. Anybody could get on the news, you know, any one of them could get on the news any time they wanted to if they were willing to say something outrageous enough.

All of those things contributed to a style and a form of leadership I think that was probably unknown to Muskie, and maybe that he was not capable of, and that I don't think that Mitchell was, that was natural to George Mitchell. I think he learned it, I think he looked at what worked, at what was needed, and changed himself in ways that are, that benefited him and that contributed to his ability to be a leader that were not necessarily natural to him. And I think the real mark of George Mitchell is his ability to rise to the occasion time after time after time as he kind of mounted the stair steps to leadership, if you want it.

That sounds kind of dramatic, that he, that Mitchell has I think a unique ability that I don't know if Muskie had it or not because I don't think it was called on the same way that it was called on in George Mitchell. A unique ability to learn and to transform and to change himself in ways that worked for him and worked for the institution that he was part of. All of that self-effacing humor that worked so well for him in his election campaign in 1982. I mean I heard some of those jokes so many times that I, we used to laugh that our lips would all move, you know, when we heard them because we all knew the words. That was learned behavior on his part, I think, because he saw that he could make it work for himself.

And he took it in and massaged it and crafted those stories. Those stories, each one of those stories is like a little work of art. And they've been very, very carefully crafted by a very, very capable, calculating in the best sense of that word, calculating intellect, you know, that's trying to achieve something by telling that story. And his leadership style, the very careful listening, the careful response where he repeats what he's heard before he makes his own response. I think all that kind of stuff was learned and honed and perfected in George Mitchell in a way that was never, that Ed Muskie never was called upon to bring to the party. That's how they were different.

DN: Thank you very much, David.

DJ: Whew.

DN: This has been very helpful.

DJ: Good, good, well I enjoyed talking to you, Don.

End of Interview