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Kyros, Peter N., Jr. oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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Interview with Peter N. Kyros, Jr. by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Kyros, Peter N., Jr.

Interviewer

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

Date

June 14, 1999

Place

Portland, Maine

ID Number

MOH 109

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Biographical Note

Peter Kyros, Jr. was born on August 21, 1948 in Kittery, Maine to Peter and Alice Kyros. His parents were of Greek ancestry; his father served in the Navy until 1954, attended law school, and returned to Maine where he began practicing law and politics. Peter, Jr. attended public schools in Portland, Maine, then Yale University. While attending Yale, he worked on several campaigns including his father's, Peter Kyros, Sr., and Edmund S. Muskie's. He graduated from Yale in 1970 and University of Virginia Law School in 1975. He worked for Walter Mondale in 1976. He married in 1994. He passed away December 25, 2003.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: 1968 vice presidential campaign; 1970 Senate campaign; 1969-1972 presidential campaign; 1971 trip to London, Moscow and Egypt; and the New Hampshire primary.

Indexed Names

Abramowitz, Sheppie

Albright, Madeleine Korbel
Bennett, Doug
Bernhard, Berl
Brezhnev, Leonid Ilyich, 1906-1982
Broder, David
Brontas, Paul
Cutler, Eliot
Druckman, Howard
Eagleton, Thomas F., 1929-2007
Cabot, Jane Fenderson
Goodwin, Dick
Kosygin, Aleksey Nikolayevich, 1904-1980
Kyros, Peter N., Jr.
Lake, Anthony "Tony"
Lander, Charlie
McGovern, George S. (George Stanley), 1922-
Mondale, Walter F., 1928-
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996
Nelson, Robert
Nicoll, Don
Nixon, Richard M. (Richard Milhous), 1913-1994
Pachios, Harold
Shepherd, Bob
Shriver, Sargent
Smith, Timothy
Vance, Cyrus R. (Cyrus Roberts), 1917-2002

Transcript

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is the second interview with Peter Kyros, Jr. at his office at One Monument Way in Portland, Maine. This is June 14th, 1999. Now last time we were talking about the 1968 campaign, the convention, your relationship with George Mitchell. And I'd like to begin today by talking a little bit about some of the other people that you worked with on that campaign and the feeling you got as the campaign progressed.

Peter Kyros: Okay. There were, of course, a lot of Maine people involved in the vice presidential campaign. Paul Brontas, who then and now was a lawyer at Hale & Dorr [law firm], but is originally from Bangor, was quite deeply involved, and was on board Muskie's airplane as a kind of a chief operations person. And Eliot Cutler, also from Bangor, who was then on Muskie's senatorial staff. And continues to this day to be one of my closest friends, and my lawyer, was assistant press secretary I think, in that campaign. Yes, assistant secretary. Bob Shepherd from Brunswick was, who I think is still, in the real estate business in Brunswick. I haven't seen Bob in a while but I'm sure he's still there, was press secretary. And I took . . . Of course Don Nicoll had a, had a, obviously a leading role as, I don't know what. Don, I'm sure Don carried the title then of Administrative Assistant to the senator. But he was really, for the

campaign, he was really chief of staff for the campaign.

And George Mitchell was really his number two and played a terribly important role, both out on the road advising Muskie and managing the process with Muskie, and also in the headquarters in Washington relating to the very senior people in the Humphrey campaign, where I helped him out. And I had a variety of, I think I described them a little bit, a variety of tasks which for me, somebody so young, were just, it was just a wonderful introduction. It was really my first introduction really to national politics. And, you know, what a way to learn it and see it happen. I think that was very much an underrated campaign. There were some very, very fine people in that campaign. Campaigns are always rated by the outcome. And God knows they should be, but, so since we lost, but there were some extraordinary fine people in that campaign. And I think from a, from day one there was a sort of Muskie-Maine mafia, a bunch of people around Muskie who made the transition then to presidential politics.

Harold Pachios, who practices law here in Portland today, and who also is a lifelong friend of mine and my family, he's on the board of my company now. Harold, as I recall, was the head of scheduling and advance for Muskie, and that was very closely related to Humphrey's scheduling and advance. And just as a sidebar, there were a series of us who, from Maine, who received our first training and entrance into national politics in that campaign. And then we went on and had a, all had roles in Muskie's 1972 presidential campaign.

And many of us stayed involved and then were involved with other candidates in '76 and '80 and '84. A bunch of us ended up working in the White House. A whole group of us ended up, several of us, Eliot Cutler, myself, a couple of others, being deeply involved in Mondale's campaign because of some relationships, Mondale's campaign and vice presidency and staff. So it was, there was a little phalanx of people that Muskie brought with him into national politics really for the first time, there. Issues people, operations people, speech writing people.

And for many of us, that campaign, that campaign was a turning point in our lives. And we knew it, even as young, I mean I was, in 1968 I was twenty years old, and Elliot Cutler was twenty-two, and Jane Fenderson must have been twenty-two or twenty-three at most. And we knew that we were, one of the nice things was, we knew that we were being given, it wasn't something that just kind of hap- It happened to us but we were aware of the unusual opportunity that was being given us, because we were close to Muskie and were kids. So there was a little group of us.

And that campaign, well Muskie could do no wrong, you know, basically. Poor Humphrey, who was just a wonderful, wonderful human being, you know, could do no right. And so of, Muskie couldn't lose, you know. If he lost the election, he had nonetheless established himself as a important national figure who not only had something substantive to say but, perhaps more importantly for that first step onto the national stage, had an approach to things that absolutely, unequivocally, the press and others found very refreshing, and that was communicated. Muskie was, as has happened a couple of times since, the darling of the news media in that campaign and got tremendous press.

And it was a grave disappointment to us to lose that election, but not like it was for everybody

else. Because you had the sense, with Muskie, that you were You had the sense with Humphrey that this was it, you had the sense with Muskie that it was just starting. And we were all very young, and Muskie was still, relatively speaking, a young man. And he had very little to lose and everything to gain, so it was in that sense a very unusual campaign. The stakes, the stakes were different for Muskie than for anybody else kind of running for office right then. And then right after that campaign, you know, Muskie, Election Day of that year launched Muskie's presidential campaign. That was the beginning of Muskie's presidential campaign, and . . .

AL: Because?

PK: Because he was instantaneously the natural leader of the centrist wing of the Democratic Party, instantaneously. He performed superbly in that campaign, just wonderfully. And he already began to stake out not only his approach, his kind of serious consensus oriented approach to national politics, but on a set of issues, on environmental issues, quality of life issues, some economic issues. He already, he was, he was right where he wanted to be and needed to be. And basically went back to the Senate and I, you know, I think Don immediately, and the people around Muskie, Don and George and Berl Bernhard immediately began to organize the paraphernalia of the presidential campaign. I went back to college and Eliot went back to the Senate staff. Howard Druckman at that time, Howard in 1968 was a Secret Service man and he, is Howard on your list? Howard Druckman, Druckman.

AL: No, not yet.

PK: Yeah, Howard was a Secret Service man in 1968 and just totally fell in love with Muskie and all of us, and I think it caused an early career change for him. He wanted to be in politics rather than in Secret Service protection. And so soon thereafter he left the Secret Service and practiced law and has practiced law ever since on Long Island and been involved in Democratic politics.

There also were a batch of people that we all got to know. We, we, 1968 provided an opportunity for the first time for the Muskie Maine people, to use a 1990s word which I hate, to "network" with the emerging group of young political talented people around the country. And those relationships were terribly important in 1972, and thereafter. And so, right after the election in 1968 we all kind of went back to our jobs, but I think there was a virtually automatic, automatic, unspoken, unnecessary to be spoken working assumption that Muskie was going to run for president.

And I went back to, Muskie was up for reelection in Maine in 1970. I went back, I graduated from college in May of 1970 and I immediately, I mean, I took off three days. I must have graduated like June 1st, and by June 7th or 10th I was working in Muskie's senatorial campaign with the clear understanding that as soon as we won the Senate seat again, I'd be working in the presidential campaign in Washington. And so I moved to Waterville and worked in the campaign office there, doing just a wide variety of things. Enjoyed it tremendously because I got to come back to Maine. And I spent June through November basically working as an all-around, you know, I don't know, junior deputy campaign manager. I spent a fair amount of time driving Muskie around from place to place, I spent a fair amount of time writing press releases

and writing, you know, issues papers, and working on scheduling. And I just had a, just a great time, great time.

By that time, of course, my dad was in the House of Representatives, and so his name, our family name, was very well known in Maine, and that was really fun. I just had a wonderful, wonderful time, that there was no question that Muskie was going to win his, win the seat again. And, of course, the high point oddly enough of that 1970 campaign was not something that happened here in Maine. Well it happened here in Maine, but it was a national thing.

As we got closer to the election, it was a nasty (*sounds like: bi*) election, very nasty. As we got closer to the election, Muskie was asked to make a, both, Nixon and Muskie were each given time on national television to make remarks about the election. And the Nixon folks used a horrible speech, a horrible nasty Nixon speech, gem of a horrible nasty Nixon speech. And Muskie taped a speech that he gave, basically that he recorded in a house over in Cape Elizabeth, with some footage of him walking, kind of walking on the beach. I mean, it was the first presentation of the Muskie-Maine persona in a package on national television, separate from any other candidate.

And he gave a wonderful, wonderful speech that was written in part, in significant part by Dick Goodwin, and it enunciated perhaps better than anything that had come out of his mouth so far. The Muskie view of the world, the kind of serious, committed, value oriented, consensus, let's not be nasty, let's have faith in each other. You know, "There are only two kinds of politics, the politics of fear and the politics of hope." It had a couple of great lines in it, some very, some very It was a moment, a defining moment where, and this is very rare in politics, where the speech and the presentation and production of the speech, the moment of the speech, really accurately reflected who the candidate was and what he had to say about politics and life. And it was broadcast basically, I think, the night before the election. I can't remember if it was the Sunday or the Monday before the election, 1970. And it was enormously well received all over the country by everybody, and catapulted Muskie again to the forefront of people's attention.

He won his Senate seat. And I think from that moment there was an automatic assumption, because not only, he took this opportunity that had been given him to represent the Democratic party on this ten minute piece of national exposure. And there wasn't quite the level of exposure of political people that we have now, the endless, you know, we didn't have quite the same. It was a big deal back then to be on national television for seven or eight minutes representing the Democratic Party. The morning after, there was an absolute automatic working assumption that Muskie was the leader of the Democratic party, the front runner for the 1972 nomination, the spokesman of the Democratic party nationally, and going to be the candidate.

And from that set of assumptions flowed all the good and all the bad. Flowed all the tremendous opportunity that was handed to Muskie and to all of us to make an extraordinary national campaign, and all the access to everybody and the flow of money and the flow of opportunity. And also from that flowed all the down sides, the, what we now know as the terrible down side of being a front runner and of having everybody assume that you're going to be the candidate, of having everybody have expectations that are far beyond anybody's, any candidate's capacity to fulfill.

So again, not to just lecture but, I moved down to Washington and went to work immediately. And by November 15th there was a headquarters at L Street in Washington, 16th and L, where there was really a nascent Muskie for president campaign where we all worked. And I suppose it's a, and this is a perfect, in retrospect, I haven't thought of this in many years, a perfect encapsulation of the good and bad of that moment. I remember there was a skeleton staff. Berl Bernhard was already deeply involved with Muskie and a fellow who worked with him on some other things, Bob Nelson, was already on board. And a wonderful person who is still in American politics in a very wonderful way, she's involved with refugees now, Sheppie Abramowitz, was already involved. I believe Madeleine Albright was already beginning to be involved on the fund raising side.

We had this small office, this small suite of rooms, constantly expanding but just four or five rooms when we started, when I first got down there. I think I must have been one of the first five, four or five people on the, on, it was called the Muskie Election Committee, payroll. And I remember being there, you know, it must have been the end, Thanksgiving time. And one of the rooms we had was like the room around the corner here, it was a Xerox paper supply, office supplies room. And it was certainly between, it must have been like December 1st, the end of November. I remember going into that room and seeing in the corner of it these two huge grey bags and opening one up and realizing suddenly that it was a mail bag, a United States mail bag. And in these two bags were several thousand letters that had been received, addressed to Muskie, by people responding to his election eve broadcast four or five weeks before, that had been, just were sitting there, unanswered, untended. And that epitomizes, I think, in retrospect that, the, you know, we were not ready for this kind of response, reaction.

People wanted to be signed up and wanted to be put to, get involved, wanted to respond People were responding to Muskie and we weren't ready for it. And so there then began a process of kind of putting a campaign together. And I, again I was, you know, twenty-one now, I served in a variety of jobs, just did a whole bunch of things. Did all the dogs body operational tasks that there were to do in presidential politics at that time, you know. I mean, whether it was answering the mail or sitting in staff meetings taking notes, I had a little contact with a senator at that time who was terribly important in Washington all of a sudden, terribly important. This relatively junior senator from a very small state was suddenly page one news and was in huge demand everywhere.

AL: Did it change him?

PK: I don't think it ever changed him one single solitary bit. I think he, I think that, that's an interesting question. I don't think he ever, he himself, ever changed a bit. And I think, to some extent, that was part of the problem. I think that if I were to describe Muskie's, if I were to describe the sense that you had, that I had over a twenty-five, twenty-year knowledge of Muskie on a fairly regular basis Obviously not as close by any means as many, many people were, but really regularly and knowing him on a very personal, private way as well, I would say that the vibration that came across as the years went by more and more and more was a sense of frustration.

I think he was a very, I think all the talk that you hear, much of it true, about his temper and so forth, it all came from a sense of frustration. Frustration with himself sometimes, that he wasn't able to adapt. Frustration that he couldn't get all the things done that he wanted to get done, the way he wanted to do them. And I mean by that not just operational things but macro, big building block things. I think he felt frustrated about his relationship with his family and that he didn't invest enough in that. Frustrated.

Muskie was a very nineteenth century man, very nineteenth century man, and, or at least I see him that way. And he was living at the take off point of late twentieth century politics. Muskie did not want to give the fifteen second answer to anything, anything. Not just to the news media, but in the private office. He didn't want to have the fifteen second consideration of any damn thing, didn't matter whether it was: what should I have for lunch today or what should be our policy, how should we negotiate the Clean Air Act amendments. There was no, and that gave rise to stress frustration and a kind of life time feeling, a career wide feeling that there wasn't enough time, that he was always being pressed to make decisions and give answers. And that there wasn't enough time to consider everything, to consider all the options, to think everything through properly.

And from that nexus, I think, came the difficult side of Muskie, because he was a very difficult person to work for. He wasn't that much fun to work for, in some respects. You had to break through, and that wasn't good, that, you know. There were good parts to it because you knew right away, the great thing about Muskie, the great part of this is that there was never any question in anyone's mind that he was serious about everything. And that's not true any more. And it's not true, sometimes when you get very close to people you realize to yourself, well, they're just human too. They have, you know, they're in a bad mood because they had a fight with their kids this morning and their wife at breakfast, his wife or her wife or their spouse at breakfast. Or, you know, they had one beer too many last night and they're, you know, you realize the humanity and the ordinary garden varietyness of all this.

With Muskie, you know, you got really close to him and you realized, this was him, he was really serious (*unintelligible word*), and that was kind of intriguing and uplifting. There wasn't any dark, petty side to Muskie. If he was petty, it was about some big issue, you know. It's hard to explain but, and so immediately I'm sorry, I'm just rambling here, I don't know if this is

AL: It's o.k.

PK: We immediately were involved in a presidential campaign and we really didn't know much about it, in retrospect. And we had, you know, one lives through these things and it's great to have 20/20 hindsight. I certainly feel that the people who were running the Muskie campaign, to whom Muskie turned over a tremendous amount of authority and decision making

Muskie did not enjoy very much the tactical and strategic short term analysis of politics. He loved the big part of politics, for all of his aggravation about it sometimes. He loved the grand speech making, he loved thinking about public policy. Loved it, he just loved it. And, even though he could, he'd sometimes broadcast this sense of frustration and aggravation and driving

everybody bananas and having a temper about it, the truth is he truly loved it and he was truly great at it and he communicated that.

But he, you know, he turned over to his lieutenants the whole organization of the campaign, the figuring out of fund raising. Muskie never had a taste for fund raising. Always felt, I think, that it was a little beneath him and a little bit the dirty side of politics. Although actually, at a time when fund raising laws that we have now were not in effect and it was a much more open system, Muskie actually ended up with some quite wonderful people contributing to him and being the core group of his support. Who were not at all second-rate, who were first class people and who liked him and respected his independence. It's quite unusual to think of, you know, we expect now that all fund raising operations, for whatever party, for whatever candidate, will turn into some kind of sick virus, and that was clearly not true. Muskie, at a time when, it could have, I mean there were no, the laws were much less stringent about amounts and disclosures and so forth.

And as 1971 wore on, you know, Muskie basically went around the country and did his, carried out his Senate duties. And we ran this little support operation, very much in the British concept of a shadow government. And everyone in the Senate office was involved. And there was a growing staff of people coming to work for Muskie, both campaign operations people and issues people. And I would be very hard pressed now, without sitting down with some people at a round table, to figure out kind of, who came when. But the model of it was the model of a shadow government, not of a political guerrilla team, which of course was what the McGovern people were out doing at the very same time, thinking through. So tremendous numbers of important people committed to Muskie, at first privately and then in a growing flood. Issues people, political people, operations, political operations people, political operatives, mayors, governors, senators. Muskie always had an ear for other elected officials. Again, a kind of nineteenth century feeling of, well, they've been subjected to the public vote, they must know what they're talking about so I've got to listen to them a little bit.

And as 1971 wore on, the so-called endorsement strategy, the strategy that basically was, everybody and his brother-in-law is for Muskie, emerged. By that time Muskie, (*aside - you need to just flop the tape?*), by that time Muskie had, we had a huge staff of issues people, we had a huge staff of political people. We had a candidate who was already frustrated by this enormous, for the time, for when it was, you know, thirty years ago now, for when it was, it was an enormous operation, relatively speaking. Position papers and speeches, Muskie had to have a position on everything, a written out position on everything. There wasn't the same kind of speechifying that we have now on CNN. But there was certainly a working assumption by the press and by the elite of the Democratic Party that Muskie was going to be nominated, and people were already jockeying for position in the Muskie administration. And for me this always, this culminated at the end, at the very end in 1971, Muskie went on some, on a long foreign trip. I'm going to get confused here, whether this was, yeah, this was, was this the fall of '70, the winter of '70 or the beginning, I guess it was the . . .

AL: Nineteen seventy-one, your trip to London and Egypt and Moscow?

PK: Yeah, yeah, that's right. You have it at '71?

AL: Yeah.

PK: That's when it was, yeah, it was at the end of 1971. By that time Tony Lake, the now, who was Clinton's first National Security advisor, had come on board, and it was kind of decreed that Muskie, I mean, Tony Lake and Cy Vance, all these people were for Muskie. I mean, it was like we were running a little private State Department operation. And the terrible truth is it was great fun. It went to one's head, because there was the sense that we just had to kind of play our cards out. And we were going to at least get the nomination, and probably win because Nixon was horribly, Nixon was terribly unattractive. I don't know how unpopular he was or wasn't at the moment, but he was so unattractive.

And at the end of 1971 a grand foreign trip was planned. Muskie went to England, to Egypt, to Israel, and also to Moscow, and I went with him. And that could take about two tapes by itself. But perhaps the most important, and I remember this very clearly, when we went to Moscow, everywhere we went Muskie was treated like one step below the president of the United States. When we went to Moscow, and this is a long time ago, the, it was a cold place. It wasn't a place that Americans were particularly, the deep freeze between, the Cold War was still very much in place in 1971, and you never knew when you went to a place like Moscow who you were going to see exactly. You were negotiating with the Foreign Ministry as to who, what meetings you would have. And at the last minute, literally as Muskie was arriving, it was announced by the Soviets, by the Russians, that Muskie was going to see both Brezhnev and Kosygin, both the premier and the head of the party, and that was unheard of. That was an indication actually, that they thought he was going to be president of the United States, clearly. So that at the end of 1971 even the Russians thought Muskie was going to be president, and . . .

AL: What happened, what changed it?

PK: Well, of course, it was a campaign where there was virtually no consideration given to connecting Muskie to ordinary people. I mean, again, you could spend all day talking about what happened in New Hampshire. What happened in New Hampshire is, New Hampshire is the ultimate retail state, as everybody who has ever been there since Muskie has been told by their campaign manager. And a bunch of young people working for McGovern went to work in New Hampshire face to face and said, you know, "We need to stop the war, you need to be, you need to be for George McGovern," and established personal relationships. Muskie, who was from Maine and had this president-in-exile, president-in-waiting feel about him, it just did, it did not sell.

And, of course, one of the great trick questions of late twentieth century American politics that you ask anybody is: "Who won the 1972 New Hampshire primary?" And the answer is: Ed Muskie. Most people will say George McGovern, but he didn't. Muskie won the New Hampshire primary, but not by as much as David Broder said he should have won it by. So it was the supreme case of expectations failed. And it had gotten quite nasty. And it just, from then on it was just a case of very quickly falling apart because, although Muskie's support was truly a mile wide, it was truly an inch deep. And as soon as it was, it was, it's not that complicated really, it was held together by a very large number of very senior white males in

Democratic politics. And the thing that brought them all together wasn't how much they loved Muskie, because Muskie was hard to love. It wasn't a passionate commitment to one or two issues above all others. It was their absolute conviction that this guy was going to be president.

And as soon as there was the tiniest chink in that armor, it completely unraveled. And it was too late. It's very simple, it was too late. After New Hampshire, it was too late to re-gear the campaign quickly, to have Muskie, to penetrate all the other states in a sensible retail way. Just too late. So it fell apart with sickening speed in Florida. And I remember very, very well By that time we had virtually a whole building in Washington, we had 1972 K Street. I mean, we had, you know, this enormous, enormous staff of talented people, really talented people, smart talented people, who were powerless to stop this unraveling. Powerless. And by the time of the Pennsylvania primary April 15th, it was all over.

And I remember very distinctly being in the elevator at the K Street office, alone in this tiny elevator with George Mitchell and Harold Pachios, three of us from Maine, me of course by far the youngest as always. I was, by then, twenty-one or twenty-two. And the campaign was finally starting to run out of money. And I turned to George and I said, "What are we going to do?" I remember this very clearly. What are, in a kind of plaintive, almost child like way. And George turned to the two of us in the elevator and said, looked at me and said, "Harold and I are going to go back to Maine and practice law, and you are going to law school." And it was already April 7th or 8th or 10th or 15th, 1972. And I hadn't applied to any law schools because you know what, I was going to go work in the White House.

And that day George Mitchell called a couple people. And literally forty-eight hours later, it was sort of kicking and screaming, unwilling, I drove down to Charlottesville with a friend of mine, a very dear friend with whom I was later business partners. A very dear friend of mine, Tim Smith, who was an advance man in the Muskie campaign, who had been admitted to UVA Law School, but had pushed it off a year because he was going to work in the White House too. We drove down and I went, George arranged an appointment for me with the dean of admissions. And I walked in and he said, "Well," there was a board member of UVA that was in the Muskie campaign who knew me and liked me and he said, "Well, it's very late." He said, "Sit here." And he pulled out one of those little side table things, like on the si-, front of my desk there, and he said, "Fill out this application." They had already accepted, the application process was over, they had already, it was April 15th.

And I filled out the application and I handed him my own copy of my college transcript, and a crumpled thing. I had taken the law boards in 1970, and I handed him the crumpled green, I remember it very clearly, it was about two inches by eight inches, a crumpled return slip from the Law Board's LSAT with my score on it, which was good. But it was completely, and I handed these things across the table and he said, "Well, I'll call you in a couple of days." And, you know, three days later got a phone call saying, "Well, we'll fit you in." And that was it.

And I spent, you know, we all went to the convention in Miami. We all watched McGovern be nominated. A bunch of, a very large number of old Muskie people, not very many Maine people, not much of the Maine mafia. But a large number of the, of the political staff went over to work for McGovern. I knew a number of these people quite well, because as 1972 emerged I

was on the road with Muskie the whole time. My job was to carry his briefcase on the campaign plane. I was the kind of junior trip director. And I did get him up in the morning and put him to bed at night and carry the briefcase and the speeches. And Charlie Lander and I worked very closely, Charlie Lander was on the plane that year. So I got to know all the advance people and political operations people. And many of them went to work for McGovern and then they, they reached out to a bunch of us and they asked me to come and work for the McGovern campaign.

And I worked that summer, I had accepted law school and the law school accepted me, more importantly. And I worked that summer after the convention, in August and early September, I worked first for Tom Eagleton, who was also a friend of my dad's but whose chief of staff was Doug Bennett, who was deeply involved in the Muskie campaign. And Doug asked me to come and work for Tom. And I traveled with Tom Eagleton, got to know him very, very well, very intimately; was in the room with him when the business about his electroshock therapy for his depressive illness came out; when McGovern said to him, "You know I'm a thousand percent behind you," and was there when he decided he didn't want to be vice president and didn't want to go through this any more. And then [Robert "Sargent"] Shriver was nominated for vice president and I went to work for Sarge for about three weeks. And then it got to be Labor Day and I realized, on my own, without any advice, this is for the birds. You know, if Muskie is not going to be president, I am going to go to law school. So I went off to law school and that was the end of it.

AL: I'm going to flip the tape right here.

PK: Fine.

End of Interview

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