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Lake, Anthony "Tony" oral history interview

Don Nicoll

Interview with Anthony "Tony" Lake by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee
Lake, Anthony "Tony"

Interviewer
Nicoll, Don

Date
April 30, 2002

Place
Washington, D.C.

ID Number
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Biographical Note

Tony Lake was born on April 2, 1939 in New York City to Gerald and Eleanor Lake. He was raised in Connecticut and Massachusetts. He attended college at Harvard, Cambridge, and Princeton. His undergraduate major was American History. His graduate work included International Economics, Foreign Policy, and International Relations. He was a Staff Assistant for Henry Cabot Lodge and a Special Assistant to Henry Kissinger as a Foreign Service Officer. Most of his career is related to foreign policy.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: personal background; education and early career in Vietnam; trips to Israel, Egypt and Moscow with Muskie; Muskie's involvement with foreign policy; counter-punching; work on the 1972 Senate campaign; and dirty tricks.

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Transcript

This interview has been slightly revised at the request of the interviewee

Don Nicoll: It is Tuesday, the 30th of April, 2002, we're in the McGhee Library of the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.; Don Nicoll is interviewing Anthony Lake. Tony, would you give us your full name and your date and place of birth, and your parents' names?

Tony Lake: Well, my full professional name is Anthony Lake, my date of birth is April 2nd, 1939, and my parents were Gerard and Eleanor Lake.

DN: And where were you born?

TL: I was born in New York City.

DN: Did you grow up in New York?

TL: No, I escaped, thanks to my parents, very quickly, and grew up in Connecticut and then spent most of my life in Massachusetts, and getting to the state of Maine whenever I could to go fishing.

DN: Did your family have Maine connections?

TL: Not really, except that my father took my mother to Maine on their honeymoon or soon thereafter, to the Rangeley Lake area, and put a fishhook through her eye on a back cast with a fly rod, and the marriage nonetheless thrived. So I was introduced to the area when I went to Grant's Camps, when I was eighteen years old, to spend a wonderful three days there, fishing, and I've loved the area ever since.

DN: And where did you go to school?

TL: I went to school in Concord, Massachusetts. Well, first to the public schools in New Canaan, Connecticut, and then to the Middlesex School in Concord, Massachusetts, and then to Harvard.

DN: And was your work all in foreign policy?

TL: No, I never took government courses, which may be evident to my students as I now teach about the government. I studied American history as an undergraduate, and then international economics and rugby and cricket, etc., at Cambridge. And then, after being in the Foreign Service for eight years, went to Princeton at the Woodrow Wilson School where I did foreign policy, international relations.

DN: What led you to Foreign Service?

TL: It was 1962, or '61-'62 when I was in Cambridge, and John F. Kennedy had just become president, and I was deciding whether to pursue a career as an American historian, which interested me greatly, or to join the Foreign Service. And I had somehow passed the Foreign Service exams, which I'd taken sort of not seriously my senior year in college, and got very excited about Kennedy, had some friends who were from Thailand and got very interested in Southeast Asia. And, therefore, I decided I would join the Foreign Service, including the attraction of actually getting a salary rather than a scholarship at graduate school, five thousand two hundred and eighty dollars a year. I'll never forget it, very exciting. And so I came back and joined the State Department and asked to go to Vietnam.

DN: And you went directly to Vietnam?

TL: My first assignment, yes.

DN: And what was your role there?

TL: I went as a junior officer. I studied Vietnamese first, went as a junior office, began in a consular section dealing mostly with drunken Merchant Seamen and learned every bar and jail as a result, and a lot of Vietnamese words they hadn't taught me at the Foreign Service Institute. And then the ambassador asked me to be his staff assistant, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge [Jr.], which I did until he left in '64. And then I did the job that I was trained for and went to Hue in central Vietnam and was vice consul there. And then did provincial reporting, traveling through the countryside and going into villages and seeing what was going on and reporting back to the embassy.

DN: And what was your next assignment after Vietnam?

TL: Then I was assigned to the State Department on the Vietnam desk, and then was assigned to be Nicholas Katzenbach's staff assistant when he was the number two person there, the undersecretary, again working on Vietnam. And then, by then I had very strong questions about the war and it was a very bitter realization that, in my view, we couldn't win it for political, not military reasons. And [I] was tired of working on it, but had become, had spent by then four or five years on it and was something of an expert.

So Katzenbach arranged for me to go to Princeton for two years, which I did, one year on the State Department, one on a scholarship, and then asked to go to a one man post in the eastern Congo because I'd enjoyed being at a small post in Hue. And they wrote the assignment to make me a special assistant to Henry Kissinger as a Foreign Service officer, which I did for a year. And to his great credit, he encouraged me to argue with him, which I did, about Vietnam policy, and then I resigned the day of the Cambodian invasion in April, 1970. Took six months off to begin work on my doctoral dissertation at Princeton, which I later completed, and met Don Nicoll, and I guess Cyrus Vance had introduced me and suggested that I go to work for Senator Muskie. I took six months off because I wanted to kind of forget the cables and all, and then when Senator Muskie was going off on a trip, as I recall, to Israel, Egypt and the Soviet Union, accelerated the schedule and I came on board.

DN: You came, you had been directed to us or introduced to us by Cy Vance. Had you worked with Cy before?

TL: I hadn't actually, no, I'd met him only a few times. So it came as something of a surprise to me. And then I met, over the course of that summer, met Paul Warnke and Les Gelb, who were advising the senator, and got to know them some.

DN: And in that first assignment, which came at the end of 1970 in the Muskie campaign, you went on the trip?

TL: Hm-hmm. Well, first I was interviewed by the senator, I remember, in his office.

DN: What was that like?

TL: It was terrifying. I can't remember whether you were in that meeting or not. We went over to his little office in the Capitol Building. It was not long before Christmas. And we talked first, some about foreign policy and I was extraordinarily impressed with his mind, his concern with the issues. His, and we can come back to this, his kind of being a counter puncher which I enjoyed, of asking you for your opinion then, not quite the Socratic method, since Socrates was probably a little gentler with some of his questions, and I enjoyed that.

And then we got to what was really on his mind which was his, that day, which was, there had been some mess up on his Christmas cards and his schedule for the next day, which was in his view impossible. And so he started expressing some irritation, as only he could, about his schedule. And I remember very carefully deflecting it from me to whoever else was there, a pattern I tried to maintain then through the remainder of the campaign.

DN: And then -

TL: And then anyway there was a call in December, I think, (I had expected to start in March or so) and went off to accompany him on the trip to Israel and Egypt.

DN: What were your responsibilities in connection with that trip?

TL: Well, at the last moment helping get ready for it in substantive terms, as I recall bringing people in to talk to him, etcetera, working with you, and then going with him to Israel, and then going to Egypt in advance to advance the trip. He, I could do a little separate story about the time in Israel but it's more about me than about him so I won't.

DN: That's fine. Talk about yourself, please.

TL: It's more about Israel and how good they are at all of this, I have always been a great admirer. My grandfather had dug as an archaeologist in Israel, in the West Bank, and Yigeal Yadin who heads, the lead archaeologist who had done Masada, had studied with my grandfather. So when Muskie met him, I introduced myself. And then the Israelis had said, (even though I was a junior nobody, but they always were willing to make future investments) had said, since I had to leave early, I should take a few hours off from being with the senator. And they would get me a driver and drive me up to the Golan Heights so I could see how important they were to Israel's security. And I said, “Great,” and the senator agreed I could do that.

So the next morning we took off in this car, and we're driving up past Jericho somewhere, I can't remember. And suddenly the driver pulled off into a parking lot, it looked like to me just this great dirt area, nobody there, and he spoke very little English, and parks the car and says, “Get out,” in a very stern voice. And, and so I got out and he takes me over, and there’s these holes in the ground, and he points down and he says, “Grandfather dug here.” Amazing. I was blown away. And then we went on to the Golan and came back.

Many years later when I was in the White House and met with the head of Moussad, I told him this story. And about three weeks later a fellow turns up at the northwest gate with a package for me, goes through the X-ray machine, brings it to my office. And there, framed, were the original documents from the Palestinian authority authorizing my grandfather to dig at that site. As we say, "No flies on them." It is now on my wall. One reason I've been supporter of Israel ever since.

In any case, then I did leave early, went to Egypt to advance the trip, and while I was in Cairo the senator was taken up to the Golan Heights. And I don't have the exact words, but was asked what he would do, and he very carefully said, "If I were Israel," which was his cautious approach, "I would not give it back." They were not happy in Cairo, they were not. I had a number of interesting meetings, but nonetheless he appeared, met with the young [Anwar] Sadat, and at the time nobody was sure whether Sadat was going to actually emerge as a strong leader or not. And the senator and Sadat had very good conversations. It was clear that Sadat was a serious person and, of course he turned out to be at least that if not a great statesman.

DN: On the Egyptian visit, you were there when the senator arrived in Egypt, and were present I believe at the interview with [Mohamed] Heikal, the editor of the newspaper, Al-Ahram, the morning after Senator Muskie had met with Sadat. Do you recall that conversation?

TL: I don't remember it in any detail, I'm afraid.

DN: Just a footnote to history, the evening before Senator Muskie and Mrs. Muskie went to the presidential palace on the barrages north of Cairo.

TL: I remember. Our control officer, by the way, was a young Foreign Service officer named April Glasby, who later became famous in a meeting with Saddam Hussein before Desert Storm, and she was actually very impressive.

DN: I happened to be on the visit with the president and Mrs. [Jehan] Sadat, and the next morning Heikal started arguing with Senator Muskie about some of the comments he'd made in his conversation with the president.

TL: That's right, yes, yes.

DN: And it was clear that he had heard a tape of the entire conversation.

TL: Yes, yes, nothing has changed either.

DN: Do you remember some of the interchanges that Senator Muskie had with the Israelis, or the flavor of those meetings?

TL: I remember it was Golda Meir, and I remember the senator pressing her to find out more about what the Israeli negotiating position might be with regard to redefining, or trying to achieve final borders. And her pointing out that for her to try to reach such an agreement within

her own cabinet, in the absence of actually being there in the negotiation, could potentially blow the cabinet apart. And she wasn't about to get into that conversation as a theoretical exercise, and the senator immediately saying he understood and of course that he would approach it in the same way, which is quite right.

And I remember it struck me at the time, as it struck me so many times since, especially working in the White House, that there is a community of elected leaders that no staff people are ever quite a part of. By that I mean, they speak a language of, at the nexus of electoral politics on the one hand, and policy on the other, as practicing and successful politicians. It's a very exclusive club.

DN: You went through that trip. Did you also go to Moscow with the senator?

TL: Yes. Now, was that trip at the same, I think we went back to Washington, didn't we, and then go to Moscow?

DN: No, we, the itinerary -

TL: Because Governor Harriman was on the plane, as I recall.

DN: He joined us in Moscow.

TL: That's it, no, it was on the way to Moscow, I'm quite sure. Somehow he joined the plane.

DN: That's right.

TL: Because I had not been ever a Soviet expert particularly, but I did a lot of squirreling around trying to educate myself. I remember talking to a friend, who was a Soviet scholar, who said that the way to think about the whole Soviet government, evil as it was, is as a Department of Commerce writ large, which was as good an explanation as I've ever heard.

And we got on, I remember then getting on the plane, and there were Governor Harriman and the senator sitting there, and the senator said, "Okay, let's have a quick briefing." And I remember thinking to myself, wait a minute, I am briefing Averell Harriman on the Soviet Union? Our former ambassador? I mean, this is insane. So I mumbled something or other and went back to my seat.

And I remember the plane ride back, you may recall, was on Pakistani Airways and we were going to Bonn, and there was terrible weather and so they wanted to divert the flight. And I believe it was you and I were going up to the cockpit trying to convince them that the senator had to be in Bonn for a meeting with whoever it was, and they had to try to land. And my speaking with all the conviction I could, that they needed to say the hell with the weather, but noticing that the pilots were very short and were kind of bouncing up and down on the seat in order to be able to see out over the window, and were also saying, "Inshallah," God willing, whenever they would make any announcement about where we were going. But we made it.

And I remember the meetings in Moscow then, with [Aleksei Nikolayevich] Kosygin, which went very well and the senator as always was, I don't recall him ever not being on top of an issue. But where the conversations really took off was when he and Kosygin discussed accelerated eutrophication in Lake Baikal; an environmental issue, of course, which the senator was an expert on. I remember two things, Kosygin being fascinated by that, and one couldn't have predicted necessarily he'd be interested in environmental issues, and then the look of almost adoration that Kosygin had when he looked at Harriman, which was very striking. And then I remember misleading you before you went out and briefed the press, you remember that? You probably don't.

DN: I don't recall the detail, no.

TL: Well, you hadn't done a lot of diplomatic reporting, or briefing of diplomatic reporters.

DN: None.

TL: None. And after the conversations, you said, "Okay, what's the first line?" to me. And I was a wise ass. I said, "Well, say they had useful and fruitful discussions," which is what every diplomatic person says and reporters just hate to hear it. And I thought you'd realize I was being a wise ass. And you went out and began what was then a very good briefing with, "They had useful and fruitful discussions," and the reporters all started almost throwing pencils at you and groaning audibly.

DN: Such is campaigning. And do you remember the moment when Harriman walked into the room at the Foreign Office when Gromyko was there?

TL: Vaguely, yes.

DN: The look of adoration that you mentioned in connection with Kosygin reminded me of that, where we went in, Mr. Harriman was a bit late.

TL: They call him Guryman.

DN: And Gromyko came in, greeted the senator very dourly, there was no warmth, nothing. And then the door opened at the end of the room and Harriman stepped in, and there was a transformation in Gromyko's face.

TL: Yes, yes. And the first reaction was Gromyko on a *good* day. So this was extraordinary.

DN: After that trip, there was the subsequent trip in March of '71 to Nigeria, which took you to Africa apparently.

TL: Yes, yeah.

DN: And that was a different kind of event.

TL: It certainly was. All African events are a different kind of event, as far as . . . . I love Africa. It was the African American Institute, as I recall, dialogue with a group of Americans, including Jesse Jackson. A young, very young Jesse Jackson, of whom I am now a great admirer and of whom I was not an admirer at that meeting, since he would go off on rants with versions of American history that I certainly didn't recognize, either in interpretation or fact. As I said, I since have gotten to know him and think very highly of him.

And the senator was giving the keynote speech there. There was obviously a political dimension to this, but he was also genuinely interested in African issues. I remember one moment in his hotel room that still irritates me, which is, we were sitting before the speech, talking about the speech and possible questions and answers and all. And I felt into the pillow on the couch I was sitting on, between the two pillows, my hand was just there and I felt something, so I pulled it out and it was a small pocket knife that somebody had left there. And I thought to myself, finders keepers, this is great. And I started playing with the, this little penknife. And the senator saw me and he said, "What that?" And I said, "It's the damndest thing, this is a penknife I just found in the sofa." So he said, "Let me see it." So I handed it to him and he said, "Huh, that *is* nice," and put it in his pocket. And I still want that penknife.

DN: Noblesse oblige.

TL: Absolutely, it was his suite, I suppose there's a territorial claim here. I decided not to argue it.

DN: Do you recall anything beyond the speech in terms of his interaction with some of the leaders?

TL: Yeah, it was great. Less with the African leaders, which were very good, were very straightforward, but with people like [Bayard] Rustin and Jackson and others, it was great. And since one of my own sorrows had always been that I was in Vietnam during, and then working on Vietnam during much of the civil rights movement about which I cared a lot, I became all the more committed to the senator when I saw how he dealt with the civil rights leaders. And it was a sort of a vicarious moment for me.

DN: Unfortunately, we've come to the end of your -

TL: Well, let's do another, five or ten [minutes].

DN: Okay, when, you indicate when you came back from that trip you were even more committed to the senator, and at that point the campaign was really under way. Give us a flavor of what you were doing and what you were coping with in the campaign.

TL: Well, I think in retrospect, I'd be interested in your view, the campaign made a mistake in, and it may have been out of over confidence. But we were putting together a very large issue staff even before we had a large political staff, rather like Dewey, I'm told, in 1948. He got a little farther. So I was hired to do foreign policy. Jim Campbell did domestic. And we each had I think five younger people that we had hired. And then I put together task forces, and by then I

was semi-experienced enough to know that it wasn't the quality of the work that they would produce, because task forces never produce great work, so much as co-opting kind of, the foreign policy establishment. We probably had three or four hundred people outside who were advising us on various things, as I recall. Maybe not that many. Though the inner group, all of whom had preceded in me, were Paul Warnke and Les Gelb, and Clark Clifford here in Washington, and in New York Cy Vance and a couple of others in New York. And the senator talked to them quite a bit. So all that kept me very busy.

Then there was dealing with the speech writers. And Bob Shrum, who remains a friend but is a force of nature and who had his own very determined views on what the senator should be saying. And I'm sure you, I hope you'll be talking to Bob. And we became good friends, but also had our run-ins as I would try to impose a State Department caution. The caution was, in substantive terms, very difficult. The senator was a naturally cautious man, and I think that's always been my bent in approaching issues, literally life and death like at the time of the Vietnam War. The essence of policy on such issues I think is how to marry prudence, maybe is a better word than caution, on the one hand, with passion for getting it done. And in this case, as I'd resigned over it, taking a firm stand on what was *the* issue for voters and *the* issue for the country, and that was the Vietnam War.

Bob was even more passionate than I was. And so in substantive terms, much of our work was involved in bringing the senator to take a stronger position, which I think politically he needed to do in any case, as McGovern was whacking on us. And we got agreement finally on the speech at the Presbyterian Center on Vietnam in which he announced his opposition. He didn't read it, frankly, with great enthusiasm, because I think he was concerned about appearing to take too, radical is the wrong word, but too fervid a position, because he was the candidate of the center in the party.

I still think he would have been much our best candidate, and history might have been very different. There's no question in my mind he cared about the war and wanted to see it ended, but he was, as I said, a counter puncher by instinct and inclination, intellectually, and cautious. And so, in that context, I was facing both the arguments with the senator on taking a firm stand, and the arguments with Bob about not using inflammatory rhetoric that was going to make it even harder for the senator to speak on the issue. So that was fun. And as I recall you were more or less where I was on the issue.

It was also an interesting, I learned a lot because while I was on K Street in the campaign headquarters, I had to work a lot with the senator's staff on the Hill. And I remember the first, getting a question about how he should vote on some bill. And my experience had all been the executive branch so I wrote a, made a few calls, wrote a two and half page memo with options, and then a recommendation on the bottom that he should vote for or against it, I can't remember. Got a call from the Hill staff saying, we don't have time to read two and a half pages and options, so just how should he vote, period. An introduction to a different world.

DN: I can remember Senator Gale [William] McGee walking through the door of the Senate one day saying, “How do I vote?” To no one in particular.

TL: Right. Yes, yeah, right, exactly.

DN: You mentioned a feeling that the campaign emphasized the wrong focus?

TL: It was fine with me, because I was a policy nerd.

DN: But your -?

TL: But I think in retrospect, probably a little more politics and a little less policy would have been a good idea. Let it be noted that I, it was a lot of work, there were some quite bad moments, the senator could be difficult, even though I became devoted to him and remained so when he became secretary of state later. And a sign of that devotion was that, as I recall, I was just about one of the last people to stay, I stayed on as a volunteer well after the handwriting was on the wall.

DN: Through the spring and through the summer.

TL: Through the spring, yeah, until the very end.

DN: Were you at all affected by the dirty tricks of the campaign?

TL: I was a focus of them, in fact, yes indeed. Of course, as I later discovered, they were tapping, they had put a tap on my telephone after I'd resigned. That tap remained for nine months. Every spring there would be then a report to the Congress on the taps that were in place, and therefore just before they would turn off a bunch of the taps, and that's when mine got turned off, I think that was the reason, so there would be less when the Congress looked into it. And it has later been established that the taps were illegal. Don't get me started.

I have a letter on my wall now from Henry Kissinger saying that they were wrong and that the taps never said anything, never turned up anything. And indeed in one of the Watergate tapes, Nixon said that my phone convers-, they knew it wouldn't work and that my phone conversations were nothing but gossiping and bullshitting, to which I took considerable offense. But no, I never, because I was being a good boy and I never told you about the secret negotiations that had been worked on and all that, so they never were able to get that. But they were, we know now, picking up over my telephone, my home telephone, my conversations, some of my conversations about speeches the senator was going to give, etcetera, and therefore had advanced warning of them and could prepare themselves. This was not democracy in action.

In addition, there was a young fellow named Tom Gregory. He turned up at the headquarters and said he wanted to volunteer. He was a student at Brigham Young University. And so they said “Fine, all volunteers welcome.” And he said, “I want to work on foreign policy.” And they said, “Fine.” And I want work for Tony Lake.” And they said, “Fine.” So he appeared, and some warning bell should have gone off in my mind, but it didn't.

Anyway, he appeared and so I put him to work first drafting a statement or two, and he was incapable of it. I then had him do some research, and it was terrible. But I didn't want to offend

him because he was a potential voter, so I had him reorganize my files. And I can still remember him sitting there surrounded by my files when I'd come in in the morning, thinking to myself, "Boy, there's an eager beaver." And then I got a form to fill in giving him academic credit for his time as an intern, which I gladly signed to Brigham Young. Later rescinded, I'm told.

Because, oh, a year and a half later Bob Woodward called me to say, "Have you ever heard of Tom Gregory?" Two years later maybe, I can't remember. And I honestly didn't remember him, he'd just been an intern, and I said, "No." And suddenly Woodward's voice got very icy, because he's figuring ah-ha, cover up here for some reason. He said, "Well I suggest you find out." So I made some calls to other people who were working with us and they reminded me about this intern, called Woodward back, said, "Yeah, he was an intern, here's what he did." And Woodward said, "Actually, he'd been hired by the committee to reelect the president specifically to come in and steal your files." And he was xeroxing what I was doing and sending them over to the Republican, to CREEP, which again irritated me considerably. No idea where he is now.

DN: He did all of that and left before, long before you found out about it.

TL: Oh yeah, yeah, that wasn't until a year and a half, two years later. So, interesting times. And I remember afterwards, when I heard about my phone being tapped, and I learned about Gregory, etcetera, when I heard about the dirty tricks with the senator, really sitting down and talking to myself about whether I was going to become as cynical as a lot of my friends about it all, or preserve enough of my innocence to go on being interested in public service and believing that you can make a system work, and deciding I would be "naive" and have tried to remain so ever since.

DN: Did your experience with Senator Muskie affect -

TL: Naive is in quotes. I'm sorry?

DN: Did your experience with Senator Muskie affect that decision?

TL: Well, certainly working with him then, and then as secretary of state, and I don't know exactly how to express this, but since he, he was not a rah-rah sort of public servant, you see what I mean. He could speak with, incredibly evocatively about the nation, about public service, etcetera, as in his, the great speech he gave on election eve in 1968. But he, you know, he was very questioning, he could be quite difficult in questioning you about some position you were bringing to him, and I admired all of that. And I particularly then admired how somebody with that kind of mind and that kind of disposition would remain so committed to public service even after what he had gone through. Because the dirty tricks, after all, weren't aimed at me, they were aimed at him. So, yes, I found that in a kind of dour New England way inspiring, and still do. I might add one other thing that I still recall of his, and I can't remember what it was that I said. I know I never repeated it, but he said to me, after I'd said this thing, he said, you know, "My father used to say, 'never speak unless you can improve on silence'."

DN: Have you, you indicated earlier that you, in some ways you enjoyed the counter punching, but there were some parts of this experience with Ed Muskie you didn't enjoy.

TL: Well, any time I came anywhere near his schedule, I didn't enjoy it and would try to stay as far away as I could. And there were times when the counter punching was so relentless that it implied that he simply didn't want to act, or do it. And, but I, and that was certainly the case in trying to get him to give the Vietnam speech. But I never got the sense it was because he didn't give a damn, or because he was essentially negative about these things. And I always took it as a sort of a challenge, like climbing a New Hampshire mountain, up the granite, and the view is always worth it when you got to the top.

DN: I'm going to stop us there, and we will come back to you with a phone interview because we want to carry this up through the secretary of state period.

TL: And the great clash of cultures. Leon Billings versus the Foreign Service, it was great.

DN: Thank you very much, Tony.

End of Interview