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Interview with Mike Mansfield by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Mansfield, Mike

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

May 5, 1999

Place

Washington, DC

ID Number

MOH 101

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Biographical Note

Mike Mansfield was born March 16, 1903 in New York City to Irish immigrant parents. When Mansfield was 14, he served as a seaman in the U.S. Navy for World War I. He later served in the Army and Marine Corps. He graduated from Montana State University at Missoula in 1933. After graduating, he became a professor of History and Political Science there in 1933 until 1942. He was elected as a Democrat to the 78th Congress in January of 1943. In 1953, he became a U.S. Senator from Montana. From 1961-1977, he was the Senate Majority Leader supporting a number of things including the Foreign Relations Committee and the National Health Insurance. Mansfield was appointed the U.S. Ambassador to Japan in 1976 by President Carter and was reappointed by President Reagan.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: U.S. Senate in 1959; Muskie's perspective during the Senate years; Senator's styles during the late 1950s and early 1960s; Vietnam War; Muskie and the Environmental Subcommittee; Mansfield's impressions of Muskie; and Muskie's characteristics and style.

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Don Nicoll: . . . [May 5th, 1999] 99, we are in the offices of former Senator Mike Mansfield at Goldman Sachs, 1101 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C. Senator Mansfield, you were the assistant majority leader in the Senate in 1959 when Senator Muskie first came. Do you recall your first encounters with him and your impressions?

Senator Mansfield: Well, my first encounter with him was when I was out campaigning in Montana myself. I had just heard the news that Muskie had been elected a United States senator from the state of Maine. And from Fort Benton, Montana I sent him a letter of congratulations and good wishes and offered to be of any assistance I, he could think of or that I could be. Then I met him in person. I was impressed with him from the very beginning. He was a studious man; sometimes too quick in temper, but always pretty good in judgment.

And I can recall him as being one of the very few senators I have ever known who was able to bring about a turnabout on the part of the Senate insofar as a certain bill covering the environment, I forget it's title, was concerned. When the bill came on the floor out of Senator Muskie's subcommittee, it was doomed to defeat, no question about it. But when Ed Muskie got through explaining what the bill contained, what it meant, and what it promised and what it would achieve, there was a complete turn around and the bill was passed decisively. He was great in the field of the environmental area. He made many contributions which he never received much credit for. And he was one of the few great senators that I had the privilege of knowing during my service in that body.

DN: What, when he first arrived, he and the majority leader, Mr. Johnson, had some problems. Do you recall those difficulties and what transpired?

MM: Not exactly except that there were differences between the majority, then majority leader Lyndon Johnson and the new senator. Ed Muskie was an independent, he voted as he thought best, as his conscience dictated. He came into conflict many times with the leadership but he held his views and was able to not only solidify them in the minds of others but to prove what they were worth. He did have his difficulties with Johnson. He didn't bow the knee to him, he didn't go along with him on various issues. And the result was that it was more difficult for Ed Muskie, as a senator, to operate, but that didn't stop him from carrying on independently his

views and achieving the results which by and large he deserved and earned.

DN: Senator Muskie came in as part of the class of '58.

MM: That is correct.

DN: And that was a class of interest to those of us who were around at that time, but perhaps you could describe what it was like receiving this group of younger senators.

MM: It was a pleasure to meet with them because they represented a new line of thought, a greater degree of independence, and were not at all backward in advancing their views, whether or not they went along with the leadership itself. They were a little concerned but they wanted certain changes brought about. I don't recall them all exactly, but in effect what they did was to advocate the idea of equality among all senators no matter how long they served or how little they spoke or anything else. That the younger members were just as important as the older members I agreed with them. And sometimes they came into conflict, several times at least, with the leadership, and were not adverse to expressing their views and making their views known and suggesting how changes should be made, changes which would reduce the power of the leader and give more of it to the senators individually and as a whole.

DN: Several people have remarked on the difference in the mood in the Congress and in the Senate today from what it was in the 1960s and the 1970s when you were the majority leader. What was it from your point of view that made the Senate what it was in the '60s and '70s?

MM: Well, during my sixteen years as majority leader it was my hope that there would be more even handedness, more equality among the senators, a better degree of understanding between both parties, a recognition of the fact that while we had differences they weren't too wide that they couldn't be bridged through accommodation, compromise and efforts of that sort. I think we were able to achieve it. But if you're looking for a comparison with today, all I can say is that I don't know but that maybe we'd be doing the same thing today that is happening in the House and Senate.

We had the good fortune to live in a less technological age, a less TV-addictional age. It didn't cost so much to campaign in those days, so we were less dependent on PACs and other forms of financial organizations engaged in political support. And while I look back with fondness and respect and gratitude for the years the Senate acted in the past, but I would be loathe to criticize the Senate of today. Because, while it is very different and more individualistic, I ask myself if I were the leader today, how would I react? If I were a U.S. senator today, how would I react? Maybe the same way.

So we did the best we could in our time to bring about equality among all senators, to achieve a recognition of the fact that there were, was no interclub, inner club. That each had, each senator had his or her own responsibilities to carry, its achievements to fight for, and to seek solutions to differences and the climate was good. And in those days the relationship between the two parties was less partisan, more friendly, more collegial. And we recognized that there would be differences of opinion. And what I tried to suggest, and what Ed Muskie supported me in, was to

always look at the other side and listen to them, because sometimes they were right, and sometimes we were wrong. And out of that philosophy developed, I think, a consensus which was possible to achieve a great deal in the way of sound legislation and continue a collegiality and comradeship among all the members of the Senate not excluded, both sides included.

DN: One of the most contentious issues in the 1960s and 1970s was the Vietnam War. And in the mid 1960s President Johnson asked you as I recall and a delegation headed by you to travel pretty much around the world to talk with leaders about our policy in Southeast Asia. Senator Muskie was part of that group.

MM: Senator Muskie and Jane, too. It was at the request of the President and we did cover a good deal of territory. We did make a report to the President on our return. I worked very closely with Ed Muskie on it among others, and the President didn't like it. We didn't write what he expected. We didn't give him any hope that the war could be won or should be continued until it was won. And we made it plain that we thought it was a mistake, that we had no interest whatsoever, which affected our national interest and sovereignty, and that we should find ways and means wherever possible to bring about a settlement which would enable us to be taken out of that quagmire which cost us so much. Fifty-five thousand [55,000] dead, over three hundred thousand [300,000] wounded, at a cost which will extend into payments in the mid, in the next century, into the middle of the next century, pensions, veterans care and the like. And it was a, one of the big mistakes, one of the biggest mistakes we've ever made and one of the highest prices we have ever paid for a mistake.

DN: In that period the great society legislation was running into trouble in part because of the war. Ed Muskie was closely identified with some of the legislation, particularly the Model Cities, or Demonstration Cities legislation.

MM: And the environment as a whole.

DN: And the environment. How do you, how did it appear to you that he was leading the fight in those areas and working with the administration?

MM: Because he was doing most of the work in the subcommittee which he headed and he carried most of the load on the floor of the Senate. He was able to convince the majority that the legislation was needed, was sound, was practical. And I think he should be given great credit, he's never really received it, for the outstanding work he did in the areas in which he developed an interest and the successes which he had achieved. There were so many good bills passed in that period that much of Ed Muskie's accomplishments were submerged. He has never really been given the credit which is truly his, but Ed was a modest man, didn't push himself forward, did his work, passed his legislation and brought credit to his state and nation and deserved much more than he received.

DN: Did you and Mrs. Mansfield have much opportunity to interact with Senator Muskie and Mrs. Muskie in those days?

MM: No. We very seldom showed up at the same social events. I don't think either one of us

went to many of them. But Jane and Maureen were quite friendly on the trip which the President sent us on. And I have nothing but respect for Ed Muskie as a senator, as a really good secretary of state though his time there was too short, about eight or nine months I believe, a man of integrity and honor, dependable. When he said something he meant it; his word was his bond or the other way around if you'd like it, and one of the nicest persons to work with I've ever known and whose passing I have deeply regretted.

DN: When you were ambassador to Japan and Senator Muskie was secretary of state, did you have many occasions to interact?

MM: Not many but several. He came to Japan. There was a meeting of Southeast Asian nations in Kuala Lumpur, he asked me to come down there to join him and participate in the program. I did. He expressed the wish that if the Democrats won the next election and he continued as secretary of state, he would like to call on me occasionally for advice and counsel. And I felt flattered, said I would be delighted to be of whatever assistance I could but I thought he was doing fine by himself. And I thought that while his predecessor was a good man, Mr. Vance, an excellent secretary, he at least had three years or so on the job, whereas Muskie only had about eight months before Carter was defeated and the Republicans took over, and thereby removing Ed Muskie from his position as secretary of state.

DN: As you look back on Senator Muskie's career in the Senate and then as secretary of state, what characteristics, what qualities do you think were most important in his work?

MM: Honesty, ruggedness, understanding, stubborn, knew what he was doing. He had all the attributes of a great senator and that's what he was.

DN: Thank you very much, Senator.

MM: You're welcome.

DN: Are there any other comments that you want to make about Senator Muskie at this point?

MM: No, I've said it all.

DN: Thank you.

End of Interview