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Senator Edmund S. Muskie Interviewed by Bill Monroe for the Today Show

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SENATOR EDMUND S MUSKIE
THE TODAY SHOW
FEBRUARY 25, 1970

HUGH DOWNS: We're taking another look now, as we have each morning this week, at the Democratic party--the Democrats and the '70s.

Our guest this morning is the Democratic Vice Presidential contender in 1968, Senator Edmund Muskie of Maine.

And although a recent poll shows that Senator--that President Nixon would beat any Democratic contender at this time, Senator Muskie came out the strongest possible Democratic candidate.

The Senator is in our Washington studio now, with Today Washington Editor, Bill Monroe. Gentlemen.

BILL MONROE: Good morning, Hugh.

Senator Muskie, do you feel that the decline of the Democratic Party was accidental--something that just happened? Or has the Democratic Party contributed to it by mistakes of its own?

EDMUND MUSKIE: Well, that's a nice opening question, Bill. Undoubtedly, the divisions in the party in 1968--disagreements within the party over the great emotional issue of 1968 - the war in Vietnam - contributed to our defeat.

And it's interesting that this great issue, which was at the top of the list of concerns of the American people should have been debated, not so much as between the two great parties, as within our party.

And undoubtedly, that debate, and the divisions which it caused, created the base, I think, for our defeat in 1968.

But this doesn't mean that the party is dead. The party is very much alive. And I'm sure we'll exhibit that life this year and in the next two or three years.

MONROE: What about the Democratic policy right now--either the Party policy, or your own ideas on Vietnam?

MUSKIE: My own view is that I hope the President's Vietnamization policy works. I have my doubts that it will, and I've expressed those doubts.

One, I think that he has forgotten that there are supposed to be negotiations in Paris, which ought to be aimed at a negotiated settlement. He has not replaced Henry Cabot Lodge as chief negotiator, and without someone in that position, the other side is not likely to move. That's the way the oriental mind works.

So there will be no hope, I don't think for movement in Paris, unless we have a Chief Negotiator representing the President.

And secondly, I doubt that we are exerting the pressure on the government in Saigon to broaden its political base. And without a broadened political base, I think the risk of a collapse when we leave is enhanced.

That's why my - these two serious doubts about the effectiveness of the policy.

MONROE: Do you agree with the Democratic Policy Council's proposal the other day that we set an 18 month time limit for getting out of Vietnam?

MUSKIE: Well, I think there ought to be a definite time frame. And that's not an unreasonable one. My own position on it, as I stated last fall, was that there ought to be an announced deadline for the withdrawal of our combat troops. That the completion of our withdrawal might well be withheld publicly in order to bring pressure on the other side to go on with negotiations in Paris.

But the 18 month time frame, as a measure of our continued commitment in South Vietnam is certainly not an unreasonable one.

MONROE: Senator Muskie, a statement that you made yesterday before the Democratic Committee on Priorities, which is now holding some hearings, to the effect that you felt the Nixon Administration was engaging in unbalanced priorities, suggests that you're going to push, as an issue, military spending being too high, versus spending on civilian needs.

MUSKIE: Yes. It's obvious that we can't do everything. That the country's interests dictate, unless you have an order of priorities, it seems to me that, although under pressure from the Congress, our military budget has been reduced.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the budget includes items which represent a sacrifice with respect to other items that are more important.

For example, getting away from military spending, the budget includes \$275 million for the SST--this new supersonic passenger plane that will be a new kind of violator of the environment, both noise and air pollution.

And yet the budget includes \$106 million for air pollution control.

Now that is a kind of twisted priority.

We're spending in this budget \$3.4 billion for space, as compared with \$1.4 billion for housing. I think man is in outer space, we'll continue there, and we'll expand our activities there. But at this point in time, which is the highest priority? Making life in our city ghettos meaningful and acceptable? Or searching for new forms of life in outer space? It's a question of timing and priorities.

So I think the budget has to be carefully combed on the military side, as well as on the non-military side, in order to re-order our budget priorities--to focus more meaningfully on cleaning up the environment, on dealing with our housing problems, on dealing with our educational problems, which, incidentally were, I think, seriously highlighted by the debate last week on the Stennis Amendment, and so on.

MONROE: When are you going to decide, Senator, whether you will be an active candidate for the Democratic nomination? And if you decide that you will, are you going to make a fight for it? And organize and work for it?

MUSKIE: Well, I think in 1968--in the 1968 campaign the earliest announcement of a candidacy for the President came in the preceeding November of '67.

That's not bad spacing. I would not think that it would make much sense to make a decision, let alone to announce it more than a year or so before the election.

MONROE: Hugh, do you have a question for the Senator?

DOWNS: Yes. Before--I didn't mean to veer away from what you were talking about. But earlier we touched on environment and its problems, and Senator Muskie was--has been known for his special interest in the environmental problem, even before President Nixon's stated interest in the State of the Union Message.

I wanted to ask you, Senator, if you look on President Nixon's recently announced comprehensive program on the environment as an effort to take this issue away from the Democrats?

MUSKIE: Well, it may be. I hope it reflects more serious concern for the problem, and of course we welcome any President's support. Because the problem is serious, and it will need all of the political support that we can commandeer.

As to whether or not he pre-empts it as an issue, I think will depend on how effectively he deals with it.

DOWNS: How do you feel about those observers who say that the Establishment is now pushing the pollution issue to distract American youth from the issues of Vietnam and racism and poverty?

MUSKIE: I don't think young people are being distracted. And more than that, I think they are picking up this environmental issue but not in the narrow, physical sense.

Although they are concerned specifically with water and air, and with other forms of pollution, they also see the environment as a total thing, involving human resources as well as physical resources.

And it is in that sense that they put together in one package air and water pollution, concern with the cities, racial unrest, as well as the war itself.

DOWNS: In this connection, do you think it is more clear in the minds of the young, perhaps, than in the minds of older people?

MUSKIE: I think that they are more vocal and more obviously concerned with it, but I find the concern spreading through the country.

Now whether or not people are concerned to the extent that they are willing to limit their own activities in order to contribute to its solution, is yet to be determined in any satisfactory way.

MONROE: Senator Muskie, let me ask you about the famous Democratic Party debt of \$8 million. Won't there be a serious problem of financing a Presidential campaign for you or another possible candidate?

MUSKIE: Well, that is a problem. But, if the political fortunes indicate the prospects of a strong Democratic race or victory in '72, it will not be an insuperable obstacle.

Secondly, if we retain control of the Congress this year, and I think the prospects are good, then the prospects for raising money between '70 and '72 to help clear the debt will improve as well.

MONROE: Is there a possibility for contention for the Democratic nomination between you and former Vice President Humphrey?

For instance, if he wants to make a strong try for the Democratic nomination, would you defer in his favor?

MUSKIE: Not if I thought I had a good chance myself. I'm sure that Hubert wouldn't expect me to, nor would I expect him to defer to me.

And incidentally, I think I sense--he has not said it--I sense a quickening of his political pulse these days.

MONROE: Let me ask you about another--present Vice President. Mr. Agnew appears to be the chief political spokesman for the Nixon Administration, and appears to have made some points in terms of public opinion polls by assailing the eastern liberal establishment, dissenters, the violence prone type of protestors.

What about Mr. Agnew as an effective political opponent to the Democratic Party now and in future years?

MUSKIE: Well, he undoubtedly has enhanced his own political appeal. But I think if he persists along this line, that he will narrow his own political base--it will be an enthusiastic and vocal base, but it will be a narrower one--and I think to the extent that he pursues it, and that President Nixon endorses it, to that extent it will enhance our prospects for the future.

MONROE: Wasn't there an exchange between you and Mr. Agnew in Maine, recently?

MUSKIE: Not directly. But the Vice President made some slurring remarks about Senator Fulbright. He suggested that Senator Fulbright should go to the deserters' dens in Canada and Sweden to pick the future leaders of the party. I thought this was implicitly an attack upon the patriotism of Senator Fulbright, and indeed of other leaders of the Democratic Party.

And so I said that it reflected a new technique of the Vice President to paint his opponents, or his critics, with the darkest possible brush in order to make them more vulnerable as targets. And then to attack them as targets.

He's what I used to call in college a "straw man debator." He likes to set up his opponents' arguments in his own way in order to make those arguments vulnerable.

I think it's a disservice to the country. I think it's divisive. And I think that leaders, whether they hold public office or not, ought to adopt a rational approach to the emotional issues which divide us. Especially those which can, by reason of emotion alone, to set Americans against each other.

It is not our job as leaders to exacerbate such emotional division, but to try to heal them. But this is not the Vice President's instinct.

MONROE: Do you feel he is exploiting emotional divisions for political gain?

MUSKIE: I don't know whether I would use the word exploiting. I think that this approach comes naturally to him.

MONROE: Senator, will you vote for the expanded ABM as asked for by Mr. Laird yesterday?

MUSKIE: I don't expect to. And opposition to it, incidentally, seems to be rising from unexpected sources.

I note that Senator Pastore and Senator Jackson, both of whom supported the Safeguard proposal last year, have indicated strong doubts, and I--indeed I think even opposition to this expansion of the proposal.

So that I would think, if their views are any clue at all, that President Nixon will have greater difficulty with this proposal than he did with the original Safeguard proposal last year.

MONROE: Will the ABM be a symbol of a general Democratic posture of being more critical of military spending than you expect the Republicans to be?

MUSKIE: That's right. It served that function last year, and I think very usefully. The 2 1/2 months that we spent debating military priorities, including the ABM, I think focused the attention of the country on this problem, with the result that Congress cut \$5.6 billion from the President's budget last--military budget--last year.

And, when you have a single issue like this as a focal point, it's easier then to dramatize the broad issues. So I think there will be a continuing, vigorous, and hopefully equally effective debate over military priorities in this session.

MONROE: Thank you very much, Senator Edmund Muskie of Maine.
Now back to Hugh in New York.