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Interview with George J. Mitchell by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Mitchell, George J. (George John), 1933-

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

September 19, 2002

Place

Washington, D.C.

ID Number

MOH 366

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Biographical Note

George John Mitchell, Jr. was born in Waterville, Maine on August 20, 1933 to George J., Sr. and Mary Saad Mitchell. His mother was a factory worker, and his father a laborer. He attended the Waterville public schools, graduating from Waterville High School at the age of sixteen. He attended Bowdoin College, graduating in 1954 with a degree in European History. He then served as an officer in the U.S. Army Counter Intelligence Corps until 1956. In 1960 he received a law degree from Georgetown University, and worked for two years in the Justice Department. Mitchell's political career began in 1962, when he joined Edmund Muskie's Senate staff as an executive assistant. In 1965 he returned to Maine to practice law. He was the state chairman of the Maine Democratic Party from 1966 to 1968, and was National Committeeman from 1969 to 1977. He was staff to Senator Muskie's 1968 vice-presidential and 1972 presidential campaign bids. In 1974, he made an unsuccessful run for Governor in Maine, losing to James Longley. Mitchell Served as US Attorney in Maine from 1977 to 1979 before being appointed to fill the remainder of the senate term vacated by Ed Muskie's appointment to Secretary of State. He went on to win the 1982 and 1988 elections for Senate. He was chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee in 1984, and served as Senate Majority Leader until retirement in 1994. In that year, Mitchell was offered a seat on the Supreme Court by Bill Clinton. However, he declined. Since that time Mitchell has been active in international affairs, most notably for his role in the Northern Ireland Peace Accords. He has also been involved in Israeli peace negotiations. He has served as Chairman of the Walt Disney Company.

He is also heading an investigation of past steroid use of major league baseball players.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: the end of the 1968 campaign; return to Maine after the election; Muskie's presidential campaign staff; travel from 1968 to 1970; mobilizing New England States; favorable response to Muskie; difficulties of Chappaquiddick; return to the campaign in 1971; Muskie's mood in 1971; evolution of the 1972 campaign; fifty percent problems in New Hampshire; Mitchell's take on the Manchester incident; assembling the Manchester rally; descriptions of the Manchester rally; Nixon's dirty tricks campaign; examples of dirty tricks; funding problems; and the possibility of Muskie running as McGovern's vice presidential candidate in 1972.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Thursday, the 19th of September, 2002. We are at the law offices of Senator George Mitchell; Don Nicoll is interviewing Senator Mitchell. Senator Mitchell, the last time we talked we were completing the discussion of the 1968 campaign. We didn't quite get to the end of it, and at that point we came back to Waterville and participated in what we hoped would be a victory watch. What did it turn out to be?

George Mitchell: Well, unfortunately, the Muskie-Humphrey, sorry, the Humphrey-Muskie ticket was narrowly defeated by the Republican candidates. I don't have a very strong or clear recollection of that particular evening. My vague impression is that it was a great

disappointment, but on the other hand, the margin had been closed dramatically in the last few weeks. Two weeks earlier, there was a widespread expectation that Nixon would win by a very large margin; it turned out to be quite close.

And also, Senator Muskie had performed so well in the campaign, had been so well received and widely praised, that there was a good feeling among his supporters that, despite the disappointment of the loss that he'd done a really good job, and people around the country had come to see qualities that we in Maine had seen in him for a long time. So, although I don't have a very clear recollection of the precise events of that evening, my impression is that it was a mixed great disappointment over defeat, but a feeling that he had done a great job.

DN: And after the campaign you went back to your regular activities.

GM: I went back to practicing law in Portland with the firm of Jensen, Baird, Gardner & Henry, and remained there until October of 1971, when I left to come back to Washington to join Senator Muskie's staff of Senator Muskie's presidential campaign. From about January of '71, or early '71, I don't remember the exact month, until October, I had worked part time in my own time in New England. I remember making trips to Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont, each of the other five New England states to meet with political leaders to try to organize them in behalf of Senator Muskie. And then I became full time engaged in campaign activity, came to Washington in October of 1971.

DN: What was it like in that period, particularly 1968-1969 and on the edge of 1970, following the vice presidential campaign and the publicity and the attention that Senator Muskie got? And the reasons for your travel, and the responses you were getting?

GM: I can't remember precisely when in that period Senator Muskie made the specific decision to seek the presidency, nor how those discussions evolved. I was not a party to them. You, Don, were of course, much more deeply involved than I at that time. I do recall having some, talking with you, talking with Senator Muskie about it from time to time. But there was very widespread support around the country in reaction to the manner in which he conducted himself in the '68 campaign, the growing awareness of his record, what he'd done in the Senate, and a strong feeling by many of the senators that he would be a strong candidate.

I think my travels to the other New England states didn't begin until the calendar year of 1971, but I'm not a hundred percent sure of that. I have a very specific recollection of meeting with John Bailey in Hartford, with Governor [John N.] Dempsey of Connecticut, and they set up meetings for me in Connecticut. I can recall many of those meetings precisely. I have precise memories of similar meetings in Massachusetts with the president of the Senate, the speaker of the House, and many others. Similarly in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island. I have a clear recollection that the response was overwhelmingly favorable.

There was a lot of support for Senator Muskie, not just because of his person and his policies, but he was from New England and there was obviously a sense of affiliation that other political leaders in New England had. And many of the Democratic senators from New England were supportive at the time, and former senators. So it was a very, it was a pleasant task, I enjoyed it,

although time consuming because I really, I drove everywhere. I drove from Portland to Hartford, to Providence, to Boston, to the other places. Not all at once, this is over a period of months. I think I would go for a few days at a time at each place, and travel around the state meeting people. Generally a very, very favorable reception.

DN: Were you at all involved in discussions around the frustrations before Chappaquiddick of Senator Edward Kennedy's prominence and the difficulty Senator Muskie was having getting attention at the time?

GM: No, I don't recall that. I guess, Chappaquiddick occurred in 197-, I don't remember the year.

DN: It was '70, I believe.

GM: Seventy, yeah, yeah, no, I don't remember that, I wasn't involved in that.

DN: Now, you came to Washington to take up full time work on the campaign in '71.

GM: Yes.

DN: What was the state of the campaign at that point?

GM: Well, I think it was going pretty well. Obviously no votes had been cast, but I think Senator Muskie was widely perceived as the leader in the race for the nomination, and as the, potentially the strongest candidate that the Democrats could run against the incumbent president. I think there were public opinion polls published that fall, though I don't remember whether it would have been in October or before or after, that showed that he was running I think about even with President Nixon, maybe even a little bit ahead. So I think things were looking reasonably good. I can't remember, really I don't recall precisely how, I came down, I remember it was in early October. How I became enmeshed and involved in the campaign, I don't remember the details of it, except that I think at first I was working in the office and then more and more traveling with the senator as he went around the country campaigning.

DN: And what did you find as reactions to him during that period, were they still quite favorable?

GM: They were, yes. There was opposition, of course, there were many candidates running at the time. But I think the reaction to Senator Muskie remained generally favorable.

DN: What was his mood the fall of '71?

GM: I spent so much time with him, it's hard to fix it in a particular time period, but I think generally pretty good, as I recall. I don't have any specific recollection of his mood. I remember how bad it was later, after he lost the campaign, but I don't recall at that time, I think it was probably pretty good.

DN: And how did the campaign evolve through the late fall, winter, of '71 and early winter of '72?

GM: Well, there was a lot of emphasis on New Hampshire, as you will recall, Don. Also Florida, and a few other large states. You will recall the, what happened in New Hampshire, we had a very fine group of local people support-, people from New Hampshire supporting the senator. One really very nice and able state senator, unfortunately unused to, I think, the difficulty of dealing with some of the national press, made a comment that the press interpreted as saying that if Senator Muskie didn't get fifty percent, it would be a defeat because he was from neighboring Maine and the front runner at the time, which I think was most unfortunate. Because eventually Senator Muskie got I think forty-seven percent of the vote -

DN: Actually I, well some people said forty-nine, forty-eight percent.

GM: Well, just under fifty. And the press interpreted it as a defeat. I've always been mystified by that. I think he won by about ten percentage points, and I thought it was a rather quick, a victory, but it was widely interpreted as a defeat and that gave added emphasis to this so-called famous crying incident at the *Manchester Union Leader*.

DN: Were you present for that?

GM: I was there, yes, and I'll tell you my impression of what happened. Prior to coming to, well during the course of the campaign before that event in Manchester, Senator Muskie had visited a drug clinic, drug rehabilitation clinic in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. I was not present at that visit, but he told me about it, as did others who were there. It was apparently a very moving experience. These were young boys and girls in their teens who had been hooked on drugs and who had gone through a rehabilitation process. And in the course of it, you know, it was very moving, and several people said to me that they had tears in their eyes, and Muskie had tears in his eyes as these kids related their stories to them.

After that, a letter appeared in the *Manchester Union Leader* from someone claiming to have been present at the, when Senator Muskie was in Fort Lauderdale, and alleging that he had used a racial slur, had used the word "canuck" in referring to Americans of French-Canadian descent. I'd known the senator and been with him personally for a very long time, many trips, and seen him in the most private and unguarded moments and never heard him use anything remotely like that. And he denied it, as did everyone there.

We didn't know at the time, that was part of the Nixon dirty tricks campaign. It was a fabricated letter made up by a Nixon campaign operative to disrupt the Muskie campaign, and unfortunately it had the intended effect. So there began to be a lot of pressure from New Hampshire Democrats who supported Senator Muskie, including those of, Americans of French-Canadian descent, to say or do something to offset this, because his opposition was using it as a way to address the campaign.

So a visit was scheduled to New Hampshire, it was Senator Muskie's (*unintelligible phrase*), on a flatbed truck in front of the *Manchester Union Leader* building to challenge the owner, or

publisher, of the newspaper. In the intervening days, another article had appeared criticizing Senator Muskie's wife Jane for some alleged rude comments that she'd made on a press bus. And so when the senator got up to speak, it was a cold, snowy day, he was tired, he had made a long trip and he, as he said many times, he wasn't as effective when he was tired as he was when he's not, which is of course not unique to him, that's true of everybody.

But the program consisted of a speech by a prominent Maine Democratic political figure, Louis Jalbert, of French-Canadian descent, who told of Senator Muskie's record which, in Maine, which was very supportive and that no one had ever heard him use such a remark. And then Senator Muskie spoke and talked about his wife, the attack on his wife, and he then described the visit at the Fort Lauderdale drug rehabilitation center, and he did become choked up in describing it. And I've always felt that, although he denied that he cried, I think it was clear that tears did come to his eyes, but I think it was the emotion of his defending his wife, and the recalling of the incident, or the visit at the drug rehabilitation center, which was a very moving experience for everyone who had been there.

Again, I didn't, wasn't personally involved, but I have a very clear recollection of the senator describing it to me in quite a bit of detail, with a lot of emotion, and others who had been there with him. So that led to that incident. I do have a clear recollection of this, which I don't think I've ever been asked. I was with the senator when he left, and he flew to Hartford that night from New Hampshire, and the first reaction of the Democrats in Hartford was that it was a good thing, that it showed that he's human and he had emotion. Of course it turned out not to be the general reaction.

It's interesting how public standards change; now he'd be praised for it if the same thing happened and other politicians are praised. At the time it was seen as a negative. It's very difficult, it's really impossible to attribute cause and effect in most areas of life, and particularly in political campaigns. So I don't think anyone will ever know how much effect it had or didn't have. But it gave the press something to seize upon and identify, and use repeatedly. And I think it did eventually have a negative effect.

DN: How much influence do you think the David Broder piece about it had on the general press reaction, and then public reaction?

GM: I don't recall that, I don't recall Broder's piece specifically. But I think it was, the whole incident was unfair and unfortunate. And ironically, it occurred because of a completely fabricated letter by a Nixon campaign operative in really the most despicable and unethical way, but from it this entire incident developed, which plainly had a negative effect. What is impossible to know is how negative and whether it was a pivotal event, or whether it was just one of many factors.

DN: How conscious were you and others in the campaign at that point of the dirty tricks campaign, or did that surface later as something new about it?

GM: I was not conscious of it, and I was personally the victim of a lot of it because I traveled with Senator Muskie, and a lot of unexplainable things happened. Later, for example, I recall

very clearly being with the campaign in a hotel in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, when I received a telephone call from the hotel, said that, I can't remember the number, but a large number, fifteen or twenty limousines ordered by the campaign were parked out front and wanted to know where the senator and his entourage were. Well, I had to get up, it was literally like four o'clock in the morning, go down to the, get dressed, go down, check around, and determine that no one from the campaign had ordered these limousines. Well there were the limousine drivers, the company dispatcher had gotten a call from the Muskie campaign to send these cars.

Another hotel, I recall, when I checked out there was a bill for eighteen hundred dollars for restaurant and bar charges for a large number of people, and my signature had been forged. My name had been written on them, but it was not my writing and I hadn't, so I had to end up in a long hassle with the hotel over this eighteen hundred dollar restaurant and bar bill that I had had nothing to do with.

Another time, it was very late, about midnight, I was sleeping in a hotel and got a call, a hundred and fifty pizzas had been delivered to, in my name, to the hotel for campaign workers, which no one had ordered.

Incident after incident of this type occurred throughout the campaign, and I didn't know what was happening. We discussed it at the time, I think you and I, maybe Berl [Bernhard], whoever, all the people who were involved in the campaign. I didn't dream that it was coming from the Nixon campaign. Some people suggested it might be other Democrats doing it.

There was also a cropped photograph in Florida, which you recall, leaflets handed out in areas that had, that were not African-American, showing Senator Muskie in fabricated photographs with African-Americans and suggesting that, you know, you shouldn't vote for him because he's too close to African-Americans, things of that type.

So there were what were just an endless series, almost every day, traveling on the campaign, I got into some hassle which was a diversion of energy, resources. We ended up paying a lot of bills I think that we really weren't responsible for. And I don't recall when we, or I, had personal knowledge that it was the Nixon campaign, I just don't remember. It was a lot of small incidents, and again, it's hard to establish cause and effect. Had they never occurred, would Senator Muskie had won? I don't think anyone can make that assertion with certainty or with any high degree of confidence. At the same time, they clearly had a hugely negative effect.

DN: As you were going through that period, particularly after the New Hampshire primary, what was the strategy from your point of view to deal with the campaign challenges?

GM: Well I think one of the problems was that Senator Muskie himself and the campaign never were able to devise a winning strategy to combat the decline in his standing in the course of the campaign. I think we all contributed to that, including the senator himself. I mean, he's a great man, but he makes mistakes like everyone else.

And I remember one particular thing I thought was a mistake was, after losing the Florida primary, you'll recall George Wallace won that primary by a large margin, on election night in

Florida the senator made a very strong and emotional speech denouncing Wallace in very strong terms. Which might have been appropriate in another circumstance, but I think came across as kind of a sore loser. Probably better off saying those kind of things before a vote, or after some separation of time. But I remember that I was personally very, very depressed and discouraged that night, both by the magnitude of the defeat that Senator Muskie, and the other candidates, experienced at the hands of Gov. Wallace, but also the senator's reaction I felt would not be well received. And it wasn't, I think it was clearly a mistake. And I think he himself felt that way. Again, hard to know what effect it had on the campaign.

There was an effort on the campaign to focus on Illinois, which we thought the senator would do well in, which he did do well in, but unfortunately by then the tide or momentum was moving the other way. And the press always, of course, liking the decline of a front runner and the success of a challenger, emphasized it and I think accelerated the trend.

DN: How well did you think you were doing with the established party leaders at that point?

GM: Well, I think reasonably well, but I think one of the deficiencies of the campaign probably was an over reliance upon endorsement by party leaders, a sense that they would and could, or I guess I should say could and would, bring their supporters to the campaign wholesale. And that didn't occur in many places, either because the public officials didn't make the maximum effort, or because even with that effort popularity is simply not transferable in politics in any real sense.

So and I think, looking back, I think that while every candidate seeks endorsements, and those who don't get them try to transfer a liability to an asset by claiming that they don't mean anything, there is such a thing as over reliance upon them and not building a sufficient direct grass roots campaign, and relying too heavily upon them. And I think that probably was a defect, one of the weaknesses of Senator Muskie's presidential campaign.

DN: What were the obstacles to getting grass roots support at that point?

GM: Well, Don, I've thought about that a lot. I think that the, in, I won't generalize, I'll be specific, in national primaries among Republicans and Democrats in the United States, that the party activists, those who are really active in primary campaigns, those who work to get out votes, and to a lesser extent those who vote, tend to be in the Democratic party more liberal, in the Republican party more conservative, than the party membership as a whole, and certainly than the electorate as a whole. And so it's, I think it's difficult for a candidate like Senator Muskie, who was a centrist, who ran on issues largely of competence, he had a tremendous outstanding record, particularly on the environment, and who was running a campaign that did not see the nomination as the end, but rather the means to the end of winning the general election.

By contrast, Senator McGovern, who was and has been all these years a good friend of mine, really ran a campaign that was designed to win the nomination; and in the process made it manifestly impossible to win the general election. I don't think there's much doubt that many of the positions that Senator McGovern took in the nomination process gained him support among

activist Democrats, but moved him further and further to the left on the political spectrum in a way that made it impossible for him to get back to the center for the general election campaign. So you had, in the end, a campaign that reached its peak on the night of the nomination, and went steadily downhill thereafter.

I don't think it's sour grapes for a Muskie friend and admirer like myself to say that I still believe that Muskie would have been a much stronger general election candidate had he been able to get the primary, get the nomination. But that's the problem that every candidate faces, and both Senator Muskie personally and those of us who helped him, including you and me and many others, simply weren't able to effectively thread that needle. Other candidates have done it, and of course other candidates benefit from not having strong primary challengers, but we just didn't do a good job at that.

Muskie's appeal was to reason, to legislative accomplishment, to sort of general policies in the best interest of the country. The primary electorate was interested in emotion, passion, strong views on every issue, and the general election candidate who tries to navigate a nomination process by not being clear on very hot button issues finds it difficult in that nominating process.

DN: Another challenge in the campaign was raising money. How did the candidate do in reacting to the demands of fund raising?

GM: Well, having gone through it myself later as a candidate, he didn't like it, as most of us didn't, and did what's necessary. I think in line with his temperament and character, Senator Muskie grumbled and said out loud what many candidates feel and think, but don't say because they know they've got to do it anyway, and they just internalize the complaints and don't complain about it as much as he did. But it's a tough process, as you know. It's gotten, really gotten worse since then.

DN: Did you learn some lessons from that experience?

GM: Well I learned one lesson, yes, a very clear one. As you recall, Don, Senator Muskie, under the law, and I can't remember the details of the law, had received a number of large contributions which were not required to be disclosed. And of course his opponents began a drumbeat demanding disclosure and the senator resisted it, we all did, but in the end you just can't not disclose such things. And the lesson was learned in many other experiences, you're better off getting it all out on the first day and getting beyond it. That the longer you say, "I won't do it", or, "I can't do it", "it's not required by law", just builds up the issue and makes more of it when you do disclose. I don't, maybe you remember, I don't remember how long that went on.

DN: It went on for a couple of months.

GM: It did, yeah, and the senator would say, well, you know, this was, you know, "People gave it to me under the law that exists, existed at the time, I'm not required to disclose it, I want to honor my commitment to them." And people who were raising the money didn't want disclosure, the people who were involved on the political end of it, more like myself, you got to

disclose it. Eventually we did, but too late to mitigate the problem. I remember that very clearly as one example.

DN: Now, at the end of the primary period, that is right through the convention, Senator Muskie didn't get the nomination, then Senator McGovern nominated, selected Senator Eagleton as his running mate, and then Senator [Thomas] Eagleton was forced to withdraw and there was a little bit of negotiation over whether Senator Muskie would run as the substitute vice presidential candidate. Were you involved in those discussions?

GM: No, I was not, no, I was not at all involved in them. The one discussion I was involved in, that I later talked with Senator Muskie a lot about, was his decision to withdraw from the race. McGovern had won by a large margin in Massachusetts, and had also won in Pennsylvania on the same night. For some reason April 25th sticks in my mind, but it might not be that date. I may be completely wrong, but I just have this recollection of April 25th in my mind, I was with the senator in Philadelphia and it was a very discouraging time. He had won in Illinois, but now lost in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, and the next race coming up was Ohio. The governor, John Gilligan, who had endorsed Senator Muskie, wanted him to continue in the campaign. But there were many of us who felt it was not possible to turn it around.

And I remember meeting with Senator Muskie in the study of his home here in Washington, in which he asked my opinion, and I told him that I thought he should terminate the campaign. And I assume he discussed it with a lot of people, like yourself, and Berl, and others. He did so, he withdrew from the campaign, and he felt very badly about it. And in later years had second thoughts about it, seemed to have convinced himself that there had been a real chance, and had he stayed in the race he might have won the nomination. And, well, on a couple of occasions he reproached me about it, in a nice way, you know, if guys like you hadn't told me to get out I might have gone on and won the nomination. I don't think he would have, but it was a subject that weighed heavily on him for a long time afterward, a long time afterward.

DN: Thank you, George, we've run out of time, and we'll pick this up later.

GM: All right, I'll try to schedule another day, Don, maybe when I come up

End of Interview