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## Muskie, Martha oral history interview

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## **Interview with Martha Muskie by Don Nicoll**

*Summary Sheet and Transcript*

### **Interviewee**

Muskie, Martha

### **Interviewer**

Nicoll, Don

### **Date**

December 4, 2000

### **Place**

Bethesda, Maryland

### **ID Number**

MOH 250

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### **Biographical Note**

Martha Muskie was born December 17, 1958 while the Muskies were living in the Blaine House. She graduated from high school in 1976 and attended the University of Maine. She graduated in 1980, the same year her father was selected as Secretary of State. She completed her master's degree in social work, and worked for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society in Washington, D.C. Martha passed away from lupus at the age of 47 on January 2, 2006.

### **Scope and Content Note**

Interview includes discussions of: 1968 vice presidential campaign; China Lake, Maine; 1968 National Democratic Convention in Chicago; the Secret Service; trip to Virgin Islands with Humphreys and meeting Nixon; 1972 campaign; Muskie's environmental issues that interested her; Bob Monks; Secretary of State years; harassment by Iranian college students; Muskie's later career; and Martha's relationship with her father.

### **Indexed Names**

Agnew, Spiro

Allen, Ellen (Muskie)  
Cory, Gayle  
Hoffmann, Joanne Amnott  
Humphrey, Hubert H. (Hubert Horatio), 1911-1978  
Monks, Bob  
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996  
Muskie, Melinda  
Muskie, Ned  
Muskie, Stephen O.  
Nixon, Richard M. (Richard Milhous), 1913-1994  
Reagan, Ronald  
Shore, Dinah

## **Transcript**

**Don Nicoll:** It is Monday, the 4th of December, the year 2000. We are at 5217 West Bard Avenue in Bethesda at the home of Jane and Martha Muskie, and Don Nicoll is interviewing Martha Muskie. Martha, would you give us your full name and your place and date of birth?

**Martha Muskie:** Okay, Martha Muskie, and I, my birthday is December 17th, 1958. I think I was born in Waterville, but it may have been Augusta, I was born from the Blaine House and I don't know, I think it was Waterville.

**DN:** A true state of Mainer.

**MM:** Right, right.

**DN:** Except that your father would have said you're a maniac because you left there.

**MM:** Right. No, he always said that you are a Mainer if you are from Maine and you stayed in Maine, you are a Mainiac if you were from Maine but you left Maine, but we didn't have a choice, so I'm a Mainer.

**DN:** You're a Mainer. Now, you were born just before your parents moved to Washington, and so you were growing up here. Do you have any early memories of the family and politics?

**MM:** And politics?

**DN:** Or your dad in the Senate?

**MM:** I think my earliest, well the way that I remember things growing up was kind of by elections. I remember things, I don't remember like, I think most people probably remember things like, well when I was seven years old I remember this, or when I was eight. And I remember them more kind of like during this election or this election.

**DN:** What's the earliest election you remember?

**MM:** The first one I really remember I think is the '68 vice presidential one. I think the things that I remember before that were more family things. And not even a whole lot before then, although I was ten then and I should remember more, but I don't. I remember more family kinds of things. I remember going to China Lake when I was younger, and I think China Lake was what I remember most as younger, so the first election that I remember was in '68.

**DN:** Let's talk a little bit about remembering China Lake. Was that an important event every summer for you and the family?

**MM:** Oh, it was a, we always looked forward to it because that was the end of school when we'd go up there. I don't really remember going up there, and I don't really remember coming back, but I do remember what it was like living there and I remember more kind of sensory kind of things. Like, my bedroom was right above the kitchen and there was, I must have been very young at this time because I was in a crib, and my crib was in a bedroom right next to a wall that had some kind of window in the wall into my parents' bedroom. So I can remember standing up in my crib and looking through the window; it wasn't like a glass window, it was like a hole in the wall, to find my parents. And then the other thing at that age was that my room also had, my bedroom also had some kind of grate or something in the floor so that I could see the light in the kitchen which was below my bedroom. And I remember smelling bacon, very clearly I remember that, my mom cooking and smelling bacon. I remember hearing my mom and Steve doing the dishes after dinner, so I must have been pretty young. Because, well I was still in a crib because I remember looking down through my crib and through the grate. And so I must have been put to bed early as they were doing dishes. So I remember hearing them talking and stuff while they were doing dishes.

And then I remember as I got a little older at China Lake just, I remember we used to put on little shows in the boat house. And the back of the boat house was open and it was right above the lake, so if you looked down there was always a family of ducks down there, every summer. And I assume it's not the same family because there were always babies, but I remember them when I was little. I remember we had a well that we pumped water out of and there was always bee hives there and, so I remember the bees. I remember swimming in the lake. And the big thing about my dad that I remember real clearly, and I remember it over and over and over every year, was we used to take the motor boat out to an island in the middle of China Lake. And my dad would cook over a campfire out there and he made, I don't remember everything he made, but I think it was hot dogs and, grilled onions I remember very clearly. He made a lot of grilled onions, and he made this salad that, we've all tried making it ever since and I can't even explain it but we all loved it. And, but that was like out special thing, and we went out to this island quite a few times in the summer. I think that's mostly, I remember China Lake, I was a real tomboy when I was little and I must have been pretty little, but I wouldn't wear shirts, I'd just wear shorts to play outside in. So I remember running around without a shirt on. I remember picking blueberries, we had all kinds of blueberry bushes. So I remember kind of, not specific details, I mean not specific things that happened, but just kind of things that happened over and over and over every summer, so. I loved China Lake.

**DN:** And as you've said, that was an important part of your family life.

**MM:** Oh, a big part of our family life. I think we would still probably be there except for it was so far from the airport for my dad to come. And he'd come up on weekends and it was, I think at that point there may not have even been an airport in Portland so I think he had to fly in to Boston and drive up to China Lake. So I think that's why we moved to Kennebunk because it was close to Boston.

**DN:** And you say that the first election you remember is 1968, the vice presidential campaign.

**MM:** Right.

**DN:** What do you recall from that experience?

**MM:** Well, I remember we went up to Kennebunk for the summer. And I think the, I don't know when the convention was but I didn't even realize, or I don't remember realizing, that there was a presidential election going on and stuff, I don't remember any of that. But I know that when, they wanted, Humphrey wanted my dad to come out to the convention in Chicago and all the riots were going on then, and so none of us could come, none of the kids, or none of the younger kids. I don't know if Steve and Ellen went, I don't think so but I don't, I don't know. But we didn't go, the three younger kids anyway, and, but I didn't realize there were riots going on or anything, I just knew we couldn't go. So I do remember my parents leaving for that, and then when they came back -

**DN:** Who stayed with you, by the way?

**MM:** I think it was Claudette. Maybe not. I'm not sure actually, I'm not sure.

**DN:** But someone stayed.

**MM:** Someone stayed with us. Down in, here in Washington when my parents would be gone we had Claudette for a long time. Did you know Claudette?

**DN:** Uh-huh.

**MM:** Okay. But also Gayle and Joanne would stay with us, too. But that summer I'm not real sure, and I'm not real sure at other times in Maine. I don't think, I wouldn't think that Gayle or Joanne would stay with us up there, so probably Claudette. Maybe my grandmother, my mother's mother. I'm not sure which year she died, but she may have stayed with us. I'm not sure.

**DN:** And your folks went off and then they came back.

**MM:** They went off and then they came back, and when they came back we had Secret Service and, so that was the first time we had had Secret Service. And I just remember them, I remember mostly the Secret Service more than anything. They were in the garage, they stayed in the garage

and they were on, we lived at the end of a lane kind of and would ride our bikes down to the beach or down to our lessons. We took swimming and tennis and all those kinds of lessons, and come back and the Secret Service would be on the lane. So mostly I remember that, I remember trying to sneak up to the back of the house to see if I could get by the Secret Service.

**DN:** Did you ever succeed?

**MM:** Yeah, I did, I did, I did down here, too.

**DN:** Were they fun to be with, or were they rather formidable?

**MM:** They were fun to be with. I think that's when I started, I was really afraid of the dark and making sure all the doors in the house were locked and the windows were locked, and my parents had to check them five times a night. And I was really, I started being afraid of everything and I think it's because, I hope they don't still do this now, but at that point, and the Secret Service would be like in our back yard. And they'd have, I thought of them as machine guns but they were some kind of tall gun, and they would lean them up against the trees as they were, you know, standing there watching us play or whatever. And I think just realizing that they had, we had to be protected by guns or something is what started getting me afraid of things. So I think it was in '68 that I started getting nervous about that kind of stuff. But, so the Secret Service had a, they were nice on the one hand, on the other hand I didn't really understand why they had to be there.

**DN:** And through that campaign did you watch any of the events? For example, did you watch your dad giving his acceptance speech at the convention?

**MM:** I know we did. I don't remember it.

**DN:** You don't remember it. And were there, did you go to Maine at the end of the campaign for election night?

**MM:** Yeah, we did, but I don't remember where we went. I remember walking down the street in Kennebunk and it was snowy, and it was right around election day. But I don't think we stayed at our house in Kennebunk for election night, I think we went somewhere else, I think we were at a hotel or something.

**DN:** Your memory's right.

**MM:** Okay.

**DN:** You were staying in Waterville.

**MM:** Okay, that's what I would have gathered.

**DN:** And after that election were you aware of the developments leading up to 1972 when your father sought the nomination for president?

**MM:** It seemed to all meld together. He, I do remember after the '68 election, they lost. And I remember going to the Virgin Islands with the Humphreys and we went down on the vice president's plane. And we stopped in Miami and at the airport, I guess to congratulate President Nixon and Agnew. And I remember standing in, Ned and I were standing in back of my father, Humphrey must have been there but, obviously, it was his plane, I don't remember him being there. My father and Nixon and Agnew and President Nixon had his hands behind his back and I was right behind him and his hands were all find of-. He was very nervous, you could tell, he was kind of twisting his hands around and, I don't know what he was doing, but he looked very nervous.

And then we left there to fly to the Virgin Islands and I just remember, I remember the plane ride very clearly because we, almost the entire time we had a pillow fight with Vice President Humphrey, Ned and I did. And, he liked playing with us, we were little so we played the whole time. Then I remember a lot about being in the Virgin Islands, it was a lot of fun.

And then after that it seemed to change in that my dad was more involved in running for president, and that seemed to go on for a long time, a number of years. Well, it did. And so, I don't, like nowadays as an adult I'm, you know, you're very aware of when the, you know, the candidates announce that they're going to run and when the primaries start and all that. And I wasn't as aware back then like when the primaries started, you know, what the difference was before and after. It seemed like my father was running the whole time. I do remember at one point in that period he gave the Democratic response to the State of the Union, and I remember that and I remember watching that. And I remember we were on the, what was her name, Dinah Shore Show, at some time in that period, and I remember that. And I don't, I remember being on her show but more specifically I remember that she was filmed on the stage studio next to The Partridge Family, and I loved The Partridge Family, so that's what was exciting about that. And, I just remember doing a lot of kind of special things, going to Disneyland and Disney World and traveling. It must have been, I assume it was after the primaries started that my dad had a plane, but maybe he had it before. But I remember he used to take turns letting each of us kids travel with him. And he was going down for a lobster bake in Florida just for the dinner and then coming back, and told me I could bring my friend. So my friend and I flew down with my dad and didn't, didn't even really go to the dinner, my dad did but we found out that the Baltimore Or-, no, Baltimore, the football team that was -

**DN:** Colts.

**MM:** Colts, were staying at the same hotel so we sat in the front lobby trying to get autographs, totally deserted my father but that's okay. I think he probably expected it. So that was in that time period. And we got, and I remember spending, flying, I think it was Milwaukee or somewhere and we all had Easter out there in a hotel. And my parents set up a Easter egg hunt for us on the hotel, we had like the whole hotel floor or something. So it's not really the politics I remember, it's more the kind of kid's view of it.

**DN:** Sure, and you were thirteen at the time of the '72 campaign.

**MM:** Right. Well, and some of that stuff happened between '70 and '72, so.

**DN:** But it was, from your point of view it was one campaign starting in '68 and continuing.

**MM:** Right, it definitely was.

**DN:** And after that campaign your dad ran for reelection in, it would have been 1976, but that was for the Senate. Does that election stand out at all, or -?

**MM:** It does because that fall, I graduated from high school in the spring of '76 and then started at Orono in the fall. And so whenever, a lot of times when my, whenever my dad was up around the Bangor area I would go with him to whatever. I went to more baked bean suppers that fall. I was also majoring in political science at that point and so a lot of my classes we just studied about my dad, so I remember it just because it was my first semester in college.

**DN:** What was it like being in class where they were essentially talking about your father and his campaigns and his work as a senator and as governor?

**MM:** It was interesting but it was kind of boring, too. I knew a lot of it and, I don't know, it's hard thinking of your father in those terms when you think of him as your father, you know. But it was interesting, too. And I liked it that I would be able to go with him to different things and hear him speak, because that was the first time I really understood more kind of what he stood for politically, you know, the issues and things he stood for.

**DN:** Do you remember any specific issues from that period that really impressed you? And positions he was taking?

**MM:** I remember more, having more of a focus like on the, or an interest in his environmental issues. I don't think I had really understood before then that he had sponsored the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Bill. And I think at that point they were starting to, and maybe I'm wrong on the dates, but wanting to clean up the Androscoggin and, or they were, they had started a few years ago really cleaning up the big rivers in Maine and he really wanted to continue that I think. And so I remember a lot of, him talking a lot about the environment, which interested me.

**DN:** And -

**MM:** I also remember he was running against Bob Monk.

**DN:** Now what calls that to mind particularly?

**MM:** Well two things, Bob Monks' son asked me out, so, which, and I didn't go. And also I remember in the summer driving around Kennebunk with my friends and seeing all the Bob Monks signs around town. And, and we'd go around and count them and all that, so that's the only reason I remember it.

**DN:** Did the number of Bob Monks signs bother you in Kennebunk?



**MM:** Hm-hmm, they did.

**DN:** Did you talk to your dad about that?

**MM:** I don't remember. I don't think so.

**DN:** Did he ever discuss the campaign with you?

**MM:** I think only in the fall when we were traveling, when we were together, just, but not at home when everybody was there.

**DN:** And did you have an interest in the campaign, talking about '76, comparable to or different from your sisters and brother, and brothers? I guess, I'm not sure how much Ned was focusing on the campaign at that time.

**MM:** Yeah, I'm not sure. I don't, I don't know how they were. I didn't see my brothers and sisters much that year because Melinda was in Portland area in school, and Ned was still in high school down here, and Steve and Ellen were both married, so.

**DN:** So you didn't see much of them during that campaign.

**MM:** No.

**DN:** The next major change in your dad's career came in 1980 when he was appointed secretary of state. Between the election in '76 and 1980, were you focusing at all on politics or on his work in the Senate?

**MM:** No.

**DN:** How did the, how did you hear the news of his selection as secretary of state?

**MM:** He called me at school and asked if it was all right. And, I don't remember the whole conversation but both my parents were on the phone and they asked if it was okay and told me what would be involved, and he didn't want to accept it without everybody agreeing. Which is what he had always done with any election or anything, is asked us if it was all right with us.

**DN:** Did he ask you in '76 if it was okay if he ran for reelection?

**MM:** Yeah. Because he, I think then, because of all the stuff around Watergate in '72, I think he thought it would come up as an issue in '76, or some of the things from Watergate might come up as an issue in '76 and so I do remember him talking to us about that, so it was fine. But with this, but, secretary of state, yeah, he did call at school and he was made secretary of state. That's the year I graduated from college, and he was made secretary of state like right before my graduation and they already had a speaker for commencement but they wanted my father to speak, so they made some kind of special, he was like a special speaker, he wasn't the

commencement speaker. And so I remember them coming with the State Department security. And see I hadn't been home in the meantime so I hadn't seen them with the State Department security, or what it was like traveling with my dad. So it was kind of weird when they showed up at my dorm and stuff. And then he spoke at my graduation which was kind of neat because it would have been the first time in my life that he never spoke at my graduation if he hadn't, so, he spoke at every graduation I ever had, kindergarten on, so. So that was, the timing of secretary of state was right around then.

**DN:** Do you remember particularly what his theme was at that time?

**MM:** I don't at all.

**DN:** The fact that he was there was important.

**MM:** Yeah, it was really nice.

**DN:** Did the State Department security take you back to the 1968, '72 period and the Secret Service?

**MM:** It did, it reminded me of a lot of that. And then, and especially because I think I stayed at school. I started graduate school at Orono, and I think I stayed there that summer or part of the summer anyway to take some classes, and started getting some kind of threats or something against me, and so I had State Department security at Orono. And then when I went back in the fall for graduate school I, the security were with me then, too. So I had State Department security at school the whole time my dad was in the State Department. And even a little longer, I had them, President Reagan I think, they still were having problems, it was during the Iranian hostage crisis, I didn't understand the whole thing. I do remember going to the FBI office in Bangor and having to look through pictures. But anyway, they found that some Iranian students or someone had been threatening me. But they hadn't at the time that, after the inauguration when Reagan became president and my dad was no longer secretary of state, so they wanted me to still have security until they straightened it out so I had them for like a month longer or whatever. So I had security at school the whole time. But if I was home, I was home part of the summer and I, we had them at the house but I didn't -

**DN:** You didn't have special security.

**MM:** No, I was glad.

**DN:** The, and after that of course your father left government service but continued in private practice of law and a lot of public service activities.

**MM:** Right.

**DN:** Did you follow those activities closely, or were you absorbed in your own activities and interests?

**MM:** Well, somewhat, you know, I knew what he was doing. Especially when he would travel, but more the kind of public things he did, like when he'd go to Vietnam to work on opening the trade over there and those kinds of things, I was real aware of, or when he would travel other places. And so when he worked on the World Health Organization and the Nestle baby formula thing, I was aware of that. So those were more the kind of things I was aware of.

**DN:** Over those years did you ever have disagreements with your father on public policy questions?

**MM:** That wasn't a good thing to do. We did. And especially when I went back to graduate school in the later eighties and got a master's in social work, and so I was taking a lot of policy classes then and so we would disagree on things like, you know, I'd bring them up or we'd see something on the news. I was living here when I was in graduate school, and something would come up on the news and we'd disagree about it. But he was very good at arguing politics, so, and I wasn't as good so he usually won, but -

**DN:** Did you find those kinds of debates or discussions difficult in retrospect?

**MM:** Oh no, I think they're funny in retrospect. I, they were difficult at the time. But I remember one time Ned had one of his friends over here for dinner with my parents, I don't remember who else was here but I know Ned and his friend were. And I'm sure this young guy, it was the first time he had met my father and I'm sure he thought, well, you know, I'm going to have dinner with the secretary of state, and so what can I discuss with him? And so we're sitting at dinner, and we all know my dad, you know, and we know that he's really good at arguing politics. And so this young guy says to my father something like, so Secretary Muskie, don't you think you made a big mistake with the Iranian hostage crisis, or something like that. And we like looked at each other, and it was the funniest thing. But we thought it was funny, and then my dad and this guy had quite a conversation, but, we thought it was funny. And looking back, it was really funny.

**DN:** And as you look back at your father's career, what impresses you most about what he did and the kind of public servant he was?

**MM:** I think just his integrity and how much he cared for the people in the country, and more specifically for the people in Maine. He just always really, really cared about Maine and he didn't think of it as a, in the grander terms like as a state, he, I think he really thought of it in terms of individual people. And just from the beginning of his life all the way to the end when he was working on the law project in Maine, he just always really cared about people. And I had a lot, I don't know, I don't know anyone else with as much integrity as he had.

**DN:** Now as you think about your dad who had enormous demands on him and his public life, how did he, from your point of view as a child growing up, deal with the conflicting demands of family for his time and attention? Did you find him ready to pay attention to you and to your siblings?

**MM:** Yeah, he was always ready to pay attention to us, and he'd take us down to the Senate,

and we brought our Girl Scout troops down there and stuff. There was a period of time, that time period when we were talking about, from '68 to '72 especially, when my parents weren't home very much, like every Sunday. But they called every day and it just, you know, we just adjusted to it, just got used to it. But he, any time we needed him he always, there wasn't, you know, I think he would have dropped anything. And that period of time when I was sick in the early eighties he was up there the first day and came up to Bangor, you know, he wrote me letters. So even though he didn't really at certain periods didn't have the time, or he had a lot of time restraints on him, constraints, whatever the word is, on him, he always became available if you needed him to be.

**DN:** Anything else you'd like to observe about your dad and his life?

**MM:** I think about him every day. So he had a big impact on me. He's in my mind all the time but, not that I can think of. Maybe next time you come back to talk to my mom, I'll think of something.

**DN:** Thank you very much.

**MM:** You're welcome.

*End of Interview*