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Nelson, Gaylord oral history interview

Don Nicoll

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Interview with Gaylord Nelson by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Nelson, Gaylord, 1916-2005

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

December 5, 2000

Place

Washington, DC

ID Number

MOH 252

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Biographical Note

Gaylord Anton Nelson was born in Clear Lake, Polk County, Wisconsin on June 4, 1916. He served in the Army in World War II, then went to Madison, Wisconsin to practice law. After serving two terms as governor in Wisconsin (1959-1962), he was elected as a Democrat to the U.S. Senate in 1963 and served in that capacity until January 1981. He served on the Interior Committee, the Public Works Committee, the Small Businesses Committee, the Finance Committee, and the Labor Subcommittee. There he became interested in issues concerning the environment, and is credited with founding Earth Day in 1970. He opposed the Vietnam War. He later worked with the National Wilderness Society in Washington, D.C. He passed away July 3, 2005.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Public Works Committee; environmental legislation; Vietnam; 1968 vice presidential campaign; 1972 presidential campaign; and Earth Day.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Tuesday, the 5th of December, the year 2000. We are in the offices of the National Wilderness Society interviewing Senator Gaylord Nelson. Don Nicoll is the interviewer. Senator Nelson, would you give us your full name and spell it for us, and give us your place and date of birth.

Sen. Nelson: My name is Gaylord A. Nelson, G-A-Y-L-O-R-D, N-E-L-S-O-N. I was born in 1916 in Clear Lake, Wisconsin, which is in northwest Wisconsin about fifty-five miles from Minneapolis-Saint Paul, on the Wisconsin of the St. Croix River.

DN: And you were elected to the U.S. Senate in 1962?

GN: Yes.

DN: And prior to that time what was your public service?

GN: Well, I was, served two terms as governor, that was four years, they were two year terms then. And prior to that, ten years in the state senate of the Wisconsin legislature.

DN: You and Governor, uh, Senator Muskie had overlapped for two years as governor, had you known each other during that period?

GN: Did we overlap two years?

DN: Yes, if you were governor from 19-, oh, I=m wrong, you were governor from >59 to >63, and he had finished his term by the time you became governor. So your first acquaintance with him was in 1963 when you came to Washington?

GN: No, no, my first acquaintance with him was some time prior to my election as governor, probably more like. I was elected to the state senate in 1948 and I think I had already met him. But at least during the ten year period that I was in the state legislature, he came out to Wisconsin at our request, invitation, maybe three, four times. And I was state chairman of the Democratic party for a period 1949, >50, in there. So he came out three or four times while I was in the legislature. We didn=t have anybody in any prominent position until, that is we had Congressman Zablocki and that, but no statewide office, until Bill Proxmire was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1957 in a special election after Joe McCarthy had died. I was elected governor in 1958. We had had Attorney General [Thomas E.] Tom Fairchild as attorney general of the state, and we did have Clem Zablocki as a congressman. I=ve forgotten what others, but -

DN: So you were really the first major statewide office holder beyond the attorney general.

GN: Well, Bill Proxmire.

DN: Bill Proxmire, he was a year ahead of you.

GN: Yeah, he was elected in a special election in >57, I was elected in the election of >58.

DN: When you came to the U.S. Senate you went on the Interior Committee and the Public Works Committee, and was there a third committee at that time?

GN: I went on the Small Business Committee. I think at that time you could have two major committees and one minor, and I went on the Small Business Committee and became chairman in a few years.

DN: And on the Public Works Committee you were assigned to the subcommittee on air and

water pollution.

GN: Yes.

DN: And that was the first year that that subcommittee was in operation.

GN: Was it? Well, and I, I stayed on that, that was the Public Works Committee, wasn't it?

DN: Hm-hmm.

GN: I stayed on the Public Works Committee for some time and became chairman of the subcommittee on, well I've forgotten the exact title. It handled poverty, all poverty legislation and -

DN: This was the Area Redevelopment Program, or -?

GN: No, we had in that committee manpower legislation and migratory labor, that sort of thing. So, but I left Ed Muskie's committee to, I don't remember which committee I went to. I was on Interior, Public Works, Small Business, then I went to the Finance Committee from the Interior Committee.

DN: Did you go to the Labor Committee?

GN: I was chairman of the Labor subcommittee of the Public Works Committee.

DN: Ah-hah, I see. Now, had you had a strong interest in environmental legislation before you went on the air and water subcommittee and the Interior Committee?

GN: Yeah, that's why I chose it. I had done a lot of work in the environmental field when I was governor, and prior to that in the state senate.

DN: Had you represented the Clear Lake district in the senate?

GN: No, I got out of the Army and then went to Madison to practice law there. We didn't even have a lawyer in my home town of Clear Lake, and I didn't want to start a practice up there anyway. And I wanted to be in the capitol city, so I went down to Madison.

DN: And what were the major issues in, major environmental issues that you had to tackle as governor?

GN: Well, the environment wasn't a big issue nationally, oh, really at the state level then. But I had a strong interest in the environmental issue prior to, well, I had an interest in it prior to getting elected to, my election to the state senate which occurred in 1948. And I spent a lot of time on the issue during the four years I was governor, finally getting past an outdoor, the ORAP program. I got a one cent cigarette tax earmarked for acquisition of public lands, the goal being a million acres on a ten year period of acquisition. We finally, I finally got the million acres

long after I left but that was the program, it was called the Outdoor Recreation Acquisition Program.

DN: So your interest in environmental protection extended beyond pollution questions to public land acquisition and protection of lands.

GN: Yeah.

DN: When you joined the subcommittee on air and water pollution, do you recall what the major issues facing that subcommittee were?

GN: Well, Ed was already I think, was that, what year was that subcommittee created?

DN: It was created in early 1963 when Senator McNamara became chairman of the full Public Works Committee. Senator Chavez, who had been the chair of the committee, died toward the end of the previous year and Senator McNamara took over.

GN: How long did he have it?

DN: He had it for about four years, until 1965 I believe it was.

GN: Then what=s his name from West Virginia.

DN: Senator [Jennings] Randolph.

GN: Randolph. What was your question?

DN: And the question was, what were the major issues confronting that subcommittee when you joined it?

GN: Well, I think air and water. Ed had a strong interest in the field, and he immediately started some extensive hearings on air and water pollution, finally got a bill drafted, finally got it passed, and it was a good piece of legislation. I don=t remember that, well the subcommittee was the subcommittee on air and water, wasn=t it?

DN: Hm-hmm.

GN: So it didn=t extend beyond that, although that was a big field, air pollution, water pollution. It involved sewage treatment plants, air pollution from all sources. And I do remember, I=d have to look it up, I do remember how irritated I was with Ralph Nader. I think he attacked Ed for not doing, not getting a better bill. And I remember at the time, you know, he got the best bill he could get and without Ed we wouldn=t have got a bill at all. So you had a guy who wasn=t involved, destroying the good with his, the perfect so to speak, which was typical of Ralph Nader anyway. Although I, he did good work on consumer stuff, but if anybody, if something wasn=t perfect he didn=t know the political system and so he attacked, I remember he attacked Ed Muskie. You=ve seen that, haven=t you?

DN: Hm-hmm.

GN: Yeah.

DN: Now, in that subcommittee there were Republicans as well as Democrats of course. Do you remember the working relationship between the members of that committee? What was the mood in the committee as it went through that -?

GN: Who was on the committee?

DN: Well, Senator Caleb Boggs was the ranking Republican member, I forget the senior

GN: Caleb Boggs was a rational Republican, I mean he was a pleasant fellow. He was conservative, but he wasn't a devoted right winger. He was easy to get along with. Who else was on the subcommittee?

DN: Well, Senator George Murphy was on that committee at that point.

GN: Well, he was always doing a tap dance with his mouth. I, you know, I served with him for some time and he wasn't much, but who else?

DN: Senator [Daniel] Inouye, and -

GN: Well, Inouye, he was a Democrat.

DN: The other Republican that I recall is Senator Howard Baker, and -

GN: Well, Howard Baker was, I don't remember specifically what any of them did, but uh, I watched Baker for enough period of years to know that he was a reasonable person, not a knee-jerk right winger. But I don't remember anything, any positions he took. Did he, how did the committee vote on reporting out the legislation?

DN: Virtually every bill as I recall was an unanimous vote in the end, for the subcommittee, at the subcommittee level. Senator [John Sherman] Cooper was another member of the committee in the early days.

GN: And he was also a good, sensible legislator.

DN: You stayed with that subcommittee a couple of years you said, and then -

GN: I don't remember when I left, and I think I left, I went to Finance, but I left Interior to go to Finance. Because Russell Long wanted help, that is to say the conservatives on the Finance Committee, he didn't have enough support to do what he wanted to do. And if a chairman loses control of his committee he becomes not only frustrated but less effective. And Russell wanted some support, so I went in, went on. And then when Mondale came he also went on, and both of

us went on to, for one reason, one of the reasons was that it was a very important committee, covered all taxes, Social Security and stuff like that. But Russell wanted us on. And the fascinating part of it was that I got on by one vote.

You see, the Steering Committee, you've made your application, you wrote a letter telling the majority leadership rather what committees you wanted to be on. And I had been there a number of years and the senator from, I think it was from Texas, had been there eight months. I only beat him by one vote to get on the committee because I would be, they knew I would be critical of the oil depletion allowance and so forth. The one vote, however, came from a southerner who was pro-oil, and I won by one vote, and that was Jim Eastland. And I had gone to, it was recommended that I talk to Jim. And I said, "Hell, he's not going to support me." And I think it was, I've forgotten whether it was Russell or not. But I did talk to him, he did cast his vote for me, I got on, although I didn't agree with him on any of the major issues. When Mondale came, he wanted to be on Finance, and Stan [Joseph] Kimmitt, the -

DN: Was he secretary of the Senate at the time?

GN: No, he became secretary. He was secretary of the majority. Then he became later secretary of the Senate. He and I, well, we were in his office, we, Mondale and Stan Kimmitt and I, I don't remember, and we'd gone up there to have a drink because there was nothing going on and we were going to vote at seven o'clock. And that's the, that was the hour set for the vote on whatever the legislation was. And we went up to visit and have a scotch, and Stan had said to Mondale, "You better ask Jim." And then, not in front of us, but he went to Jim, Jim said, "All right," and he won by one vote, too. It would, might be worthwhile if that's of any consequence to check with Stan, but I think we both went on by one vote and it was Jim Eastland's vote.

DN: What do you think were the reasons for him voting for the two of you who disagreed with him on a number of issues?

GN: Well, we had gotten acquainted with him a bit and a group of us would go on up to Stan's office and, when they were voting late, and sit around and have a scotch and bat the breeze, and so we got acquainted with Jim. And, so he liked both of us and gave us his vote. So there's no explaining some things. People, if you told people that, who knew anything about it, they'd say, "Well, my God, Jim will never vote to put you on a committee." I beat Lloyd Bentsen, he was from Texas and an oil guy, and so was Jim Eastland an old oil guy. And I beat him by one vote, because I knew Jim and we were pleasant to each other and we got acquainted. And so, you know, he con--.

DN: This really brings up the question of the way the Senate worked in the 1960s when you came there, and we hear a number of comments these days about how the Senate has changed. But as you look back on it, what strikes you about relationships within the parties and across party lines in the 1960s?

GN: Well, they were always very civil. And, you know, that changed there. Well when I came, the right winger of the Senate was Barry Goldwater. Well Barry was a, you know, if he

were there with this crowd he wouldn't be getting along with them, because he isn't as ideological as many of these people are. So Barry was the right wing, but I was, had a very friendly relationship with Barry. And with [Everett] Dirksen. When I wanted to know, I could go to Dirksen, and it's running, we're going to run until eight o'clock or so. And I'd go to Dirksen and walk up to him and say, ASenator, I'd like to get the hell out of here. Is there going to be a vote? Well, sometimes he didn't know, but whenever he had a member or two who had an engagement, maybe a fund raiser that evening some place, or couldn't be there and he knew who wanted to be there to vote, he'd say, AGaylord, no votes tonight. You couldn't get that from the majority leader, Mike Mansfield, because he didn't know, you know. If Dirksen wanted a vote, well I suppose he could have gone to Dirksen.

But I went to him several times and I'd get out of there at five-thirty and drive on home and mix myself a scotch and pick up the phone and call Tom Eagleton or somebody and say, AWell, I'm here, or George McGovern or what have you, just to irritate somebody and say, AWell I'm home having a scotch, there's going to be no votes tonight. And there wouldn't be, and they didn't know how I knew. But there was a, you know, a friendly relationship.

When Stan Kimmitt became secretary of the Senate and a group gathered in his office to have a scotch or something, waiting for a vote, aw hell, Republicans would come in, it would be mostly Democrats, but Republicans were welcome and everybody was collegial. There wasn't, well I suppose there were people who didn't like each other. You get a hundred [senators], and there are some Republicans who didn't like some other Republicans and some who didn't like Democrats or vice versa, but it was always very civil. Everybody tells me now that it's not fun any more. You got these right wingers who have found the answer. It's, you know, if you have some religious faith in which they've found the answer to everything and it's the answer, it's what the Lord wants. And if you're against the Lord they aren't going to have much to do with you. Well, they've found the answer, lots of these people and they're very

I remember a couple years ago [David] Dave Obey from my state told me about two freshmen had come in, one Republican and one Democrat. And they were, became acquainted and liked each other, and they were seen in the congressmen's dining room laughing and joking. And it was brought up at the next caucus. Well, if anybody brought that up in the caucus while I was there they would, somebody would get up and say, AYou horse's ass, get out of here. I can associate with whomever I please. But he was, one of the Republicans was criticized. So I think it's a very destructive thing, because you have to have cooperation to make the system work, and when you don't have cooperation the system doesn't work very well. And I would hope something would happen to cure that situation. But it never existed when I was there.

DN: When you look back to the work on the pollution legislation and the work of that subcommittee, what are your impressions of Ed Muskie's style in dealing with disagreements in that environment?

GN: Well, he, in the first place he was very intelligent, he was a good student, he knew the issues probably better than anybody else on the subcommittee. He was very, and everybody respects knowledge, if somebody's around who's an expert on something everybody listens and is, may not vote with it because they got political reasons, but everybody. . . . Ed was a good

leader and he knew the issues and he was cheerful. He had a short temper all right, and that showed once in a while, but he was well respected and well liked.

DN: As you moved toward the end of the 1960s and up to 1970 the, one of the great marks of the period was Earth Day. And you're regarded as the father of Earth Day. How did that come about?

GN: Well, I'll give you the, I'll hand you the history of it before you leave. Well, I had been concerned for many years that the issue of the environment was not on the national agenda. Now if you look at the agenda, you've always got, you know, you've got the military problems, the foreign relations problems, you've always got Social Security, you've always got education on the agenda. There are a number of things that are always on the agenda. The economy is always on the agenda. Every time we meet there's issues on the agenda that are permanently on the agenda.

In my view, the most important issue of all, the state of the environment, was not on the agenda. It wasn't, it was more important in my view than Social Security, any issue that you can think of, it still wasn't on the environment [*sic*], on the agenda. So, and I think the case is strong, you know, the economy's always the agenda. The economy is wholly dependent upon the status of the resource base. You know, in the long poll, poor countries that have no resources are, remain poor and, unless you can import it all like the Netherlands and stuff like that.

So I finally got the idea that if I could get President Kennedy to a national tour on the environment, it had never been done, and that that would focus the whole attention of the country on the issue. So I flew to Washington, talked to Bobby Kennedy for an hour and a half or two, he liked the idea. I brought along a scrapbook that was three feet, thirty-six inches long, based, showing the news clips I got in getting passed the one cent cigarette tax for acquisition, environmental. And it was, when it passed it was a front page article, headlines, in almost every single paper including the weekly papers. And he liked the idea, the president, when he brought it up, the president liked the idea, and then the president decided to do, he agreed to do the national tour. He wrote me a letter asking me for ideas and - (*telephone interruption*). Well then, the president liked the idea, jotted me a note. And I wrote him a five page letter on what I think he, suggestions of things I thought he ought to cover.

Then he did a five day tour. I've forgotten how many states now, eight or ten or so. We flew, so Hubert Humphrey, Gene McCarthy and I and Joe Clark of Pennsylvania, left with the president and, to fly on the first leg of his trip, stopped in Pennsylvania to dedicate or something Gifford Pinchot's home, then to land in Duluth, fly across to Ashland where they had ten thousand people at the airport, and then back to Duluth. And then the next day or that night, no, the next day I guess, fly west. And he spent several days, covered a number of states.

However, two problems. It didn't achieve what I was, you know, I had just assumed if the president . . . Well, on the morning we were leaving, supposed to leave at whatever the time was, the leadership had scheduled a vote on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty between the Soviet Union and us, and that was big stuff. And the president was very interested in that, so he held up the plane so that Humphrey and Gene McCarthy and Joe Clark and I could vote on the Test Ban

Treaty, and then we took off. And I remember saying to myself, this is it, now the environmental issue is on the agen-, goes on the agenda. Well, that, the Test Ban Treat was the news.

Most editors, most reporters didn=t know a damn thing about the environment and didn=t care. It wasn=t an issue. So I was mistaken in my assumption. So it didn=t end up forcing the issue onto the national political agenda as I had hoped. Several years went by before I thought of the idea of getting a nationwide demonstration on behalf of the environment big enough, a demonstration big enough, to shake up the political establishment. Well, Earth Day ended up being much bigger than I had hoped for; the estimates by Walter Cronkite were twenty million people, you know, ten thousand colleges and two thousand five hundred communities, and it was a big event. And it did force the issue onto the political agenda and it=s been there ever since.

DN: Did you and Ed Muskie ever talk about the question of getting the environment on the national agenda?

GN: No. He did speak, I think he went to Philadelphia and spoke there on the first Earth Day, but I don=t recall that we talked about it. Maybe a little bit.

DN: And that was about the time that he was getting his campaign organized for the 1972 campaign for president, and it followed his involvement as vice presidential candidate in 1968. Were you at all involved in those two campaigns?

GN: Now, let=s see. He ran in, well he was on what ticket in -

DN: Humphrey-Muskie in 1968, and then he sought the presidential nomination in >72 and was not no --.

GN: That=s the one that McGovern won.

DN: And McGovern won the primary in, won the nomination in >72, yeah.

GN: Yeah, I think I traveled with him once on, in that >7-, let=s see, he was a nominee in >68 and he sought the nomination in >72. Who did he run with in >68?

DN: Hubert Humphrey.

GN: Yeah, I thought, I remember now, I thought Ed Muskie=s fifteen minute appearance on national television was one of the best political speeches I ever viewed. It was a magnificent speech. You remember, did you see it? And I rode with him some place once, I=ve forgotten, probably in Wisconsin. And many people speculate that if it had lasted, you know, another ten days, because it was turning, and that Hubert would have won. Was that your question?

DN: Yeah, I wondered how much involvement you had in those campaigns.

GN: That was >68? Well, I had my own campaign. I was, I had been elected in >62 and I was

up in >68, and we had that lousy convention with all that. And I didn't come back to Washington, I didn't go to Wisconsin until ten days after that convention was over, because I knew that all the questions would be about the disturbances and I figured if I waited ten days they'd be done asking those questions, which is it. I didn't want to, so I wasn't campaigning anywhere else than Wisconsin because it was my first time up for reelection.

DN: That was an ugly campaign for a while and you must have felt you had an even greater battle than a normal second term to face in >68.

GN: Well, we had, you know, we had a situation in which the odds favored the Republicans, and I'm on the ticket. And I won substantially as a matter of fact, but I had voted against every appropriation for the Vietnam war. And by >68 when the politics had turned around on it I got lots of criticisms, you know, in >64, >5, >6, >7 for voting against the appropriations, but by >68 it had turned around pretty well. But still, if you're on a ticket that isn't winning and you're underneath the ticket, you can't, you got to be concerned about it.

DN: How were your relations with the Johnson administration during that period, when you were voting against the appropriations?

GN: He never, as a matter of fact we had a fund raiser at a friend's house and Hubert came over for the fund raiser, and the president intended to come. I never criticized him, I just talked the merits. And then he sent a hundred dollar bill with Hubert, and I always regret, I even thought, well what the hell, I wished he had sent a check, I would have framed it, you know, it wouldn't have cost him anything. But he sent cash with Hubert. I think in Texas they don't deal with checks on political campaigns.

DN: No checks and no balances.

GN: But, no, he was always, never got mad at me. He was mad at Fulbright, he got mad at some other people. But I never mentioned his name, I just argued the merits and he didn't, so he wasn't mad at me.

DN: As you look back on your own time in the Senate, dealing particularly with environmental issues, and look back at Ed Muskie's work in the same general area, what do you see as your respective contributions to environmental protection?

GN: Well, I don't think we, without, I think the air and water pollution legislation was a very important step because without good leadership we wouldn't have had that legislation. I was working on environmental stuff all the time but, you know, the, but most of my stuff he supported and anything, I'm sure that anything he proposed on the environmental field I supported. But you're talking now thirty years ago and my memory span might be thirty minutes. But I worked on lots of projects but, and I didn't, I don't remember, at the time I suppose the one thing I remember is air and water and it was early on in the game and I was goddamn irritated with Nader, you know. It was a major step forward. I don't have a list of the other stuff he was doing.

End of Side A
Side B

DN: This is the second side of the December 5th interview with Senator Gaylord Nelson. As you look at the environmental issues that you were working on in the 1960s and into the 1970s, and you look at the environmental issues today, have they really changed or are we fighting some of the same battles as before?

GN: Oh I, there have been additions. Nobody was talking global warming thirty years ago that I know of, there may have been some scientists. That wasn't on the table. Air and water pollution were on the table immediately because at every locale in the United States, every community almost, had some environmental problem. Either the pond or the lake or the kid=s, everybody would go swimming, the beach was closed, it was polluted. And those were hundreds and hundreds of places in the country. Or trout streams were getting polluted. Or, I remember driving to Washington to the founding convention of the Americans for a Democratic Action, the ADA, drove down with two other people, and this was before the freeways, this would be sometime in the >50s. Well, hell, I=d never driven to Washington, but a hundred miles away you could see Pittsburgh, it was an ugly orange-yellow cloud just for miles and then you knew that was Pittsburgh. So something was happening everywhere that was negative, and so it was an informed and concerned public, and they were concerned but the political establishment wasn't.

DN: Are there any other comments that you=d like to make, Senator Nelson, about your recollections of Senator Muskie and your service with him?

GN: Well, I saw a fair amount of him at his house, and he was at my house, and I would see him at some of the other homes. So, even after I left the Senate and after he did, I would see him socially. We were good friends. As a matter of fact, I had a long debate with him because I was asked by Bob Byrd to handle the ethics committee, an ad hoc ethics committee, to handle the question of political contributions and so forth. And one of the, and by coincidence Dave Obey on the House side was handling that legislation over there. There was a consensus that we had to do something about outside income, all that stuff.

And Ed was strongly opposed that, and there=s a long debate in the, I think it must have gone on for a couple of days, with exchanges back and forth between me and Muskie, which is kind of interesting. I can't recollect it, it was too long ago, but still, he didn't think the, I think this was (*unintelligible word*) his case, he didn't think it was any business if somebody wanted to give a speech and receive an honorarium, and we were abolishing the honoraria. And he led a, and made a, you know, a good argument on the side of not telling anybody what they could make money on their own time. And, and so he was up and straightforward about it, but he never, we passed it.

And he had been a popular speaker and he figured, you know, all the, and there=s some merit to this, all the goddamn reporters and especially the high visibility people on TV making ten times as much as anybody in the Senate, you know, they=re up in the two, three and four hundred thousand bracket, and getting thirty dollars, thirty thousand dollars a speech which no senator got that. And they were doing it on their time and why should we be told by the Senate that we

can't make speeches, or writings, and be paid for it. And the people who are writing about the politics all can do it, why didn't it apply to them also. It was a spirited debate, and probably a good one to look at. I don't remember the dates any more, but.

DN: Now that strong disagreement did not affect your personal relations?

GN: No, no. No, no. We got along socially and saw each other. Well, his wife is the one who asked me to speak at the, his funeral services. So, we weren't, no, he could debate and so, I had an opinion and he had his. And he wasn't one of these people who, neither of us were, you know, we figured, we didn't get nasty with each other, so. But the ideologues up there nowadays don't.

DN: Thank you very much, sir, this has been very helpful.

GN: Well, I hope so.

End of Interview