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Interview with Don Oberdorfer by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Oberdorfer, Don

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

June 19, 2001

Place

Washington, DC

ID Number

MOH 298

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Biographical Note

Don Oberdorfer was born May 28, 1931 in Atlanta, Georgia to Dorothy Bayersdorfer Oberdorfer and Donald Oberdorfer, Sr. He grew up there, attending public elementary and high schools and then Princeton University, graduating in 1952. He was immediately commissioned as a second lieutenant for the Korean War but arrived at the time of the armistice and did not face action. After, he used his Army pay to travel around the world. In 1955 he returned and got his first newspaper job in Charlotte, North Carolina and stayed in journalism until 1993, when he retired from the *Washington Post*.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Oberdorfer family background and education; Charlotte, North Carolina's *Observer*; Oberdorfer's coverage of Vietnam; *Washington Post* and Ben Bradley; Muskie's 1972 campaign; Oberdorfer's article "What Happened to the Muskie Campaign," July 14, 1972 for the *Washington Post*; Oberdorfer's assignment to the Nixon 1972 campaign; Humphrey's 1972 campaign; problems with the Muskie 1972 campaign; Oberdorfer's personal journal/record of his work; Secretary of State Muskie; Muskie and Oberdorfer on "Face the Nation"; the effect of Nixon's "dirty tricks" on Muskie's 1972 campaign; and Senator Mike Mansfield as majority leader and Oberdorfer's biographical work on him.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Tuesday, the 19th of June 2001. We are in the conference room at the Edmund S. Muskie Foundation, and Don Nicoll is interviewing Donald Oberdorfer. Don, would you state your full name and spell your last name, and tell us your date and place of birth.

Don Oberdorfer: My full name is Donald Oberdorfer, although I write under the name of Don Oberdorfer, Donald Oberdorfer being too long for anybody. I was born May 28th, 1931 in Atlanta, Georgia.

DN: And what were the names of your parents?

DO: My father was Donald Oberdorfer, actually I'm a junior but I quit using that years ago. My mother was Dorothy Bayersdorfer was her maiden, Oberdorfer.

DN: And you grew up there?

DO: I grew up in Atlanta. I went to public elementary school, public high school, and then I went to Princeton University and graduated from Princeton in 1952.

DN: And did you go from Princeton directly into journalism?

DO: With a little interlude for the U.S. Army. The Korean War was on, I was commissioned a second lieutenant the day I graduated in the artillery. I went to Korea, but fortunately for me I was on a troop ship on the way to Korea when the armistice was signed. I served eight months with the military there but did not see any battle action in that war. After I got out, I took a trip around the world on the Army's mustering out pay. However I came down with polio in Pakistan and had to come home, took me a few months to get over it. And in 1955 I went off to Charlotte, North Carolina to my first newspaper job and was in journalism from 1955 until I retired from the *Washington Post* in 1993.

DN: Now, had you always from your high school days thought of journalism, or was this something that developed later?

DO: No, it developed in, before my high school days, in the third grade somehow. My best friend told me, I came in off the playground and said, "When I grow up I want to be a newspaper reporter." Why, I don't know. No one in my family had ever done anything remotely like this, but it was in my mind. I was putting out a little neighborhood newspaper while I was still in elementary school, I was the editor of my high school paper, I was editor of the *Daily Princetonian*, my college paper, I knew I was going into journalism and that's what I did.

DN: You say no one in your family had done that. What kind of exposure did you get to public affairs at home?

DO: My mother had been a college educated woman in an era that there weren't too many. And she was interested in the world, what went on in the world. My dad was a business man, an insurance agent, and I wouldn't say he was oblivious to the world, no he wasn't, but that was not his interest, he was focused on his business and his friends and so forth. So my mother was the one who really encouraged my interest in world affairs, if you want to call it that.

DN: And when you started your journalism career, in North Carolina?

DO: Yes, Charlotte.

DN: In Charlotte, were you a general assignment reporter?

DO: Absolutely, I did everything. Three years in Charlotte I covered almost every beat they have, I covered the two state legislatures in North and South Carolina, I covered labor, I covered weather, hurricanes, I covered city hall, I covered the police department, I covered, you name it. They put me through everything, and then they sent me to Washington in 1958 as the

Observer's first full time Washington correspondent, and I have been here ever since.

DN: And were you working for the *Observer* when you started on the assignment in, was it in Vietnam? Or you went to Tokyo?

DO: Well, no, I worked for the *Observer* Washington bureau from 1958 to '61. Then I left and I went to work for *The Saturday Evening Post*, the old *The Saturday Evening Post* magazine, from '61 to '65. In '65 the Knight Newspapers, which owned the *Observer*, K-N-I-G-H-T, came to me and asked me to come back as a sort of general international and national affairs reporter for the entire Knight chain. I say entire, there were about five newspapers. It's about fifty now, Knight-Ritter. And I did that beginning in the summer of '65 as Vietnam was heating up. From '65 to '68 I covered Vietnam, either in Washington covering the various hearings or whatever there were, or going to Saigon, come back, go back to Vietnam, and come back. I did that until the fall of '68.

In the summer of '68 I got a call from Ben Bradlee asking me to go to breakfast and offered me a job on the *Washington Post* and I took it. And my first assignment was covering Richard Nixon's presidential campaign in '68, which I did. I was a political reporter and covered the Nixon White House from '68 until 1972. And in '72 I went to Tokyo as bureau chief for the *Washington Post* in Asia, in northeastern Asia. When I came back in 1975, in early '76, I became one of the two diplomatic correspondents covering the Department of State and U.S. Foreign Policy, and I did that basically until I retired in 1993.

DN: Well the bulk of your, once you went to work for the Knight Newspapers as a chain, the bulk of your reporting with the interlude of '68 on was in international affairs.

DO: Either national or international, either covering national politics or international affairs, but I had a strong interest in international affairs.

DN: Now, you indicated before we started the interview that you first met Ed Muskie in 1965.

DO: That's right. When he, he had come back from the trip headed by Senator Mansfield to Vietnam and other places, and I wanted to do a piece on the trip. I don't remember why I picked out Muskie rather than trying to interview Mansfield, maybe I thought he was more accessible. Whatever the reason was, I remember interviewing him. That's the first time I had met him. And then I didn't see a whole lot of him until '72. I saw him from time to time in the Senate but not anything to remark about. When he started his campaign for president, I remember going up to his place in, is it Kennebunkport?

DN: Kennebunk.

DO: Yeah, Kennebunkport, in the winter. It was horribly cold and he wanted to try to replicate I guess the famous broadcast of 1970, I was one of the few reporters along. They brought in these huge blowers for heat in this summer place. Every place was all boarded up there, and it was kind of a, I don't know what you'd say, but it was a bit of a charade. It looked like he was talking to the nation from his house in Kennebunkport in which nobody was around,

except for reporters and hot air machines which we had a lot of fun with.

Then I covered a good deal of his '72 campaign. Not all of it, I wasn't present for the famous crying incident. Dave Broder spelled me and he was the correspondent on the scene then. But I went, I covered a good deal of it including the Democratic National Convention that year and I wrote a very tough piece about Muskie when it was over, which I have here.

It's probably the best thing I ever wrote about him, called "What Happened to the Muskie Campaign" dated July, this says 14th but I think it's July 11th, 1972, in which the theme is that the Muskie that appealed to the national audience politically was a figment of the imagination of the nation. And this was a quote from one of his persons who had been in the campaign, the delegate, the Muskie delegate, he said, "Muskie filled a need in me but did not correspond to the reality in him. He arose from a concept, a function to be performed, an idea that was not materialized in the flesh." And then I say, "The need, the function, concept, was the desire for someone to solve the problems of the world with strength and calmness without shaking things up. Someone strong and yet safe to take care of things." And I wrote what I think --- I haven't looked at it until just a couple of days ago since then --- was that my own real assessment of Muskie, that he gave all of the signals of being a guy who could take care of things, safe, and yet who could do things that needed to be done. And the problem was that he really wasn't that person, and he knew he wasn't that person. And he was always saying things, as you'll see in here, like, "I'm not sure I'm the man to do this," or "I'm not sure I'm the man to run for president." We thought he was being coy, but I think that's what he really felt, that he wasn't sure that he was the man to do this. He was a man of tremendous contradictions I think. I must add that I had the greatest respect for him, and I liked him a lot. And this was a very rough piece politically, it appeared on the *Washington Post* edit page. It was kind of the obituary for his 1972 campaign written from Miami. And it's here, it's what I thought and here it is.

DO/DN: (Unintelligible comments)

DN: Let's go back and trace the evolution of your impressions of him. You first interviewed him in connection with the Mansfield trip on the Vietnam issue. What was your impression of him when you talked with him at that time, and what did you get from him about the trip?

DO: Don, I really don't remember. I mean, I was impressed with him, I thought he was a serious and able senator, but beyond that he told me whatever he thought about the trip. But to be honest I really don't remember anything about it in detail other than I interviewed Muskie and I remember meeting him. And that's the first time, no, that's the first time I met him face to face, I mean one on one situation.

DN: And then as you said, you didn't see much of him until the '72 campaign. In '68 you were covering the Nixon campaign so you didn't really observe at close hand the Humphrey and Muskie campaign.

DO: I was on Humphrey for one week. We did a switch off and Bud Nossiter who was covering Humphrey came over and did Nixon for a week, and I did Humphrey. That was the *Post* idea of seeing the other side of the fence. But I was new on the *Washington Post*. In fact,

first, my first day on the *Washington Post*, it's hard to believe now, I was assigned to the presidential, as the lead correspondent for the presidential campaign and the most likely winner of the presidency by Ben Bradlee. I covered it the whole campaign. I'd never been on the newspaper one day.

DN: Did you get a sense of why Ben Bradlee picked you and assigned you that, ah ...?

DO: Oh, I know why he picked me, he told me. Basically, when he hired me, he wanted somebody who was not biased. And there were several reporters on the *Washington Post*, national political reporters, who couldn't stand Richard Nixon. Dave Broder was not on the paper then, he was still on the *Star*, so I'm not talking about him. And Bradlee did not like the idea of assigning a correspondent to lead the coverage of a presidential campaign, or anybody else, who right off the bat couldn't stand the candidate. And he wanted somebody who he felt was going to be fair and was not going to wear his opinions on his sleeve.

And once I passed the test at this breakfast and told him I'd covered, you know. He asked me how I'd feel about covering George Wallace and I said, "Fine, I know these [southern] governors, I've covered them before." "Or Humphrey?" "Fine." "Or Nixon?" "Fine."

That's what he wanted to hear, that's why he assigned me. And nobody else, because he didn't have anybody that he had much confidence in that they were not going to come with some pre-fixed notions.

DN: When you came out of that campaign did you have any fixed notions about Humphrey or Muskie?

DO: No, I didn't really see any of Muskie at all, and Humphrey I knew, I'd known in the Senate, not well but known him, and you know. They ran their campaign and, as you know, it was a close call, and I was too busy covering the incoming administration and Nixon. It was my first time on a big newspaper like the *Washington Post* to worry too much about the people who didn't make it.

DN: Now when did you first get involved in the '70 to '72 campaign covering Muskie?

DO: I think it was at the beginning of '72. In addition to covering the White House, I was on call as a national political reporter. I had a partner covering the White House, Carroll Kilpatrick, and there were other people, lots of people who could come in there. So we had a small group of people, including by that time David Broder, who would do political reporting. And I don't know why it was, I don't remember why it was that I drew Muskie. But I was sort of, for a while I was the main reporter on Muskie for the *Post* during the campaign. And I didn't bring my articles but they're obtainable through, I can get them from the *Post* library, that sort of stuff. But most of it is just routine coverage of he said this, or did that, whatever.

I had a lot of respect for him; I didn't have a lot of respect for his campaign which was a mess, as you'll see from this article. Things didn't work; people didn't show up; people didn't know what they were doing and, etcetera. I suppose that's endemic to campaigns for president, most

of them in those days anyway.

DN: A question which you may or may not be able to answer: how much different are successful campaigns, in terms of people doing what they're supposed to do when they're supposed to do it, from those that don't succeed?

DO: I think there's a big difference, I really do. I covered some of the Nixon-Kennedy campaign in 1960, I was still then with the Charlotte *Observer*, but I covered that for the Knight Newspapers. The difference between the Nixon in 1960 and the Nixon campaign in 1968 which I covered intensively, was striking. Nixon, like I think Muskie, tried to be his own campaign manager [in 1960] as well as his own candidate, and it did not work, and he couldn't make decisions.

A person running for president has too many decisions to make too fast. There's no way he can do that and also be the candidate in my opinion. And lots of American politicians have learned that over time the hard way. So now what you have is the opposite, you tend to have these campaigns that are, everything is precooked and there's no spontaneity and there's not much intercourse between the reporters and the candidate and all that sort of stuff, which is in my opinion the other extreme.

But if it's going to be a successful presidential campaign, I remember the Stevenson campaign in '56, I did a little writing on that, too. It was a mess. And you'd get somewhere and the guy, Stevenson would be walking in the door and he'd still be fiddling with his speech and nobody had a copy because it hadn't been, you know, [duplicated].

DN: Well one of your criticisms of Ed Muskie as a candidate was the fact that he tried to manage too much, or make too many decisions about the campaign.

DO: Yes, it was not a well run campaign. There's chapter and verse in this article about that, toward the end of it. I always thought, although I respected Muskie as a senator, I really always thought he should have been a judge. It seemed to me that he, thought over everything that he considered important and thought of it again and then came back and thought over it a little more. And he could chew on these subjects until he felt he was confident that he'd do what he should do or where his mind was. And that is a wonderful trait, but it is not a trait for running a presidential campaign. In fact, it's an impossibility for running a successful presidential campaign. There are too many decisions that have got to be made too fast. And maybe that's the fault of American politics, but that's kind of the way it is.

DN: You mentioned the contrast between the role of a judge and that of a presidential candidate. Did you have much chance to observe him as a senator in the crafting of legislation?

DO: No, I didn't, I just didn't, I mean I knew what he was doing. I knew something about some of the environmental legislation and other things, but I wasn't covering the Hill at that stage of things, so firsthand I did not. I am just basing my impression on my own sense of the man, my own sense of how he dealt with issues and that sort of thing.

DN: In your column at the end of the nominating campaign, you referred specifically to the fact that you liked him as a man, but you were very critical. What were some of your encounters with him as a reporter like? Did you run into difficulty there?

DO: No.

DN: No.

DO: No, no, he treated me with respect and, the way to treat a reporter. Once in a while he'd get angry but I thought that was a very human side of him. I had good exchanges with Ed Muskie, and this piece was based on, I mean I'm sure the piece was my idea probably. Here was a guy who it looked like at the beginning of the year was the odds on candidate to be nominated for president, probably would have won in my opinion. I could have, Nixon was not the most attractive candidate in the world. And yet by July his campaign had gone down in flames and, I guess not flames, it just had gone down, there were no flames. And the question was: What happened? And this was an effort to explain why the campaign came apart as it did, and I felt that fundamentally it went back to the candidate as these things normally do. So you'll see it's there.

Now there's another phase of Muskie's career that I covered at close range and that was when he became secretary of state. Starting in late 1970s, when I became *Washington Post* diplomatic correspondent, or shortly after that, I started keeping a journal. And I would write in it and I, it was not a diary, I didn't write in it every day and I didn't write the kind of things you write in a diary, "dear diary." But I would write on airplanes and on weekends at home if I had spare time. And this was very different from what I wrote for the newspaper. It was my, my thoughts about things and what I, sometimes it was what happened, what really happened, you know, and how that story developed and so forth and so on.

And I pulled out one, two, three, four, five, six, ... eight ... nine, what do you call them, extracts of nine days on which I wrote about Secretary of State Muskie and what he was doing, what I thought of what he was doing, what I thought of this, that and the other, what he had told the reporters, what the reporters were thinking about what he had said on some particular issues. It's all here, it's all in my handwriting which is not the greatest in the world but it's probably legible. I have cut out a couple of things which were said to me by Berl Bernhard, and I, it was questionable because it was rather critical. But one almost has to be critical of some people and I called Berl and said, "You know, I'm going to do this oral interview and I've got these notes and if you want me to tell them this or not." I don't feel I should do that without his permission. So I've sent them to him, mailed them to him and then he'll decide whether he wants this to be part of this record or not. But otherwise, as far as I'm concerned, it's here, I'll just run over them very quickly.

The first one was the, when Carter named him to succeed Cyrus Vance, this is on May 4th, 1980 and my discussion, or my thoughts about Muskie coming in as secretary of state based on my conversations with him before. Then the second one was on the trip, his first trip abroad as secretary of state to a NATO meeting in Vienna, meeting Gromyko, and my thoughts about what happened there. The third one is aboard Muskie's plane coming back, well we didn't come back,

we went from the NATO meeting to Asia, from Ankara to Kuala Lumpur, I guess it's the same, no, that's a separate trip. We came back, and then this is the next trip that went to a NATO meeting in Turkey, and then on to Malaysia for a meeting of ASEAN, the Association of South Eastern Asian Nations, this was on the plane. Happening . . . here's one done June 27th from Kuala Lumpur when we arrived at the Asian destination.

The next series is during the Democratic National Convention with Muskie aboard a U.S. Air Force jet from Andrews Air Force Base to Los Angeles. The Democratic Convention will begin in New York on Monday, and there's a lot of speculation that felt that if Carter faltered, Muskie was going to come in. And then there's another one, the same trip, en route east bound with Muskie at the end of the trip. And then there's one the next day, the next act of our airplane trip. This had to do with a controversy over nuclear targeting and whether Muskie had been cut out of the discussions about nuclear weapons targeting, and I wrote a story about it. I couldn't find that story. You can get it, I'm sure, from Lexis with a little more work. And there's one the next day, how rapidly things change, further developments on that story. And then a month later, September the 11th en route to Atlanta, my home town, I was going home for something, and then I had a few thoughts about Muskie. I was on Face the Nation with him and then I had some discussions with him after the program.

DN: This is September, you say?

DO: September 1980, and that's the last one in the series that I've -. After that, the campaign was on, the campaign of 1980, and I didn't for whatever reason write anything more about him of any substance.

DN: That's a very valuable addition to the archives.

DO: Well it is valuable because it tells you what I was thinking, what the reporters were saying, what he was telling us. And it's just like a, it's just as it happened, I mean I couldn't recreate one one hundredth of this today if you asked me what did I think. I wouldn't even remember the plane ride, much less the details. So I'm so glad that I wrote this stuff down.

DN: Let me ask you, though. You indicated that the first entry deals with the appointment of Ed Muskie as secretary of state and what you expected.

DO: Right, and also here are some articles, we did pull these out. This has, this qualifies some of these pieces as you'll see, and you can put them together with the -

DN: With the notes.

DO: With the notes. (*Unintelligible phrase*).

DN: You indicated when you referred to the journal notes that you had an impression and expectations of Ed Muskie as secretary of state based on what you knew before. Did those change over time?

DO: Well, yes, in a sense that I wasn't sure what was going to happen. I'd never seen him in that role, obviously. And if you read them I'm, I'm raising my own questions in my own mind as to what kind of secretary he's going to be and one of the crucial questions was, where was he going to fit in the Carter administration, you know? You had Zbigniew Brzezinski who almost had driven Cyrus Vance out of the government. Or at least the controversy between Brzezinski and Vance and Carter's own inability to decide for a long time what, which way he was going to go. And then he decided it, or the Iranians helped him decide it against Vance.

And then Muskie's walking into all this and he's saying, "I'm going to be the president's principal of foreign policy, advisor and spokesman." And I was somewhat doubtful that that was really going to be the case. But on the other hand I didn't know. Muskie was a strong character. Turned out not to be the case, but I'm writing as you'll see in here not out of a fixed conclusion as to how this is going to be but wondering what's going to happen. I mean, that's kind of the way I am. I didn't usually come to things with a 'I know what's going to happen' attitude, because I don't. I didn't, and I don't now.

DN: Looking back on, one question about the '70-'72 campaign, and then I wanted to ask you about the Senate under Mike Mansfield and the work you're doing now on the Mike Mansfield biography. Did the, from your observations and knowledge of the '70 to '72 campaign, did the so-called "dirty tricks" campaign play a significant role in Muskie's decline, or was it simply an add-on?

DO: Of course the answer is, I don't know, but my feeling is that it was mostly an add-on. I don't think any of those things would have destroyed his campaign had it been a better campaign. I mean, it was deplorable, we didn't know about it naturally, obviously. But there was nothing there that the campaign could not have surmounted, in my view. Even the worst of them would have been a one day story, you know. But it was symptomatic of the weirdness of Richard Nixon and his people that they would try some stuff like that. But I don't think it sunk his campaign, no.

DN: Going to the era of Mike Mansfield as majority leader, what's your sense of the way the Senate functioned in those days, and the relationship between Mansfield and people like Ed Muskie?

DO: Well, I have to preface this by saying that I haven't really focused yet on that issue in terms of writing, but Mansfield is a very unusual person in many respects. And as a public figure he's a particularly unusual person in the sense that he operated with the greatest of deference and respect for other senators, even those he did not agree with. And he felt that the way to build a majority was to accommodate people and get people to come to the conclusion that they agreed with the basic premise. He was incapable of using any strong arm tactics on anybody. Partly he was the opposite of Lyndon Johnson, and it's like the story here, the presidents who always try to be the opposite of their predecessor in some respects.

He had excellent relationships with the Republican leaders of the Senate, with Everett Dirksen and later with Hugh Scott. As he explained to me, if he was going to get any controversial legislation passed it was going to require Republican votes, the Democrats didn't have enough to

beat a filibuster for example. So he was quite willing to give Dirksen, for example, a very public leading role in civil rights legislation, although it pained Paul Douglas who was also from Illinois and who felt that politically it was helping the Republicans. Mansfield's view was if you want the legislation passed, he should be front and center. And he never put himself front and center about anything. Like Muskie, he's a more complicated person than it looks on the surface. But one of the true parts of Mike Mansfield is that one thing he loathes probably above anything else is anything that might smack of self promotion or putting himself in the center of whatever.

So his relations with other senators, as far as I know, were almost entirely excellent. Even [with] those who criticized him, as some did. He went out of his way to, Tom Dodd for example, famously. Even Joe McCarthy who campaigned against Mansfield in 1952 came out when, his first run for the Senate, and sent out a guy who lied, a former Communist name Harvey Matusow, who accused Mansfield of being next to a Communist. When McCarthy died, Mansfield contributed a eulogy to him. Now he didn't get along with McCarthy, don't get me wrong. But his ability to accept other people is rather remarkable politically. Today it would not be. You don't find people like that. And as far as I know he had a very good relationship with Muskie.

DN: Yep. Is there anything else you would like to add? You've obviously provided us with a wealth of material here to review, and you've indicated that other details elude you at this point.

DO: Yeah. No, I think, what I'd suggest is you read this stuff and think about it and if you have some further questions based on it, I might try to answer them. But I think this is better evidence than anything I could ever remember, in the first place about his time as secretary as seen by one of the reporters who followed him on a pretty daily basis during that period of time. And then the piece from '72 which summed up what I thought about the campaign, and to a degree what I thought about Muskie. And I think, reading it over, I hadn't looked at it since then, it does fairly represent my view of Muskie. It looks like a very tough piece and it is, but I have to say it was written also with a good deal of respect and, while it might not seem so when you read it, some affection. I liked the guy. But I had to recognize why he failed as a presidential candidate.

DN: Thank you very much.

DO: Okay.

DN: And we will be back.

End of Interview
moh298.int