

7-6-2000

Rolde, Neil oral history interview

Robert Ruttmann

Follow this and additional works at: http://scarab.bates.edu/muskie_oh

Recommended Citation

Ruttmann, Robert, "Rolde, Neil oral history interview" (2000). *Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Collection*. 345.
http://scarab.bates.edu/muskie_oh/345

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Muskie Archives and Special Collections Library at SCARAB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Collection by an authorized administrator of SCARAB. For more information, please contact batesscarab@bates.edu.

Interview with Neile Rolde by Robert Ruttmann

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Rolde, Neil

Interviewer

Ruttmann, Robert

Date

July 6, 2000

Place

Lewiston, Maine

ID Number

MOH 198

Use Restrictions

© Bates College. This transcript is provided for individual **Research Purposes Only**; for all other uses, including publication, reproduction and quotation beyond fair use, permission must be obtained in writing from: The Edmund S. Muskie Archives and Special Collections Library, Bates College, 70 Campus Avenue, Lewiston, Maine 04240-6018.

Biographical Note

Neil Rolde was born on July 25, 1931 in Boston, Massachusetts. His parents were L. Robert and Lillian Lewis Rolde. Neil's earliest exposure to politics was from his parents, who were both moderate Republicans. However, he did not become really politically active until after he went to Phillips Andover and then Yale. At that time, he switched from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party at the behest of his friends, who were liberal political activists. After getting his Master's degree in Journalism from Columbia University, Rolde married and moved to York, Maine. He became very involved with the Maine Democratic Party and worked for Ken Curtis before being elected to the Maine Legislature in 1972.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: family political and social views; family and education background; evolution of political attitudes; William F. Buckley; Yale students for Eisenhower (1952); Adlai Stevenson; McCarthy hearings; graduate school; marriage; moving to Maine; first exposure to Senator Muskie; change in political beliefs; Stan Tupper; Democratic Party in York, Maine; 1964 elections; straight ticket voting—Big Box voting; Democratic electoral success in 1964; working for Ken Curtis; Dickey Lincoln Dam; impression of Senator Muskie; argument between Muskie and worker for Elmer Violette; Muskie as a public figure; Muskie as a

politician; crying incident; 1972 presidential campaign; Ken Curtis; the end of straight ticket voting; switch from Republican to Democratic control of Maine; Muskie's joke; Bill Cohen; evolution of Maine politics; run for Legislature vs. Cohen; Nixon's dirty tricks against Muskie; and the 1968 vice presidential campaign.

Indexed Names

Brann, Louis
Buckley, Fergus Reid
Buckley, William F. (William Frank), 1925-
Chiles, Lawton, 1930-1998
Clinton, Bill, 1946-
Cohen, William S.
Cooper, Dexter
Cross, Burton
Curley, James Michael, 1874-1958
Curtis, Kenneth M., 1931-
Dewey, Thomas
Dunfey, Robert
Fitts, Dudley
Goldwater, Barry M. (Barry Morris), 1909-1998
Harding, Floyd
Hathaway, Bill
Herter, Christian Archibald, 1895-1966
Humphrey, Hubert H. (Hubert Horatio), 1911-1978
Hutchinson, Marjorie
Johnson, Lyndon B. (Lyndon Baines), 1908-1973
Kennedy, Jacqueline O.
Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1917-1963
Kennedy, Robert F., 1925-1968
Kyros, Peter N., Sr.
Martin, John
McGovern, George S. (George Stanley), 1922-
Mitchell, George J. (George John), 1933-
Monks, Bob
Nixon, Richard M. (Richard Milhous), 1913-1994
Reed, John H. (John Hathaway), 1921-
Rolde, L. Robert
Rolde, Lillian Lewis
Rolde, Neil
Roosevelt, Franklin D. (Franklin Delano), 1882-1945
Smith, Margaret Chase, 1897-1995
Stevenson, Adlai E. (Adlai Ewing), 1900-1965
Truman, Harry S., 1884-1972
Tupper, Stanley

Violette, Elmer
Wallace, George C. (George Corley), 1919-1998
Wiesenthal, Mickey
Willkie, Wendell L. (Wendell Lewis), 1892-1944

Transcript

Robert Ruttman: This is Robert Ruttman in an interview with Mr. Neil Rolde at the Muskie Archives at Bates College on July the 6th in the year 2000, and we we're gonna start, sir, by asking if you could state your name and spell it for the record, please.

Neil Rolde: Okay, my name is Neil, N-E-I-L, Rolde, R-O-L-D-E.

RR: Thank you. Where and where were you born, sir? When and where, I'm sorry.

NR: I was born in Boston, Massachusetts on July 25th, 1931.

RR: And the community you grew up in, can you remember as you were growing up as a child any of the political, the social climate of the community in which you grew up?

NR: I grew up mostly in Brookline, Massachusetts, which is a suburb of Boston. I wasn't, as a child, too attuned to politics. I would hear a little bit about it in the house, I think mostly there were, my father actually was a staunch Republican, but we used to hear a little about FDR, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and we knew he was president. And my father later denied it but I think he voted for him in a couple of elections, but he wouldn't... he wouldn't admit it. And then we used to hear some imprecations about the Boston politicians, particularly James Curley, who was mayor of Boston and was a well known scamp. I mean, he was quite a character. And the people in the suburbs didn't care for him very much at all, so. But other than that there wasn't too much. Of course a lot of my growing up was during the war, the Second World War, and that seemed to be the major concern of most people, not politics.

There was a little bit about, I remember when we were in grammar school, sort of when Willkie, actually it was 1940, when Willkie was running against Roosevelt, there were some in the school that were, their parents were obviously for Willkie and others who were for Roosevelt. So we used to have kind of, you know, wrestling matches. But other than that. And then, I guess that was about it, yeah.

RR: Now, during that time were, was it, were the majority of the people Republicans? You mentioned your parents were Republicans.

NR: My parents were Republicans. I would say in that part of, Brookline was a very wealthy town (*unintelligible word*), that was the nickname of the football team was "the wealthy towners." But I would say in our area, our area was, by the time I was growing up was quite heavily Jewish, and there was probably a very strong support for Roosevelt there, even among the ones who weren't Democrats.

RR: Your parents, could you spell their full names and tell me their full names?

NR: My father's name was L. Robert Rolde, R-O-L-D-E, and my mother's name was Lillian, her maiden name was Lewis, L-E-W-I-S, and her last name was Rolde, R-O-L-D-E.

RR: I see, and what were their occupations at the time?

NR: My father was a building contractor and real estate person, and my mother was a housewife.

RR: Any siblings at all, sir?

NR: None, none.

RR: Were your parents involved in any community activities that you can recall?

NR: Well, they belonged to a number of, you know, non profit groups such as charities and that kind of thing. The only thing I vividly remember was during the war they were both air raid wardens, which was a community activity.

RR: What did that entail?

NR: They had helmets and armbands and we used to have air raid drills during the war and blackouts. And so they would, their job I think basically was during blackouts to go around and make sure that nobody was showing any light. Now, these were all drills. Of course, we didn't have any, nobody attacked us, but it was organized in that way.

RR: That's interesting. You mentioned football earlier. Did you ever get to play any yourself?

NR: Oh yeah, I played football quite a bit. I mean, I wasn't big enough to be really good, but I played. I was on the freshman and JV teams in high school.

RR: And did you carry on your football career during college?

NR: No, because I was, I mean I was playing guard at a hundred and thirty-five pounds, that's a little bit too light.

RR: As you were growing up, sir, let's say your high school years, can you think of any political views that might have shaped your perception and contributed to your idea of the world at that age?

NR: Well, during high school, like a lot of kids who didn't think very much about politics, we were mostly thinking about sports and girls, I sort of went along with the flow from my parents. So I was essentially a Republican, and when I, and then I, I went two years to a public high

school and then two years to a private prep school. And when I was at prep school at Andover, that was my first election. It was a mock election, and it was a presidential election in which Harry Truman was running against Dewey, and we all voted for Dewey. And I think there were about maybe, out of the couple, the two or three hundred kids in the school there might have been five that didn't; they voted for Truman. And we woke up the next morning and were absolutely astounded to find that Truman had won. And I remember being in the dining room and getting the first sense of how that was possible talking to the guys who were working there, and they'd all voted for Truman, you know, because he was good for the working man, they said. So that was a memory that I had very strongly.

But I don't think I had any thought-out philosophy of what I was. I was listening to my father who was very anti-Harry Truman, and even though my father, my father's career as a builder was basically built on dealing with government programs. Yeah, he built, in the later years, well he, his, during the war he built housing for people who were working in the ship yards and that sort of things, and that, of course that was all through the government, and then they had FHA programs, and my father, federal housing authority programs, my father became a real expert on how to deal with the government. And of course it was very frustrating, and he was, but he was always down on Harry Truman, and so, you know, I imbibed some of that.

RR: Have your views changed since that time?

NR: Well, of course, yes. And in fact, you know, of course, well, I, later on my, when I, when I became of age to vote, my father had been appointed to a position in the state government. It was a commission of some sort, and he'd been appointed by a Republican governor; I think it was Christian Herder at the time. And so he asked me when I went to sign up to vote whether I would sign up as a Republican. Somehow, he felt that if I'd signed up as a Democrat and the word got out or something, it would embarrass him. So I said, sure, it didn't bother me, so I did. And now we're getting ahead a little, unless you want to get to the college.

RR: Oh, was this at college (*unintelligible word*)?

NR: Yeah, see, in those, in those, well, see that was, you had to be twenty-one in those days.

RR: Yeah, of course, yeah.

NR: Yeah, and so I was already in college by then.

RR: What year did you graduate high school?

NR: I graduated in '49.

RR: And did you go directly on to college?

NR: Yeah, I went -

RR: And what college did you attend?

NR: I went to Yale.

RR: Is there any particular reason for making that decision to go to Yale?

NR: In a way. As I said I went to prep school for two years; I went to Andover. Andover was sort of considered a prep school for Yale. The bulk of, I think probably more than half of our class went to Yale, and so that was one direction. My father had also said, well you've got your choice: you can go to Harvard, Yale or Princeton. And I didn't want to go to Harvard because I wanted to get away from home, because I lived in Boston, and Princeton somehow didn't turn me on, so Yale was the obvious choice. And as I said there was a huge, huge contingent from Andover that year. In later years it became much more difficult for, but in those years, in the forties, I went in to the counselor who was counseling you for what you, you know, where you wanted to apply, and he said, "Where do you want to go to school?" I said, "Yale." He said, "Don't bother, don't apply anywhere else; you're in, you're accepted." Those days are gone but, so that I went down to Yale.

RR: What were your interests during high school and did they influence your choice of major at all?

NR: My interests were writing, and so, yeah, they did eventually because I ended up as an English major at Yale. And so at least in my, particularly the years in Andover I became very interested in writing and did a lot of writing, had a wonderful English teacher there. So, although I was also very interested in history and would have been a history major at Yale if I hadn't gotten into certain writing programs that forced me to become an English major.

RR: You mentioned a teacher that inspired you. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

NR: Yeah, his name was Dudley Fitz, and he was a nationally known, or even internationally known translator of Greek poetry. And he was the kind of guy that could have been in any major Ivy League college. He was just extraordinarily well known.

RR: This was at Andover?

NR: At Andover. But he decided to go to Andover because, one, he, I don't think he ever got a Ph.D., and he was just too, you know, some people said he was lazy, some people said he drank too much. But he was just, you know, it just wasn't for him, he was just a free spirit, and he was just a marvelous teacher. So I, you know, he's the one that helped set you in a direction.

RR: What would you say is the most important thing you've gained from your interaction with him?

NR: Sort of the ability to just keep trying things in literature and not to get all cramped up, you know, and just, and to keep writing. I think that was the most important thing.

RR: Now, we spoke earlier about the point at which you became a little more politically

aware. Could you discuss the evolution of that a little more?

NR: Yeah, well, that was, it was, at Yale. There were a couple of things. One was my freshman year was the senior year of William F. Buckley, and so he was around with that very right wing, which then, of course, was really almost shocking. And even more so his brother, he had a younger brother named Fergus Reed Buckley, who was also in the class. And I remember probably the first thing I did was, Buckley had something in the paper, in the Yale paper that; we had a student newspaper, and, a daily. And I'm just, my writing a very vitriolic letter in response to it, that was one of the first things I remember.

But then I think one of the real catalysts was the 19-, let's see, I graduated in '53, so it would have been the '52 election, and that was when Eisenhower was vying for the Republican nomination against Robert Taft, and Taft was a Yale graduate and, but there were a whole bunch of us there who didn't like Taft at all. He was very, very conservative, and I, particularly isolationist, and I was certainly opposed to that kind of isolationism that we had before the war. And so a group of us formed an Eisenhower for President Club, and I can remember we went down to a big rally in Madison Square Garden, and we were sort of featured a little bit because we were from Yale- it was for Eisenhower and that we were from Taft's own school, so we got a lot of, you know, interest in that.

And then I remember going out to, that summer I went out to Indiana University with a buddy of mine who had to make up a course there at summer school, and they had a school called the school of letters, which was quite a literary school, and he was taking a course there, and I took some writing courses. And that summer was the Republican convention, and it was the first time that a convention had ever been on television, and so it was fascinating -

RR: Which year was that?

NR: Fifty-two. And so I remember going in the student union where they had a big television set and just sitting and watching the whole convention. And of course I was rooting for Eisenhower, and he won, and it was a very bitterly contested convention. We don't have contested conventions any more, but this one was really extraordinary. And it was the first time the American people had ever seen that, so it was, it had a great impact. And then the interesting happened was that the Democratic convention came on, and the man that got the nomination there was Adlai Stevenson. And so, ironically, it ended up that I think just about all of us who had started this Eisenhower for President Club ended up supporting Stevenson. So that was my first, it was my first vote. My father, who had been sort of, he wasn't too thrilled with Eisenhower and, but the dynamics changed afterwards, and Eisenhower went pretty much farther to the right, and Stevenson really captured the imagination of a lot of intelligent people. I mean, he was, he was probably a little bit too intellectual for the American people than not.

RR: In what sense?

NR: Well, his, his, he came across as an intellectual; his language, his manner of thinking, and so forth wasn't that kind of getting to the grass roots. And of course Eisenhower was a tremendous popular war hero and so forth. So, but I remember, you know, by the time of the

election I'm wearing a Stevenson button, my father's wearing Eisenhower buttons, and we go down and vote, and, you know, we lost, so that was my, my first. And then all of my buddies, too, at home were, you know, they all became quite active Democrats in Massachusetts. And so that was my first real immersion in it. Then, of course, I went to graduate school after that, and I went to journalism school where, of course, you have to be very well aware of what's going on. And it was during the McCarthy era, and so, I mean, I even went down to see one of the McCarthy hearings, the McCarthy Army hearings and getting there by like four thirty in the morning to get in line.

RR: And you actually -?

NR: I actually went in to watch. You could see it better on TV actually, but that riveted the country. And then of course I was very, very anti-McCarthy. And what I, and then I, I lived in New York then, and then later went back and lived in New York, but I kept my voting address in Brookline, and I would go back and vote, and usually my buddies were working for some Democratic candidate. A couple of times it was for guys running for congress, and so they'd put me to work on Election Day, you know, handing out pamphlets and stuff like that. So that was sort of my first taste of active politics.

RR: So, when you went to Yale, you mentioned you went to journalism school after that. Did this exposure to the presidential campaign in '52 I believe it was, did that influence your choice of what you wanted to do, of making the decision to go to journalism school and possibly what to do thereafter?

NR: Not really. When I decided to go to graduate school I applied to three graduate schools, which had three different types of writing. One was journalism school, and that was the one I was least interested in. I had written movie reviews for the Yale *Daily News*, but I had never really been a newspaper person. The other was to go to movie school, and I was really gung ho about movies in those days and had written a couple, and we'd even produced a couple at Yale, at UCLA; I was accepted there. And then the other was to do just plain creative writing, and that was University of Iowa, which had a very good score. And probably if I'd had my druthers I would have gone to UCLA, but my best friend was bugging me to go to journalism school with him -

RR: Where?

NR: At Columbia. And he had gone to Dartmouth and been very active with his newspaper there. My parents wanted me on the east coast, they didn't want me in California or in the middle of the country, so in the long run I, you know, I gave in, and I decided to go to journalism school. It was probably my, you know, least desirable choice but, so, but the fact that I had gotten somewhat interested in politics did not drive me into journalism.

RR: What did you do when you finished your postgraduate's degree?

NR: Well, I was ready to go into the Army and, because you had to take two years in those days, and then they rejected me because of some childhood illnesses that I had. And so I spent

some time, I lived in Cambridge, Mass. for a while. I was trying to do some freelance writing, and then eventually I went down to New York and got a job actually working for a movie producer, so.

RR: How long did that last?

NR: Oh, it lasted a couple of years. And then I tried doing some more freelance writing, and that didn't work out too well, so.

RR: So what brought you to Maine?

NR: Well, I came to Maine after I got married; my wife and I got married in 1960. We came east, we met in California, I was actually out there working on a movie script, and the project never came about for, you know, those are the kinds of things that happened. And then I met her, and we got married and came back, and then when she was about to have our first child, this buddy of mine who was the guy that I was working on the script with in California had moved to Maine and, York, Maine. And so we used to go, when we lived in Boston, we'd drive up there just about every weekend. So she said let's move up there, she wanted to have her kid in the local hospital, our child in the local hospital, so I said fine, and so we moved up.

RR: Can you talk a little bit more, describe the circumstances under which you met your wife?

NR: This friend of mine who I'd gone out to do the movie script with was a classmate from Yale, and we flew up to San Francisco to see- he was going up on business, but I hadn't been to San Francisco for a long time and didn't really know it. And we had another friend, another classmate from Yale who was there, and it turned out he worked in the same place my wife did, and somehow we met at a bar in Berkeley and had dinner and that was it. Three weeks later we decided to get married.

RR: Three weeks later, wow. That's incredible.

NR: And it's now over forty years.

RR: Oh, wow, so it really worked out well. That's a fantastic story, nice story. So when you moved up to Maine, that was in which year?

NR: That was 1962.

RR: Nineteen sixty-two.

NR: Yeah.

RR: Can you remember the time you first were exposed to the late Senator Muskie?

NR: Well, the very first time that I'd ever heard of him was in '54 when I was at journalism school, and of course I remember the headlines, you know, first Democrat in twenty years or

something, and he got a lot of, I think it was on the front page of the *New York Times* and -

RR: Really?

NR: Yeah, when he got elected governor, that made national news, and so that was the first time I remembered hearing about him. I didn't know very, I had spent a number, quite a bit of time in Maine. I mean, I'd gone to camp in Maine when I was kid, and my father was actually born in Bangor and, although his parents were immigrants, but they happened to be living in Bangor at the time he was born at the turn of the century. And we'd gone fishing in Maine and that sort of thing. But I hadn't, you know, I knew nothing about Maine politics and I didn't know much when I moved up here either, you know. I mean, I knew there'd been a guy named Muskie, and he was very popular. And in fact the first political meeting I ever went to in Maine was a Republican town committee meeting in York. My landlady's daughter, and she was, my landlady was a staunch Republican, and her daughter was a staunch Republican, still is, said, "Well, there's a meeting of the Republicans, and they're having this congressman come, and why don't you come?" I said, "Okay", I, you know, so I went.

And I met, the congressman that I met was a guy named Stan Tupper, and Stan Tupper was quite a liberal Republican and still is. In fact I had lunch with him about a month ago. And he seemed like a very nice man, and the other people at the party, you know, at the thing were very friendly and seemed like nice folks. Quite, a little bit different than Massachusetts because I guess I had gone to some Republican events in Massachusetts through my father or something, and I thought they were a bunch of stuffed shirts, so. And in fact later on I actually changed because before this there's some other things that intervened. I had changed my party to Democrat partly because my friends were always teasing me. They had, they had looked at the voters list and saw that I was a Republican, and they wouldn't leave me alone.

The other thing was, of course, the Kennedy election, and I had actually in the primary been for Stevenson, but once Kennedy got the election I was very strongly for him, and I hated Nixon. And in fact I, on election day early in the morning, I lived in Beacon Hill at the time in Boston, and my buddy, who was chairman of the local committee, Democratic committee, came down, and he banged on the door, it was quite early in the morning. He says, "Come on, we're all going down to watch Jack Kennedy vote." And so I ran down, as soon as I got my clothes on I ran down Beacon Hill to Cambridge Street, and just as I got there Kennedy was driving up in a limousine, and I remember just standing there all by myself applauding, then ran over to the Harrison Gray Otis School where he and Jackie were voting, and so that was a historic moment. I remember seeing Jack Kennedy vote for himself that day.

And so I was a pretty strong Democrat by that time, and when we moved to Maine, my wife wanted to register as a Demo- as a Republican. I said, "No way." And, because every, what I didn't realize was everybody in, York was one of the most Republican towns in the state of Maine. So anyway, I went to that, my first year there in '62, you know, I didn't know who the Democrats were in Maine. And I saw, I finally saw a candidate for governor on television; he didn't appeal to me at all. So that particular year, I voted a straight Republican ticket.

RR: Really?

NR: Then what really propelled me into politics in the state after that was 1964, and that was when Goldwater got the Republican nomination. And it wasn't Goldwater himself. I always sort of liked Barry Goldwater as a person but his politics I hated, and the people around him scared the hell out of me. And, you know, I can remember looking at the Republican convention and thinking it was almost like the old Nuremburg congress, you know, just a bunch of fascists. And there were, what happened was there were about four couples in York, we were young, all people sort of from away who had moved there, and we got together one night, and we said, "What are we going to do?" We, and then I had heard, I'd read in the paper that this same congressman, Stan Tupper, who was a Republican congressman had said that he was not going to support Goldwater publicly, and so I said, "Well, you know, why don't we, the eight of us, we'll sign a letter to this guy Goldwater- to this guy Tupper- and say as long as you continue your stand against Goldwater we'll support you?" And so we did.

And then what happened was I still wanted to get active, I was still so shook up about this congress, I went to my town clerk, and I said, "Who's the chairman of the Democratic party in town?" And he didn't know. Well, I mean, there were a handful of Democrats in our town. So he said, "Well, I think Colonel Peter (*name*) is," so, and he gave me his address and I called him and went over to see. He wasn't the chairman, but he was on the county committee from York, and I don't think he ever went to a meeting, but he said, "Well, they're having a meeting," he said, "why don't you go and represent me." So I said, okay. It was in, it was actually Kennebunkport, I remember, I went there and, you know, met, and there were a bunch of Democrats from the county. Well, the county was a Democratic county then because it had Biddeford and Sanford and so forth, a lot of the people were from there, and the one thing I got out of that was the Democratic candidates were going to be coming on a swing through the county, and they would come to York. Well, coming to York meant that a bunch of us would get out on the roadside on Rte. 1, and they'd come and stop the bus or whatever they were on, they'd come out and shake hands and then get back in, and that's precisely what happened. And that was, I believe, the first time I ever met Ed Muskie, he was one of the candidates. And then I met the- yeah, in fact he was running for reelection then and -

RR: What year was that?

NR: That would have been '64. Yeah, he had, because I had, I remember I had Lyndon Johnson on my bumper, Ed Muskie, and Stan Tupper, a Republican. And I had no idea of who the Democratic candidate was who was running against Tupper, but it turned out it was a young guy by the name of Ken Curtis, and when I met him, I said, ooh, maybe I made a big mistake because -

RR: Your first impression was not good?

NR: No, my first impression of Ken was great, you know, and I said, oh, but I've already committed myself to his opponent. So I said, boy, I made a, I probably made a mistake.

RR: His opponent was Tupper?

NR: Tupper, yeah, he was running against Tupper, who was the incumbent. As it turned out Tupper won by two hundred votes; they had a recount.

RR: Oh my gosh.

NR: And the recount stood, but also what happened was, because we had straight ticket voting in those days, there was a Democratic landslide in the state.

RR: What does that mean?

NR: Straight ticket voting?

RR: Yes.

NR: Okay, in the old days our ballot was, then, we had like two columns, you had a Democrat and a Republican column. And then at the top was what, they called it the "big box." It was like a big square at the top of each one, and you could either go down and vote individually, or you could put a check at the top. And if you put a check that voted all Democrats or all Republicans, and it was the thing that kept the Republican Party in power really in the state because they had trained their voters not to split their ballots, always to vote the straight Republican ticket. So it didn't matter, you could have Mickey Mouse at the bottom, as long as the Republicans did their big box and vice versa -

RR: Mr. Rolde, we're getting pretty much to the end of the tape so I'm going to ask you a little bit more about the political machine of Maine as soon as we turn the tape over.

End of Side A, Tape One

Side B, Tape One

RR: This is the second side of the interview with Mr. Neil Rolde; Robert Ruttman is interviewing. And Mr. Rolde was just speaking about the ticker tape?

NR: Straight ticket voting.

RR: Straight ticket voting, and that was a mechanism devised by the Republican party, kind of device to ensure that people could vote either Republican or -

NR: Or Democrat.

RR: Or Democratic, exclusively.

NR: It was something that the Democrats had actually tried to get rid of for a number of years. I'm not sure exactly how it came into being but it was, whether the Republicans had devised it or not it was something that really helped them. I know personally because twice it defeated me when I ran, so straight ticket voting was very difficult in the Republican areas, in the rural small towns. It was great for the party, for the Democratic Party in the cities, but in, I think it was one

of the things that kept the Republicans in power for so many years in the state.

Anyway, let's see, where were we? I was talking about having met Ken Curtis, and in '64 it backfired against the Republicans because so many people wanted to vote for Lyndon Johnson, they didn't want to vote for Goldwater, so they would vote the Dem-, even Republicans would vote the straight Democratic ticket. So what happened was you had a Democratic landslide, and the Democrats captured both the house and senate in Augusta, and then they were able to elect the constitutional officers. And Ken Curtis became secretary of state, and I forget who became attorney general and so forth and so on.

But anyway two years later Ken Curtis ran for governor, and I had told myself, because I hadn't voted for him for congress, that if I could do anything for him, I would. And he was in a primary with two other guys, and the local committee, the head of our committee was a guy in his seventies and, a retired union guy, came to my house one time, and he wanted me to take a petition around for Ken. And I didn't have the time to do it; I was trying to run a theater at the time and, a repertory theater in New Hampshire, and, but I wrote a letter to the Curtis people and said, "If you need somebody who has a masters degree in journalism, I'd be happy to help you." And I got back a letter that, you know, said, well, don't call us; we'll call you. You know, this kind of thing.

But then one day the phone rang, and it was a fellow calling, he was, the guy was running the campaign, was calling from Portland and wanted me to come down to Portland and meet with him and some of the other top people in the campaign, and so I did. And a guy named Bob Dunfey was, Bob Dunfey, Sr. was sort of the overall charge of the campaign, and I think he'd heard a little bit about me from his brother in New Hampshire who had heard I was running this theater and that I was a fairly competent guy. So they asked me to become part of their, the campaign committee, and I did, and then eventually they asked me to go to work for them because they really needed somebody to do the journalism and to do the press work and stuff like that so. So for the last part of that campaign I was on their staff and working for Ken. And he was running against the incumbent governor, John Reed.

And that was when I had my first real contact with Senator Muskie, and it happened, it was sort of like the very end of the campaign. One of the biggest parts of the campaign was we had Sen. Robert Kennedy coming to Maine to campaign for Ken, and it was a huge event in Portland, and, I mean, literally the streets were lined with people seeing him come through. And so I was involved with that and with the press and so forth, and I had gone down to Portland that day to work on that, and as soon as I got to Portland, got to the headquarters this young guy I'd never met before whose name happened to be John Martin, came rushing up to me, and he said, "You're going to Aroostook county tonight." Here I was, I had nothing, and so I said, "Okay." They gave me a hundred dollar bill, and that was it, and I was off, put in a private plane with a state senator named Floyd Harding, and we were to fly up to Van Buren, Maine for two things. One was, there was a big event that night for Elmer Violette who, I don't know if you know Elmer, he just died a couple weeks ago. He was, at that time he was running for U. S. Senate against Margaret Chase Smith.

RR: Oh, I see.

NR: And he was from way, way up in the St. John Valley, the town of Van Buren, and so there was a big event for him up there in his home town. And then the next day was the start of what they call the “Democratic caravan”, and it was to start up at the northern part of the state and then drive all the way down, with the candidates, down to Kittery. And this was sort of a traditional thing.

RR: Yes.

NR: And so aside from the fact that our plane almost crashed because we got caught as Bobby Kennedy’s jet was taking off, the Caroline, we got sucked into the jet stream.

RR: Oh, my God.

NR: Yeah, I didn’t realize what was happening, but Floyd knew. And anyway, we got up safely, finally, to Van Buren. I found a, at this big party for Elmer, I found a place to cash my hundred dollar bill in case, to buy a toothbrush or whatever I needed, some clothes, and I had all this stuff in a paper bag. And they would travel for a whole week. And I guess my first, we first got together, or at least in my memory, with Senator Muskie, there was a dinner or lunch, I guess it was lunch up in there with, probably in Fort Kent, with local business people, and, yeah, it probably was in Fort Kent, and I can remember him having to handle some fairly tough questioning from the local people about the Dickey Dam and why wasn’t, you know, they make, these people were all in favor of the Dickey Dam, and why weren’t they, why wasn’t it coming along in Washington? And I can remember Ed, who was a towering figure, sort of over-awing these people and trying at the same time to explain, you know, how complicated things were in Washington and what the strategy was and how to do it, and they shouldn’t be impatient and so forth and so on. So that was my first impression, my first contact with him.

RR: Can you explain to me a little more about the Dickey Dam project?

NR: Well, Dickey Dam, it’s a little complicated, but I can give you the history of it. You have to go back somewhat in history, in Maine history, back actually to the 1920s when a man by the name of Dexter Cooper had an idea of trying to harness the tides out in Washington county, in the Eastport area, the Bay of Fundy, it’s the highest tides in the world. And his idea was that you could harness them, make electricity out of them. And in the thirties, he was a good friend of Franklin Roosevelt, who of course summered in that area, in Campobello, and so he got Roosevelt to trust him, and FDR actually got the government to start, they were going to put in this big dam and get power from it. They actually had money; they set up a village for the workers up there. But there was tremendous opposition to it because it would be public power, it wouldn’t, so the local, the private power companies were violently opposed to it. There is no public power in New England, and the private companies were bound and determined to keep it out. So they were able to defeat that.

Then what happened was when Jack Kennedy got elected, they decided to try and revive that and the idea. And then they did some studies, and they said, “Well, it can’t stand alone. It won’t, we’ll be putting more money into it than we’ll be getting out of it.” But if it was attached to

another project up in the northern part of the St. John River for I think it was what they call peaking power. Anyway, they decided they would have this dam and another dam up in the upper St. John River Valley. And there were a number of proposals for that, and the most viable was Dickey-Lincoln. One of the projects was rejected because it would have flooded the Allagash, and at that time that was a big issue, the Allagash River, keeping it wild. The Dickey Lincoln would not have flooded it although it would have flooded a lot of area up there. And so anyway, then what happened was they finally decided Quoddy just wouldn't work anyway, and that got scratched, but Dickey-Lincoln could stand on its own two feet. The people up in the northern area thought, well, this will be a great boon to the area, it will bring business here, and we'll have cheap power and so forth. But the forces opposed to it were still the private power companies, they were very much opposed, and they sort of hid behind the environmentalists who began to be very much opposed to it. And you could see, I mean, most of the politicians were all in favor of it initially, and then later as the tide started to turn people like Bill Cohen changed their position on it and opposed it.

And it never got built, but at that time it was a very, very strong issue. And there was a very strong issue on, you know, what do you do about the northern part of the state, how do you get economic development up there and there were a lot of schemes that, none of them ever really came much to fruition.

RR: Yeah, I think there's a lot of vested power in the private companies like CMP.

NR: Well, CMP and Bangor Hydro and then Public Service of Maine were, you know, they were all very, very strongly opposed to it, to any kind of public power.

RR: What is your impression of the way, what is your, I would, I guess I'd say your first impression of Senator Muskie? Did, how do you feel he handled the situation? You said he spoke authoritatively, what did you think of him?

NR: Well, he was a very imposing person, you know, I mean he was, I don't know, about six-foot-two, six-foot-three; very strong personality and very adept at sort of over-awing people. And, but I saw an incident later on that trip that was, has always stuck in my mind. And this was, you know, and we traveled in a kind of helter-skelter caravan in a sense. I mean the way it would work is sometimes, you know, one candidate would break off or another candidate would break off, and then we'd meet, you know, that evening. So, I will never forget this evening; we were in Waterville, which was his home town at the time. We were at a dinner at his, one of his secretar-, one of his people who worked for him, it was a woman named Marge Hutchison, who was I think one of his, you know, staff people, important staff people in Maine, and it was a dinner that she had at her house. And at that dinner was Ken Curtis, myself, Elmer Violette, Muskie, and I don't know if Bill Hathaway or Peter Kyros was there; these were congressional people. But there were a number of things that stuck in my mind. And then, you know the, Elmer had his staff people, and Muskie had some of his staff people, but the thing, there were two things that I remember. One, we happened to arrive there the same day that Richard Nixon was campaigning in Maine and campaigning in Waterville.

RR: Oh my gosh.

NR: And we had this journalist, his name was Mickey Wiesenthal. He came over to that dinner we had at Marge's, and he was telling us about Nixon and the way Nixon was campaigning. He even had a sheet of instructions that Nixon had given out, and it was just like, you know, how, the not-tos in the campaign, how to keep away from the people. You know, he didn't, you know, he didn't want to be approached. And we were all, I remember laughing over that.

But the incident I most remember was there was a young guy working for Elmer Violette, a fiery young French kid named Nate Cyr, C-Y-R, it was a very common name up there, and Nate got into an argument with Ed Muskie. I can't remember what it was over, maybe it was over how Lyndon Johnson was doing or something, I can't remember. But they got into this really wild argument, and Muskie did everything he could to sort of blow this kid away, you know. I mean he was, Nate was probably in his, you know, young twenties or something, and here he is arguing with this august United States senator, and Nate wasn't having any of it. He would just come right back up off the floor and go right out to him. And then I, I noticed an interesting change in Muskie. He suddenly stopped being this kind of overbearing and pompous, not pompous but, you know, kind of real tough, and suddenly became absolutely charming, you know, and conciliatory and making a friend of this kid who he had really infuriated. And so I could see the great charm that this guy had, you know, behind a kind of technique, I think, that he'd developed in politics for getting his way. And so that was a very revealing moment, I always, I will never forget that evening.

RR: Sounds like Machiavelli.

NR: Well, in, yeah, but I mean in a, you know, in a good sense, in a sense, you know, I mean I suppose that's really what politics is all about.

RR: I agree.

NR: Is how to deal with people and how to get people to go along with you or, you know, not end up hating you. At least in American politics. But I just, I will never forget that particular incident, and it's one of my key memories of Ed Muskie.

RR: I wanted to ask you about the person, Muskie the person. Do you think the person behind the politician was any different from what was presented telegenically?

NR: That's hard for me to say because I really wasn't, not like, you know, where I spent a lot of time with Ken Curtis, I really got to know him. I didn't spend that much time with Muskie, so I never probably saw him in a really nonofficial capacity.

RR: I see.

NR: I don't think I ever saw him with his family, you know, and I know he had, you know, family problems, I know he had a daughter who was quite sick and had some mental problems, and I'm sure that must have taken a real toll on him. I never, never really saw him as a family person. I saw him as a public figure, so it would be hard for me to say that. I would think, you

know, I mean, given what I know about his background, I mean, here's a guy who, born in a mill town up in Rumford and sort of having to take on the establishment no matter what, you know . . .

RR: Against all odds.

NR: Yeah, against all odds. He kind of, you know, builds up a persona that's pretty tough. And yet at the same time, at the time when he, he was elected in '54, I mean, he was just totally surrounded by Republicans, so he had to be able to have that kind of conciliatory personality that could get something done rather than just, you know, be at odds with them all the time. And he seemed to do that, and he seemed to have won over a lot of Republicans, that's how he got elected. You couldn't get elected in Maine in those days if you didn't win Republicans. And at the same time to project somebody they felt comfortable with who wasn't their idea of some crazy Democrat who was going to, you know, spend everything and drive the state into bankruptcy.

RR: So do you think, what you just mentioned, the sort of delicate balance by having this kind of conciliatory aspect to his personality and at the same time not being a pushover, do you think that is what contributed to him winning the 1954 gubernatorial election in the midst of a very dominant Republican state?

NR: Well, I think, yeah, I mean, of course I didn't live in Maine in those days so I, I don't, I really couldn't have observed how that campaign went, but I suspect that that certainly contributed to it. I think it was, he was up against a governor who was perceived as not being very swift or being extraordinarily conservative and having done enough things to really annoy people that they were looking for somebody else. I mean, it had been over twenty years. I guess the previous Democratic governor had been Louis Brann in the thirties, and so he, yeah, '33, '34 I think was when Brann was finally out, so it had been over twenty years since they'd had a Democrat, and I, you know, I think people just get tired after a while. They look for a new face, they look for. And of course Muskie himself had never believed that he was going to win, I mean that was, the whole idea of entering the race was to prepare himself for two years later. This was to be a trial run, and, yeah, they had no thoughts of winning that election. And yet it just, it all came together. And so, but I think it was, I mean he was, he was perceived as an attractive candidate that Maine people could vote for. They felt at home with him, they felt, you know, he wasn't too radical, but at the same time he wasn't an old stick in the mud like Burton Cross.

RR: People have described Senator Muskie as being a master of compromise throughout his political career. At the same time others have criticized him as being guilty of procrastination at times. What is your perspective on that issue?

NR: I can't, the term procrastination's an interesting one because a lot of politicians practice it, you know.

RR: Kind of waffling.

NR: Well, you know, if we ignore this problem, it'll go away. I don't know that he was any

more deliberative in that regard than other politicians. I guess my later experiences working in like his presidential campaign were that he, he did not give you the sense of, well, he gave you two senses. One was that he was the boss. There was always, there was a feeling that the people who worked for him were, were working for him because they did what he told them to do, you know, that they didn't talk back. That may not be true, but the instance I said with Nate Cyr was an example of it. He didn't like to be contradicted, and he was his own person, so he was very much in charge of what he wanted to do, and he seemed to know very much what he thought were the right directions, and he could articulate that very strongly. And I don't know if that helped him or hurt him. I think in some respects it hurt him in the long run. It certainly seemed to hurt him in that presidential election.

For example the infamous situation where, in front of the *Manchester Union Leader*, where supposedly he cried. And by the way I am absolutely convinced that he didn't cry, and the reason for that is that at that time I was working for Elmer Violette, who was running for congress. And we, and Elmer was one of the people standing on the stage next to him. If you remember the situation, there had been this supposed letter, or, where he had, or supposed incident in Florida where he had made a statement against French Canadians, talked about Canucks, which turned out, of course, to be a forgery. The whole thing was, it was a letter to the *Manchester Union Leader* that was printed. It turned out to be a forgery from the Nixon people, but, and we were having all these dirty tricks played on us down there; we didn't know what was happening. But in any event the idea to counteract that was to get a whole bunch of Franco-Americans from Maine to go down and, and other places, and stand with him in front of the *Manchester Union Leader* to show that he was not anti-French. Elmer was one of them, and so I sent a movie photographer down there to get, we thought, oh, this is going to be great, and we wanted footage for our TV ads later on to show, because we thought Muskie was going to be running for president and this would be great for Elmer.

And so I remember seeing the footage afterwards, and what was happening of course was there was a snowstorm, and the snow was coming right down in their faces, so everybody looked like they were crying. I mean, the water just dripping down, their eyes all squinched up. But the thing was that Ed just decided on his own to make this, you know, blast against the paper for insulting his wife. And that, and as my understanding was, wasn't the script. The script was, you know, going to be about free speech and Constitutional things, but apparently they, you know, that's what he wanted to do, and he did it, and that really killed his campaign.

RR: Would you say that was his biggest misfortune?

NR: Well, it was, to be honest, that campaign was not going very well to begin with. I mean, we pulled it out, we brought in a whole bunch of people from Maine. He had, for some reason, and I don't know who made this decision, had brought in a whole bunch of people from Connecticut who had worked for a guy named Duffey who had run the year before for the U.S. senate and got absolutely creamed, and they brought in all these guys, and they didn't know what the hell they were doing. And so we were close to losing that election anyway, and then we pulled it out, but the problem was again he had let the, they had let the newspapers say that he had to win by, you know, eighty percent or something, and, of course, you know, we won by about sixty; we got sixty percent [*sic*] of the vote. And that was perceived as a huge defeat for

him, and from then on the campaign just went *phlut*.

RR: Really.

NR: Yeah, it just, so those were some mistakes. Now who made the mistakes, I don't know, but, you know, as I said, the feeling was, I mean for example I tend to be very outspoken, and I certainly was working for Curtis, who not only allowed that but encouraged that kind of thing. You know he, his guys spoke up to him, I mean, sometimes he'd finally say, "Well, shut up. It's going to be this way." But he, I had the feeling that I wouldn't work for Ed Muskie because that kind of thing from his subordinates was not all that welcome. That was the feeling that I had.

RR: Let's get back to your tenure as part of Ken Curtis' campaign team. What sort of role do you think Ken Curtis' administration played in overhauling the political machine that the Republican Party for such a long time had pretty much manufactured?

NR: Okay. Well, there were a number of things that Ken did. Of course he's most remembered for the most dramatic thing that he did, which was to bring in an income tax into the state. And amazingly he did it with Republicans, I mean, because he had a Republican legislature totally, which was a tribute to his ability to work with the other side. He also totally restructured state government. We had a government that had sort of grown like topsy, and there were like, I can't remember the exact number of departments and so forth that all reported directly to the governor, and we broke that down into fourteen different departments. And that's pretty much, it's stayed like that since. I happened to have been in charge of pushing that through the legislature; that was one of my roles was the whole government reorganization. I think that was a major effort.

I think in terms of breaking down the Republican machine, as you want to call it, probably the most single event was something that neither of them did, although it was, it was really Ed Muskie's impetus that got it going. And it was, because everybody thought that Muskie was going to be the candidate for, what was it, 1972, that he was going to be the candidate, the Democratic candidate for president. The Republicans suddenly had this horrible image of everybody in Maine voting for Muskie for president and voting the big box and having this huge Democratic sweep and, because even then, even after Ken was elected in 1966 the Republicans still had had a pretty strong hold on the legislature. I think, I was first elected in '72, and they still had both the House and the Senate. So they suddenly saw, oh my God, we're going to be slimed. And what happened was a guy who had come to Maine, he'd run against Margaret Chase Smith in the Republican party by the name of Bob Monks, very wealthy guy from Massachusetts, put up the money to have a state-wide referendum on the big box. And so, ironically, it was the Republicans putting it on the ballot that got rid of the big box.

And to show you the difference, I first ran in York in '68, I ran for state senate, I was beaten mostly by straight ticket voting. I ran again in '70, I originally ran for state senate in about eight towns, they were all Republican towns. Then I ran in York in, alone, in '70 when the big box was still on, and I lost by, less than two hundred votes. And again, it was the straight ticket voting. In '72, when the straight ticket voting had been done away with, I won by, I had sixty-two percent of the vote. So you could see, and what was happening is in '72 the Republicans

still had control of the house and senate, but we had made tremendous gains in the house and in the senate and were coming within striking distance of the Republicans. And also winning in towns like York and South Berwick and Exeter and places that had never had Democrats before. And then two years later, of course it was also combined with a real reaction against Nixon, we had ninety-two members, Democratic members in the house. So that the whole thing changed, and I think, I think that was the major stroke was getting rid of the big box that did in the Republicans and changed the whole dynamic.

RR: In terms of the - (*recording gap*).

RR: This is the second tape with the interview of Robert Ruttman interviewing Mr. Neil Rolde on the 6th of July in the year 2000. Mr. Rolde, please continue where we left off, or -

NR: Well, do you want me to go back a little bit in case you missed that, about the big box being taken off.

RR: Why don't we do that.

NR: I think that was the real key factor in the sort of the end of the Republican hegemony in the state. And then the Democrats actually became the majority party. And I think having young people like Ken Curtis following upon the pioneering efforts that Ed Muskie had made. We were electing attractive young people like Peter Kyros and Bill Hathaway, and young people were being attracted to the party, George Mitchell was starting to come into the fore so that, and the Republicans were really starting to fall by the wayside. They weren't developing; they were seen as the party of the past and we were seen as the party of Maine's future. So that really, all these things contributed, plus a tremendous amount of grass roots effort as well. I mean, I can remember just all kinds of drives, going out and signing people up as Democrats.

And also, I saw it in my own town, it became okay to be a Democrat, you know, it wasn't, before, I mean, you were like an eccentric if you were and all of a sudden now it was okay. And I think one of, another turning point had been Ken's reelection campaign in 1970 because he had put in the income tax and everybody just thought, oh God, this guy'll never get elected. He'd also come out for gun control. And we won that election by five hundred votes. And then in his second term he was extremely popular. So, and of course at the same time you had, Ed Muskie was becoming a big star on the national and international scene, and his accomplishments, some of the things that, you know, he was being known for, Mr. Clean, the environmental movement was also growing in strength, so that resonated very well in the state.

RR: You were in the legislature while Senator Muskie was serving as a U.S. senator. Do you remember any particular legislation that he might have advocated that you took particular interest in?

NR: Well, I'm trying to remember. I think some of the environmental legislation particularly, I can't remember specifically, some of the clean water bills, and those are things that I was very much interested in. And, but I, you know, when you're in the Maine legislature, you don't follow that much what's going on in Washington. Yeah, you're really, except sometimes you

might have a memorial to congress asking them to do something, but we weren't that closely tied, unless it was a bill to have state funds, to participate in federal programs.

RR: When did you cease your political ties with Ken Curtis, or not your political ties, in terms of political employment? I believe it was six years that you worked for him?

NR: Yeah, I worked for him, and it wasn't, I mean there would be times when I was out, and then I'd come back and work. It was when I finally got elected in '72. Obviously I couldn't work for him and still be in the legislature so, yeah, he sent me a facetious note saying, he said, after I got elected, congratulating me and said but don't you want your old job back?

RR: Now, in 1990 you ran against Bill Cohen.

NR: Right.

RR: Can you talk a little bit about that experience?

NR: Okay. Let me tell you a funny story about Ed Muskie that's involved. I can't remember where it was, but I heard Ed Muskie tell a joke at one thing so, it was a very funny joke, and so I, when I was running for senate, I would start, I would always start off telling that joke. And I always credited Ed Muskie, you know, and I always, because, you know, everybody was always concerned about credit, you know, that you'd be plagiarizing, so I always said, "This is a joke I heard from Ed Muskie," and I would tell the joke, and everybody would laugh like hell. And then one day, I was still in the legislature part of this time, and I was up there, and I'd been off doing something, and I came, and I noticed the doors to the house were closed, and I said, "What's going on?" They said, "Well, Ed Muskie's up there, and he's giving a talk." And then one of the guys came out, and he comes over to me, and he says, "Well," he says, "Muskie's in there," he said, "and guess what, he's telling your joke."

RR: Could you tell the joke now?

NR: Yeah, the joke was, let's see if I can remember it. It's about a little grandchild comes over to his grandfather, and he says, "Grandpa," he says, "can I climb up in your lap?" And the grandfather says, "Yeah, of course you can." He said, "Grandfather," he said, "can you make a noise like a frog?" And the grandfather says, "Well, I suppose I can, but why would you want me to do that?" And the little boy says, "Well mama says that when you croak we're all going to go to Hawaii."

RR: Oh my God!

NR: And I remember, I mean Ed told that story, and we all roared, and it was just the perfect kind of story to tell and, because I used to do it in terms of, you know, what expectations are and, you know, nobody was expecting me to do very well against Bill Cohen. So anyway, yeah, that, but I always remembered that.

RR: What were your impressions of Bill Cohen?

NR: Well, I had, I'd run the first campaign for Elmer Violette that Bill Cohen ran in when he won the congressional seat. My impressions were that he was a very bright, sharp, opportunistic political figure who was very attractive, particularly running in the Republican party, which, you know, had, didn't have these young attractive people. He was also very clever, and he, I think the milestone of his campaign back when that, of course this, this was '72 I guess, was that he did what, he imitated what Lawton Chiles down in Florida, and he walked the district, and that got him a lot of attention. And we lost. And he also, he devoted himself to doing, working very hard in Democratic areas, and he was the kind of candidate that Democrats could vote for. You know, he was liberal enough, he was flexible, he'd jumped ship on the Dickey-Lincoln thing, was originally for it and then went the other way. And so I saw him as somewhat glib, somewhat shallow, not a real leader in a sense. A guy who really felt which way the wind was blowing. But in terms of our campaign against each other, I mean, I think we came to have a certain amount of respect for each other. He's certainly been good to me as secretary of defense on things that I've had to work on with him. You know, we worked on saving the shipyard when he was still in the senate, the Portsmouth shipyard. I was chair of the group that was trying to support it down in our neck of the woods. So all along, and I think he's done a decent job as secretary of defense, and I have to admire him for sticking with it after all that stuff that his party threw at Bill Clinton. And, you know, I think he realized he didn't have any future in the Republican Party either. I know from talking to staunch Republicans in other parts of the country, they consider him a traitor, so.

RR: Yeah. Let me ask you a little bit about the evolution of politics in the state of Maine in let's say the last twentieth century; you've written extensively about this topic. I'd like to ask you a little bit about the role of media first of all, and then secondly voter apathy.

NR: Well, let me tell you voter apathy first. Everybody makes a big fuss about voter apathy. I don't know that they've actually gone back through the historical records to see what percentage of the vote, people voted in the past. And I know in my research, I'm looking at, there were seven votes that made Maine independent from Massachusetts. I think at one point there was as low as five percent turnout in one of those votes. So that I'd like to see somebody do a real study of, you know, what were the percentage turnouts of people in prior elections? Were they as great as everybody is saying? And I think, I mean, we saw it in the recent primary elections. There was a horrendous turnout. But, you know, anybody with a brain could have predicted that because all you had to do was look at the ballot. There were no contests on it. If there's no contest, why the heck are people going to go down and vote? I mean it's only the mo-, I'm surprised as many people came out to vote as actually did, so that shows that there is a basic number of people that have to vote no matter what, whether there's anything to vote for or not.

It's excitement, it's voting and politics are a form of entertainment. In the past you could get a lot of people out to hear a party speaker because there was nothing else to do except go to church. I mean, literally, politics was the only form of entertainment, and they made it a form of entertainment. They had barbecues, they had, they, the liquor went around like crazy. I mean, I was reading about what George Washington had to spend to get elected, and it was mostly on rum, because he gave free drinks to everybody.

So that I just think that this is kind of a false thing of people when they say well our, you know, our democracy's falling apart and all that stuff. I just don't believe it. I think if you have good candidates, people will come out. If you make it easier for them to vote as we did in Maine by allowing you to register on Election Day, which the Republican Party has tried over and over again to get rid of that. I mean, we've made the franchise as open as we possibly can in this state, and we have the highest percentage of voting in the United States consistently in major elections. So, other states make it very difficult to vote, and there are reasons for that. And so, I'm not concerned about voter apathy. I mean, I think we don't seem, it's not easy to get people to run for office, but we never seem to have a lack of candidates.

And given the second part of your question, which is the media and the incredible grief that the media has now inflicted on anybody who has the gall to run for office. I mean, I saw that the minute I announced against Bill Cohen. Who the hell did I think I was running against Bill Cohen? And then there were, you know, they were calling this over and over and over again, who would say this election's over before it even starts. Well all I did, given my background in media, was say, well, there's an opportunity for me to make my point. So I'd call them up and I said, "Would you let me write my side of the thing." They'd say, "Okay," and then I'd say, "Well, here's a guy who's a good candidate." I'll give you an example, one guy, he was wrong on both cases. He started off, this is the most ridiculous thing I ever heard, this guy Rolde running against Cohen, the race is over now. Rolde ought to go to East China or something, and ...

End of Side B, Tape One
Side A, Tape Two

NR: By the end of the election he was right, it's like I was going to win in a landslide, you know. So, I mean, that shows you, you know, these guys don't know. The problem with the press is, you know, they don't have any, there's nothing hanging over their heads for being wrong, you know? They, it doesn't hurt them if they write the stupidest article in the world; they don't have to pay any price for that. Whereas somebody in politics makes a mistake; they get crucified. So the press has become, given my background with a master's degree in journalism, has gone against many of the things that we were taught. We were taught to be objective, we were taught never to be argumentative, you know, take what the guy says. I mean, ask your questions as well as you can, but you know, don't argue back. I mean, that's the thing, the press starts becoming you know, a party to the issues trying to get a rise out of people; they become extraordinarily hostile. I mean, if you're a public figure or running for public office, you're, you know, you're one step above somebody's who's committed a criminal act, and you're fair game for anything that they want to do. You just have to deal with that, and it's always been my feeling that the press are essentially a bunch of masochists; they like to be attacked, so attack them. I would never sit still for anything that I felt they were doing, and you know, the final thing is you just say, "Okay, goodbye, you know. You ever call again I'll just hang up on you. I'm no longer a source for you."

RR: Yeah, I think that's an interesting point. I think we're pretty much getting to the conclusion of the interview. Is there anything else that you might want to add that comes to mind?

NR: I was trying to think about other things about Ed Muskie. Well, he's, I think in many ways he was a magnificent figure. I mean, he, I mean for those of us of the age that, he was more like a father figure in a sense, I mean he wasn't of our generation, so we couldn't really be buddy-buddy with him the way we could be with a guy like Curtis. But he, he certainly made an incredible impact on this state and certainly on the country. I was very disappointed that he didn't get to be president. And, and that was a, I mean, part of it we were operating against things that we didn't know about like the Nixon dirty tricks. And I can remember when that was happening, even before this incident in Manchester, I mean, what we were, the word was coming back to us that, you know, people were getting phone calls at two o'clock in the morning with, you know, people who were giving him a very hard time. Or they'd have some black guy show up on their door step and give them a hard time, saying he was working for Muskie, and all these kinds of things were happening, and this was in New Hampshire, which was the

And I can remember going to George Mitchell, who was running the campaign, and saying, you know, we don't know who's doing this but what we ought to do is, we think it's, we thought maybe it was the McGovern people, is just issue a thing telling the McGovern people to stop doing those kinds of things, and so we'd get out the word that it wasn't us that was perpetrating it. George didn't want to do that because he said we can't prove it's them. Well, that was a question of tactic, and, but we never really rebounded against that, and, and you know, we lost to the guy that was bound to lose to Nixon, you know. And I tried, I mean right at the very end we were still trying. I went down as a staff person for the convention delegates to Miami, and the purpose was basically to have me go out and try to drum up support for Muskie. And I can remember we were even dealing with the George Wallace people, you know, as some way to stop McGovern, and of course it didn't, it never came to anything. But I think, I think he would have been a fine president.

RR: Do you think his chances would have been pretty good had he won the primary?

NR: I think so. There was, again, it was, and I don't know who was responsible for this, but there was an overconfidence that had started because he was certainly way ahead the frontrunner, he made a marvelous impression on the country when he ran with Humphrey. A lot of people said if it was Muskie-Humphrey, Muskie would have won, and I think he would have. Humphrey had all of the baggage of the war. Muskie, although he supported the Vietnam War, didn't have the same, he wasn't the same lightning rod for a lot of people who just should have voted for him but didn't. And so, but the point I guess I was trying to make, there was an overconfidence. There were, I remember these bumper stickers that said, like, "President Muskie. There, don't you feel better already?" I don't know who came up with something that was that awful, you know. But that was sort of the tone, and our campaign didn't overcome it and I think in the long run if Muskie had gotten the nomination, it would have been a much different election. I mean, because, you know, George McGovern was way out to the left, and he wasn't a very good campaigner to begin with, and he just didn't fit the mood. Whereas I think Muskie would have been a much different comparison to a guy like Nixon. But you know, politics is often, you know, being nimble, and maybe that was one of the things that he, well, he could, you know, at times operate as a very smart politician. In this case it just was beyond him. Plus the fact that he had never run for anything more than state office in Maine, you know. In

every election, when you move from one level to another, it's a much different ball game.

RR: You have to adapt.

NR: Pardon?

RR: You have to adapt.

NR: You really do, you can't run it the same way you ran your other campaigns, I mean, I learned that the hard way the first time I ran for, I ran in a primary for congress and tried to run it the way I ran my campaign for state rep and you can't do that, you just have to do it all different manner.

RR: What did you change the second time?

NR: Well, the second time I, I mean, when I was running for congress, I mean I would first, like, go into people's houses every day. What you do the second time is you try to figure what you're going to do, you know, you have to run a television campaign, and you have to kind of pick an issue. I happened to pick an issue that was important to me. It wasn't important to the pollsters or the party or the political pundits, which happened to be the need for national health care. Nobody else had voiced that, and I said that's what I want to run on, and everybody said, you're crazy, and it turned out that (*unintelligible phrase*). I was a little, as everybody says, you were ahead of your time.

RR: Yeah. I'm going to conclude by asking you one more question. If you could describe your personal impression, your personal opinion of Senator Muskie in but one word, what do you think that word would be?

NR: I guess I'd use the word imposing.

RR: Really. That's interesting. A lot of people have actually said he is very authoritative and obviously being as tall as he is. And I think that might, do you think that might have also contributed to his successes as a pol-, do you think that is an asset? A virtue or a vice?

NR: Oh yeah, I think size in politics sometimes is. But I use imposing also in the sense of he was also a man with a great intellect. I mean, he was a very smart man. He, and that showed through, you know, he was very intelligent, and he knew the issues. He wasn't, you know, a glad hander who could, you know, just b.s. his way around. I mean, he had obviously thought a good deal about what he was talking about, and that showed through, and that was imposing as well as his size and his manner and his speech and so forth.

RR: Do you think he got more imposing as he progressed through the course of his career?

NR: Yeah, he probably did. He obviously, you know, sitting where he did in the Senate, and he made himself a very fine record in the United States Senate, which is not always easy to do. And, you know, and he worked himself to a position where he was chosen as a vice president.

And, of course, I was at that convention, and I was in an awkward position because his position was, you know, he wanted everybody to support Hubert Humphrey because Humphrey was going to give him, could give him the vice presidential nomination. And I was one of the few that didn't.

RR: Oh, really?

NR: And so, you know, I felt the pressure on that. I was voting for the peace plank in Vietnam, and I was a Robert Kennedy supporter, and I think if Kennedy had lived, Kennedy would have won the nomination. I mean, we had about a, I'd say when we started about a quarter of the delegation, and I think we would have gotten most of them even with Muskie against us, eventually. So, but of course we were very, very pleased when he got that nomination.

RR: Well, I guess that brings us to the conclusion. Thank you very much for taking the time out of your schedule to (*unintelligible phrase*).

NR: My pleasure.

End of Interview