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## Scowcroft, Brent oral history interview

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## **Interview with Brent Scowcroft by Don Nicoll**

*Summary Sheet and Transcript*

### **Interviewee**

Scowcroft, Brent

### **Interviewer**

Nicoll, Don

### **Date**

January 30, 2003

### **Place**

Washington, D.C.

### **ID Number**

MOH 391

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### **Biographical Note**

Brent Scowcroft was born March 19, 1925 in Ogden, Utah. He is a graduate of West Point and received his M.A. and Ph.D. in International Relations from Columbia University. He is president and founder of The Scowcroft Group and one of the country's leading experts on international policy. Brent Scowcroft has served as the National Security Advisor to both Presidents Ford and Bush. From 1982 to 1989, he was Vice Chairman of Kissinger Associates, Inc., an international consulting firm. In this capacity, he advised and assisted a wide range of U.S. and foreign corporate leaders on global joint venture opportunities, strategic planning and risk assessment. His prior 29 year military career began with graduation from West Point and concluded at the rank of Lieutenant General following service as the Deputy National Security Advisor. His Air Force service included Professor of Russian History at West Point; Assistant Air Attaché in Belgrade, Yugoslavia; Head of the Political Science Department at the Air Force Academy; Air Force Long Range Plans; Office of the Secretary of Defense International Security Assistance; Special Assistant to the Director of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Military Assistant to President Nixon. Out of uniform he continued in a public policy capacity by serving on the President's Advisory Committee on Arms Control, the Commission on Strategic Forces and the President's Special Review Board, also known as the Tower Commission. At the time of the interview, he served on numerous corporate and non-profit boards.

## Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: the Tower Commission.

## Indexed Names

Braithwaite, Karl  
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996  
Scowcroft, Brent  
Tower, John G.

## Transcript

**Don Nicoll:** It is Thursday, the 30th of January, 2003. We are in the offices of General Brent Scowcroft in Washington, D.C., and Don Nicoll is interviewing. General Scowcroft, had you encountered or worked at all with Senator Muskie before the Tower Commission?

**Brent Scowcroft:** I knew him before the Tower Commission, I had not worked with him but I think I first, well, it's vague in my mind when I first met him, but I think I met him first when he was senator and then I had, our paths crossed a couple of times when he was secretary of state. But did I really feel I knew him? No, because they were very chance meetings.

**DN:** And when he and you joined with Senator [John Goodwin] Tower on the Tower Commission, did you have any particular expectation of how Senator Muskie would tackle this very tough assignment?

**BS:** No, I didn't, because I knew him only as a public figure, as a senator, a presidential candidate and then as secretary of state, so I had, no. I was interested in working with him, I was looking forward to that. But I had no particular expectations.

**DN:** What was your impression of his attitude toward the work of the commission when you started?

**BS:** Well, I was very pleased with his attitude, and I'm not sure I can separate what it was when we started with what it was when we finished. But it was the smallest commission I've ever been on, just three people. And I've got to say, it was one of the most efficient commissions I've been on, because there were only three people, two Republicans and a Democrat. And, of course, Senator Muskie was the Democrat, and so I didn't know what kind of a problem we would, would develop because of that. Because if, while this was an investigation only into certain things, it definitely had political overtones, which could have become a partisan issue. And I think we were all conscious of that. And there may have been a couple of exchanges in which that was an issue, but on the whole it was three people working to try to get a job done as honestly and effectively as we could, and that was the spirit in which he went about it. It was a good relationship.

**DN:** What was his style in dealing with the rather difficult political and policy issues that you encountered?

**BS:** Well, he was a very interesting individual, because he has a very affable personality, likes to talk, and very warm and friendly. But he has an absolutely, kind of absolutely explosive temper, which I saw more than once during the course of it, and something would set him off and he would be, the violent verbal eruptions. But then, just as suddenly the storm was over and we were back to doing business normally.

And on the political things, we worked out a system, and we bent over backwards not to put any particular aspect of our investigations into a framework where politics were likely to come up, and that worked quite well. It was partly conscious, partly unconscious that we would just go about it in a way that I was conscious that he would have problems signing on to certain things I thought we had to sign on to. So we got around it by doing (*unintelligible word*).

**DN:** Did he articulate, in your recollection, what he thought the basic task of the commission was, or what the results of the commission's works should be?

**BS:** Now that's getting tough. I don't, I'll be honest, I don't recall that. We were the first look into the circumstances. And I think that this was a commission set up, I guess it's not technically right to say the president, although it's a presidential commission, but at least I was asked to serve by the president's chief of staff, and it was to look into the facts of what happened. And it was not a legal commission, but simply designed to illuminate and make public the circumstances of what actually had gone on.

**DN:** And you've indicated that the relationship between the three members of the commission was in general quite affable.

**BS:** Oh, yes, it was, it was very friendly. And interestingly enough, it turned out that Senator Muskie lived less than a mile from where I lived, and so we would have these meetings, many of which would last for a considerable number of hours, and sometimes until late in the day and so on. So frequently, I have no idea how he got to work ordinarily, but frequently I would give him a ride home because it was right on my way. And we had what I found extremely valuable, wonderful conversations. About everything, including his run for the presidency, that famous -

**DN:** So-called crying?

**BS:** Yes, and so on, and he explained it all and so, and I just found him a fascinating man.

**DN:** What did you conclude about him in terms of his personality and what drove him?

**BS:** I believe that he was, my sense is he was very patriotic, and he was in fact driven by this notion of public and patriotic service, and that he thought he had something to offer and he wanted to be a good public servant. And I think he thought that he would make a good president. And I'm not sure that that's not a correct assessment.

**DN:** Now you were, from at least an outsider's observation, three very different personalities on that commission.

**BS:** Very, yes.

**DN:** And yet you were able to come together reasonably well, apparently.

**BS:** Yes, we did. I don't know how many hours we spent together, but it was a lot. That commission was very, very time consuming. And we had long discussions, we had long, we'd get into the partisanship, especially when we were drafting some very delicate descriptions that would not violate Muskie's sense. And would, the thing we didn't want is for it to look like a Democrat and two Republicans parting company here and there and elsewhere. So it was a laborious process, and of course John Tower is a colorful personality in his own right. So it was, but it was a very interesting time for me, and I enjoyed it, thoroughly.

**DN:** I was thinking that you must have had some rare views of those two very different products of the Senate, interacting.

**BS:** I did, and it was colorful.

**DN:** Karl Braithwaite, who was staff to Senator Muskie for the commission, has told me that you were a great help to him in the drafting of the conclusions. That was his staff assignment, and he said you worked directly with him in guiding him in the policy.

**BS:** Well, you know, this dealt, the whole crisis dealt heavily with the national security role of the president, the National Security Council and the staff and so on and so forth. And since I had been National Security advisor, I had an intimacy with the operation and the way it operated that was much more detailed than either Senator Tower or Senator Muskie. And I probably had more detailed ideas about how to fix some of the problems that we uncovered, and so, yes, I was heavily involved in the drafting of the report.

**DN:** Was Senator Muskie one who depended on you on those kinds of details and insights into the system?

**BS:** I wouldn't put, I wouldn't put it that way. It was just a very natural, just, the way it came, but I did notice, especially in the two or three press conferences that we held, that John Tower would field all the questions, but he would pass most of the nasty ones over to me. So I expect, you know, in terms of the detailed knowledge of how the system worked, they both relied on me to a certain extent.

**DN:** Did Senator Muskie accept without question your descriptions or analyses?

**BS:** Well, Senator Muskie didn't accept very much without question. He, you know. But after discussion, yeah, I don't, I still do not perceive any different philosophical approach between the two of us on what ought to be done.

**DN:** But did you find him testing you when you said it?

**BS:** Oh yes, oh yes. No, he was, he was quick to question “why this and why that” and “what were we getting at,” oh absolutely. He took very good care of himself in these discussions.

**DN:** As you look back on the work of the commission and its report, what for you were the most important accomplishments of the commission?

**BS:** I think the most important accomplishment was that we pointed out how a process can get off the rails, how certain things can happen, not because people are seeking to subvert the system, but because in zeal to get things done, corners were cut, checks were not made, that kind of thing. I think it was, I think it was a good look at what can go wrong when there is a strong interest in getting something done.

**DN:** Are there any other observations you have about Senator Muskie and your experience, or, let me back up. After the Tower Commission, did you and he have many occasions to interact?

**BS:** Well, I wouldn't say we had many, but we had some. And I found them very warm and very friendly. I would say that out of this experience I considered Senator Muskie a good friend. I enjoyed his company, I enjoyed his thoughts. And he had a charming wife.

**DN:** And do you have any other observations about him as a public figure?

**BS:** No, I don't, I don't think so. As I say, I think he had a fine mind, a dedication to service and so on, that made him a good public figure. I think part of his problem in general in public life had to be this explosive temper that he had, because it's, especially for politicians, when you lose control of your emotions, things happen that are, that are not so good. That, I think that probably was a problem for him. But other than that, I think he was an outstanding public servant.

**DN:** Thank you very much, General

**BS:** You're very welcome.

*End of Interview*