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## Stafford, Robert T. oral history interview

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## **Interview with Robert T. Stafford by Don Nicoll**

*Summary Sheet and Transcript*

### **Interviewee**

Stafford, Robert T.

### **Interviewer**

Nicoll, Don

### **Date**

December 4, 2001

### **Place**

Rutland, Vermont

### **ID Number**

MOH 322

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### **Biographical Note**

Robert Theodore Stafford was born in Rutland, Vermont on August 8, 1913 and educated in the public schools of Rutland. He graduated from Middlebury College in 1935 and attended the University of Michigan Law School. He graduated from the Boston University Law School in 1938. He served as Rutland County prosecuting attorney from 1938 to 1942. During World War II, from 1942 to 1946, he was a lieutenant commander in the United States Navy. He also served during the Korean conflict from 1951 to 1953 and was a captain in the United States Navy Reserve. He was Rutland County State's attorney from 1947 to 1951, deputy State attorney general from 1953 to 1955; and State attorney general from 1955 to 1957. He served as lieutenant Governor from 1957 to 1959 and as Governor of Vermont from 1959 to 1961. He was elected as a Republican to the Eighty-seventh Congress in 1960, reelected to the five succeeding Congresses, and served from January 3, 1961 until his resignation from the House of Representatives on September 16, 1971. He then became a U.S. Senator, filling the vacancy caused by the death of Winston L. Prouty. He was reelected in 1976 and again in 1982 for the term ending January 3, 1989. He opted not to run again in 1988. During his time in the Senate, he served as chairman of the Committee on Environment and Public Works (Ninety-seventh through Ninety-ninth Congresses). Stafford died on December 23, 2006 in Rutland.

### **Scope and Content Note**

Interview includes discussions of: Muskie's skiing experience; House Armed Services Committee; Public Works Committee; Labor and Human Resources Committee; Education Committee; and Environment and Public Works Committee.

## **Indexed Names**

Aiken, George D. (George David), 1892-1984  
Bailey, Consuelo Northrup  
Cole, Edward "Eddie"  
Daschle, Thomas  
Davis, Deane Chandler  
Ford, Gerald R., 1913-  
Hatch, Orrin, 1934-  
Leahy, Patrick J.  
Mitchell, George J. (George John), 1933-  
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996  
Prouty, Winston L. "Win"  
Randolph, Jennings  
Reagan, Ronald  
Snowe, Olympia J. (Olympia Jean), 1947-  
Stafford, Bert L.  
Stafford, Helen  
Stafford, Robert T.

## **Transcript**

**Hon. Robert Stafford:** . . . and there we were able to repay our social engagements for each year by inviting about a dozen couples to spend an evening on the boat with us.

**Don Nicoll:** It is Tuesday, the 4th day of December, 2001. We are at the home of Senator Robert T. Stafford in Rutland, Vermont at 901 Sugarwood Hill Road in Rutland. Good morning Senator Stafford.

**RS:** Good morning.

**DN:** Could you tell us your full name, your date of birth, and the names of your parents?

**RS:** Certainly. My full name is Robert T. Stafford. I was born in 1913 on August 8th in the city of Rutland. My father was Bert L. Stafford, who was born in Tinmouth, Vermont, on a very large farm that his father had acquired right after the Civil War with earnings he got from working in the Springfield rifle plant throughout the war. He was a native of South Wallingford, Vermont, another small town. My father was an ambitious man who had managed to get himself through not only the six years of school mandatory in Vermont, but two years in Wallingford, Vermont, six miles away, and that got him into what then passed for a high school called the

Limb Classical Institute, which got him into Middlebury College where he graduated. And immediately on graduation signed on to go to the Philippine Islands where we had just defeated the Spanish, with forty-nine other graduating students from across the country. They were an early version of the units we sent over in recent years to help people in countries that have been subject of war or simply need help in learning modern things.

**DN:** What was the organization that sponsored that?

**RS:** It's simply, frankly slipped my mind at the moment. But the name they were all known by was the, they were called the Thomasites because they had been carried over in an old Army transport called the Thomas. And when they reunited, they were known as the Thomasites. My father got malaria and so, after a year and a half, and he was shipped home through China, and studied law and became eventually a leading lawyer, a trial lawyer, in one of the law firms here in Rutland called Lawrence, Stafford, & O'Brien.

He also became a banker to the extent of president of one of the local little banks, and vice president of another. Those jobs were presiding titles over boards, and not operators of the banks. The operators of the banks in those days were called the cashiers. And so he was a lawyer by profession and a banker simply by title and presiding over meeting of the boards of directors.

He, he wanted me, as I told you, to go to Middlebury. I wanted to go to the Naval Academy, but I got a football scholarship at Middlebury and he said, "Take a year there and if you still want to go to the Naval Academy I won't object." But he knew if I went to Middlebury, I'd never want to leave. And I didn't, fortunately, because my senior year I went back for early training, after incidentally two months on the farm he'd been born on, which was tougher work than football training camp ever was. And my senior year I came back for early training and met a freshman girl who was there for orientation, and by the time I had known her three or four weeks I had decided I wanted to be part of her freshman orientation. The result is four children, and we've been married sixty-three years.

**DN:** That's a wonderful story.

**RS:** Yeah. That preceded my getting really into politics, but when I came home from law school at Michigan, where I met Gerry Ford incidentally, and at Boston University, I realized I didn't know anything about trying cases in court. They taught you how to appeal a case you lost, but not how to win it so you didn't have to appeal it. And so I got myself elected city prosecutor, which was a very small job with virtually no pay, no assistant, no office, but I got to try cases, a lot of them, in the local municipal court for very small matters like speeding, parking illegally, occasionally getting intoxicated, and things like that. And for a couple of years, of course, I was embarrassed by every experienced lawyer who represented the person I was prosecuting. I'm sure my father suffered seeing, as an experienced lawyer, seeing his son be worked over in court.

**DN:** Did he give you any advice?

**RS:** Once in a while, but he knew I just had to learn how to do it. And after two years of

humiliation I began to win my share in the third year. Then World War II came along and I was gone almost five years, came back, got elected state's attorney of Rutland County unopposed. And, now that got me into serious trials against opponents who had more experience, and for cases where serious crimes had been committed. And that lasted until the next war came along, and as I've mentioned earlier, I was called up for another year and a half during that war. And at the end of it, as I was being released from active duty, the attorney general elect of Vermont called and asked if I would be interested in serving as his deputy. And that seemed like a good way to get back into law, with my father dead and the law firm gone, so I accepted.

And this is the interesting note, I got a call shortly afterwards from the governor elect who I knew didn't really trust the attorney general elect very much, and thought I suppose that sticking Stafford in there might bring the governor's viewpoints to the attorney general's better than otherwise might happen. Anyway, that was my surmise, but I served two years as attorney deputy, and then two years as attorney general. And in Vermont it was a fascinating job because you were advisor to the governor, you were advisor to the members of the legislature, you were advisor to the department heads of the state government. You had one deputy and one detective and that was it, but Vermont was very small and pretty well behaved in those days compared to now.

**DN:** Did, were the cases tried by the state's attorneys?

**RS:** Usually the major cases, homicides for example, were tried by the attorney general. And state's attorneys, who were usually younger than I was and less experienced, frankly I think were glad they had me come and try the case so that if I didn't get a conviction they could blame it on me. But there weren't very many homicides in Vermont in those days.

**DN:** You went on to become lieutenant governor.

**RS:** I was planning two years, two terms as attorney general and then go back to Rutland, and by then I was an established lawyer and thought I should make my home there with Helen and the four children. But in the middle of my first year as attorney general the lieutenant governor who was a woman, the first, I've forgotten her name, 88 is costing me my memory of a lot of names. But she called and said, AI don't think Vermont will,@ Consuelo [Northrup] Bailey was her name, AI don't think that Vermont will elect me governor and so I'm not going to run again, and I won't announce that for a month if you want to take a shot at it.@ So I did, and that's how I became lieutenant governor.

One sidelight you might like to have, but not for publication, is this: at the start of that campaign I was not the favorite. The favorite was a man following the usual route, and his name was John Hancock of Hardwick. He was a dignified and rather stiff, middle age or older gentleman. But in the course of one debate he and I had, the master of ceremonies was a gentleman named Rea Lefevre, who owned a circus. And I'm sure by accident, he introduced my opponent as John Hardcock of Hanwick, and the uproar of laughter that followed was really, started John Hancock on a slide from which he never really recovered.

Well that's how I got to be lieutenant governor, and then in the middle of that Joe Johnson said,

AI'm only going to be here one more term, Bob, and so you ought to try to be next. And you help me prepare the budget for next year if you will and we'll, and then I'll leave and you're it.@ And so starting with lieutenant governor, I went to a New England Governors Conference that was called for, Northeastern Governors I guess, it was going to be held in Vermont, and that's where I first met Ed Muskie. And I suggested to him, although I didn't know him well at all, that he might like to try skiing, and he did and it was virtually an addiction. He enjoyed it so much, I don't know whether he did later in life, but at that point he appeared absolutely fascinated with his first two or three days of skiing at Mt. Mansfield.

**DN:** I think the only thing that probably prevented that being a long term activity was his back injuries that he'd suffered before he was governor and caused him problems ever after. But he had, I believe he'd done a little skiing when he was a boy, but it was in Rumford in the days of a strap across your instep.

**RS:** Yeah, well that's the way I started, too, all of my kids and I. But by the time the children were hardly beyond toddlers there were bindings and, of course, we had people coming over from Switzerland and Austria to teach us how to ski in the modern fashion. So that's where I first met Ed and first got to be on a speaking acquaintance with him.

And then of course we next became in close contact when I got down in Washington, and after enduring ten years on the House Armed Services Committee, where they stuck me because we were again at war, in Vietnam. And with my Naval background they sent me to Vietnam twice, with two or three others like me, to spend I think two weeks full tour of the entire theater. The last one turned out to be a slight disaster for me personally, because with my duties concluded I managed to get on a plane which caught a tail wind, 200 mile an hour tail wind. And with one stop in Honolulu we made it, we picked up a day at the international date line and got into Washington in time for me to catch a plane to Vermont and speak to a state association of builders. And in the course of it, of course, they wanted to know how things were going in Vietnam. And I said, AAs far as I can tell from personal inspection, flying around the country in helicopters with a couple of gun ships with us, and on the ground a lot, things seem to be going reasonably well.@ I went to sleep that night in a hotel in Montpelier, woke up in the morning, there was a newspaper stuck under the desk, under the door, and in big print it said on it, ATET offensive began last night@. It made me look like an idiot, and it certainly made our intelligence service look like a bunch of damn fools.

**DN:** During those days did you have much of an opportunity to talk with Senator Aiken about your perspectives on the war and his?

**RS:** Yeah, we discussed some. Not really a great deal, although he was, while he was there, since he was the senior member of our delegation, I went to his office when something in the House and Senate looked like it might bother us both. And I distinctly remember after Lola Aiken was on his staff, and later his wife, but usually we hadn't gone very far, it would be [Senator Winston L.] Win Prouty, [Senator] George Aiken, myself, when Aiken would say, AI think we'd better get the oracle in here.@ That meant Lola, she wanted him to hear what the discussion was and she was very valuable to him because he listened to her advice. She may have been the only one, she really did, but he listened very carefully to what Lola recommended,

and Lola was a very sharp individual and with very good judgment. I think she contributed quite a lot to Aiken's very successful tour of duty as a United States Senator.

My own contact with Muskie began in earnest when I, when Prouty died in the summer of '71 and I was appointed to the five and a half remaining years of his term, and then stayed two more terms in my own right. But one interesting footnote to this, and this is about me, not really Ed, but it leads up to him. With Prouty dead, the governor, Deane [Chandler] Davis, called and said he would appoint me as his successor if I would promise that I would run for the office when it became vacant. And, and so, (*phone interruption*) so we caught a plane and, I guess it was arranged for us, and flew up to Montpelier and Deane swore me in, having voted on the military budget for the following year in the House that morning before I left. And it was somewhat controversial, so they needed the votes.

In the course of my being sworn in, another call from the White House came in and they said, AWe've got to have you back here in the Senate, signed in and ready to vote on the military appropriations at ten o'clock tomorrow morning.@ So a plane picked us up again in the afternoon in Burlington, flew us back to the Capital, and I was there at ten o'clock. And according to some of the elder senators, who thought it was something of a joke but they kidded me about it ever after, I'm the only living American, or dead, who ever voted on the same bill in both houses within one twenty-four hour period.

**DN:** So much for the separation of the two houses.

**RS:** But I had long had a major interest, thwarted somewhat by my life in the Armed Services Committee, in education and in the environment. After all, mid-western acid was damaging our maple crops and I was well aware of that from the complaints I heard during my days in the state capital. And education had always been of interest to me. And I had delivered my high school commencement address on the value of a college education, which may not have convinced anybody else but convinced myself. So when I got in the Senate there was a chance to get on Ed's committee on environment, the subcommittee on environment, or the committee on I guess it was labor and human resources, or environment, public works.

**DN:** It was the public works committee.

**RS:** Yeah, I got on his committee and there was a vacancy also from Prouty's death on the education and labor committee, or labor and human resources committee, so I grabbed that also. And those were the two committees that I served on for the next eighteen years, and principally on the education committee and on the environment committee. And Ed was the leader, I believe, in environmental interests in the whole Senate by far. So he was the one who aroused in me a willingness to go to war for environmental issues, and I did throughout the rest of my career, while he was there and, much as I missed him after he was gone, I carried on as best I could.

**DN:** Now you became the chairman of the full committee in '81.

**RS:** Yes, that's right. Well I was in a happy spot when the time came, when Reagan was

elected I was the senior Republican on both the labor and human resources committee and on the environment public works committee. But I knew that one other senator desperately wanted the labor and human resources committee chairmanship. He's still there, Orrin Hatch, he was a young man then. So I said, "Orrin, if you will give me your word of honor that I will be chairman of the subcommittee on education as long as we control it, I will with some reluctance take the committee on environment and public works and chair that." And he, we shook hands on it, he kept his word, and that left me the chairmanship of both committees.

And in the last two years on the labor and human resources committee, it seems to me, oh, Jennings Randolph had been chairman of it. When I became chairman, he was such a gracious gentleman, he said, "Well Robert, you're the chairman and I'll be at your side." And on the other committee, on the subcommittee I think it was, I can't think of his name, he was a famous football player, but he was too sick to do the, preside over the committee and going to retire at the end of the same year I did. But those last two years, his staff and mine agreed that, I'll think of his name in a minute, you just tell him what he needs to say and he'll say it. So in effect, and off the record, I helped him run the committee, though I never presided over it, during the last couple of years. He was so sick, near the end he wouldn't come out to see anybody in his office but, unless you knew him very well. Clinton Burdick was his name. His father had been, he said, "Bob you never heard much of me because I was the blocking bag in Nebraska for that very famous guy who ran." A nice, awful nice guy.

**DN:** Very quiet man as I recall.

**RS:** Yes, he was.

**DN:** Your description of your own experiences in the Senate raises the question, what was the mood like and what were the relationships like in the public works and the environment subcommittee when you went on in 1971?

**RS:** Well my general impression was that things were quite collegial in the Senate generally, and even when there was disagreement, that was not carried on in the brash way it is often today. Even when you were mad at somebody, you were especially polite to them. And Ed was, I think, a highly respected leader of the subcommittee on environment, so it made it easy for us to move ahead in the committee. We had a difficult time in a lot of the environmental causes, especially it was very difficult to get the lead out of paint, in, because of the effect of lead in schools and so on on children.

It was even harder to get the lead out of gasoline, and whether Ed was still there or not, he may have left when that happened. But I do remember the three heads of the major manufacturers: Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors, met him in my office. And Ed Cole, who was then president and general manager of General Motors, which controlled fifty-three percent of the total market in this country at that time, shocked the other two by saying, "Gentlemen, we're going to take the lead out of gasoline and we're going to do it right away." And those two guys went into a dancing tantrum of dismay when he said it. But there wasn't anything they could do, he had it set and that happened.



**DN:** Had you had any forewarning that he was going to say that?

**RS:** No. I think he had made up his mind to take everybody by surprise so that, of course I was delighted. And I can remember another thing that happened, whether Ed was there or not, I got a word from the head of one of the big chain restaurants, the only big one then, and once again names are getting away from me. But he wrote me, I was, we were complaining about their use of something or other in containers for food and so on, and he wrote me a letter saying, AIf you will submit proof to me that it is, should be stopped, I will stop.@ And we did, and he did it, and that was the first big chain restaurant, so. You know it, you would . . .

**DN:** Was this -

**RS:** At sixty-eight [*sic* eighty-eight], names just suddenly get away from me. It was the first big chain national restaurants, fast food.

**DN:** Well, let's see, was it Howard Johnson?

**RS:** Yeah. That probably was after Ed was gone. But while Ed was there, he was our leader and I was very happy to be on his team with him and do everything I could to help him. And I thought then that he was one of the finest men I ever had the privilege of meeting or serving with. I remember his leaving for the Department of State, being secretary of state, that's what made me the head of the committee I guess, or at least the leading Republican until Reagan took over.

I remember once I was in an argument with somebody while Ed was still there, and each time he asked me if I would do something, forgotten what it was, I said, ANo.@ And the second time I said no, I remember Ed got up and staring us all in the face, and he said, AJust remember that when a Vermonter says no, he means no.@ And that carried the point.

**DN:** Did you as New Englanders, in addition to the personal feelings, feel that you were somehow akin?

**RS:** I think probably we did, we'd both gone, he'd gone to the same kind of a small college I had, I think he went to Bowdoin, didn't he?

**DN:** He went to Bates.

**RS:** Bates, yeah, well Middlebury and Bates were much alike in those days and still.

**DN:** You and he had also had Navy service in WWII.

**RS:** Yeah.

**DN:** He went from being a lawyer to being an engineer, a diesel engineer.

**RS:** Oh, in the Navy.

**DN:** In the Navy.

**RS:** Yeah, well, the black gang.

**DN:** Now, you've mentioned the issues around lead and lead pollution. Were there other major environmental problems that you dealt with?

**RS:** Yes, there were a lot that we were beginning to deal with. The best summary ever written of what I did and, was by one of the reporters for the *Rutland Herald*, who does a weekly, short columns. (*Short pause*) We were dealing with clean water, for another, and safe drinking water for another, and clean air, that was a major because of the damage being done in much of the country, but especially in the East from the mid west power plants, big factories and so on, that were burning coal. And the carbon dioxide and acids that were generated, especially the acids were flowing eastward in the air currents and damaging the foliage of eastern trees. And in our case, maple syrup was one of the better known, not very large but important to us, crops that damaging the maple trees damaged the, cut down on the maple crop. And forests generally were a major harvest in Vermont and their well-being was being damaged by the flow of contaminants in the air, so we were fighting for water and air both. Did I mention getting paint out of, lead out of paint? Yeah.

So water, various aspects of clean water, safe drinking water, clean air, getting the things out of that, were all struggles that went on through the time Ed and I were together. And when he left to be secretary of state they continued and we finally got things fairly well fixed up by the time I left. But now, with the population gone from a hundred and forty million when WWII started to three hundred million today, the world population from one billion in the year 1800 to six billion now, all those problems are beginning to recur, because there are so many people that they're beginning to overwhelm some of the resources of the globe.

I think the world has to come to a realization about population control. It's too bad to have it happen through AIDS and fighting. It ought to be done by people voluntarily, and that's why I think today that worldwide education, especially in the uneducated parts of the world, is extraordinarily important because they've got to understand why they should not be having eight or nine children, and why if they overwork their fields they're liable to turn them into bare ground. And if they cut down the trees and cut down the foliage on the ground, they're eliminating the principle source of the oxygen that we live on and can't do without.

It took millions and millions of years after water was here before the first life appeared in the earth, in the waters, and millions more before plant life developed that used carbon, that got the oxygen out of carbon dioxide in the water, and enough of it out there so that animals in the form of fish and shell life could derive their oxygen from the water. And then millions of more before plants crawled out of the water and began to flourish on land, and then their systems separated out the oxygen from the carbon dioxide in the air. And if we cut down too many trees and eliminate too many grasses, we're going to seriously diminish the supply of oxygen that keeps us alive.

So looking down the road a long ways, when you and I won't be here I guess, population control has just got to be brought under control, understandingly and worldwide. I think the Western world understands it pretty well now, but China's got 1.3 billion people right there, and India another billion. And if Ed were here I think he would be joining me and anyone else in efforts to try to make people understand the consequences if they don't control the size of this whole world population, because it'll only support so much. And I think we're overburdening it right now, that's partly why the world temperature's globally has gone up three degrees, and weather patterns are beginning to be distorted. Like right here, this is the driest it's ever been in Vermont, this last couple of months.

**DN:** That's true across northern New England.

**RS:** Yes, I think it is. And there are these violent thunderstorms and rainstorms and snowstorms elsewhere where they, in some cases, they haven't been before. But over all, the world is three degrees warmer right now. As an aside um, it has seemed to me maybe that there's one favorable aspect to having the Chinese have 1.3 billion people; they're so goddamn busy trying to feed themselves, they haven't got time to cause any mischief anywhere else.

But to show you how that's grown, the last year I was in the Senate, which was in 1988, through Pat Leahy really, Tom Daschle who was a freshman senator and his wife, and Pat and his wife, and Helen and I arranged an invitation from the Chinese government to come as their guests for a two weeks tour of China and Tibet. This is when we were not on all that friendly relations. They allowed us to be flown in to Beijing on an American plane, but then it had to go back to Manilla and wait for us. And they provided a good old Boeing 727, the old three engine plane, in good shape and nicely taken care of, and they flew us around China for about ten days. And then they put us on a special 707 that provided service from an elevation of about three hundred feet in China to Tibet, twelve thousand three hundred feet, twelve thousand higher than we were ready for, and then we were the guests of the Chinese government through the Tibet government for four days there. At that point the total population there was 1.1 billion, and it's already 1.3 billion, just a few years after we were there. In spite of their Draconian attempts to limit it.

It was a fascinating trip. We had the chairman of their committee on agriculture, if that would be a proper name, and some escorting people who made the whole tour with us, and an instantaneous translator who was very good. I remember once Daschle said to him, AWould you tell us in English what we're eating?@ And he finished saying that, I said, ATom, shut up.@ Most of us thought it was easier to eat it if we didn't know. But it was an enjoyable trip, and I'm glad it was one of the last things we did. Actually Pat Leahy did the arranging for it. I think he thought I ought to see China before I got home. You've learned a lot about me and not half as much as I should have told you about Ed.

**DN:** Well, I have some other questions for you there. First, you mentioned the problem of acid rain and its effect on the trees, and particularly the maples in Vermont. And early in the conversation you indicated that you had been aware of this when you were in state government.

**RS:** Yeah, well I was aware, yes, I was aware of that. The maple industry was beginning to complain that something, and they believed it was acid from the western industries and so forth -

*End of Side A*  
*Side B*

**DN:** . . . well, this is not a new problem.

**RS:** I think it was not generally known through the state, but yes, I think our forester was well aware that something was beginning to damage our trees, and of course whether I was attorney general or lieutenant governor or governor, the information, they were making sure I got the information.

**DN:** Back to Ed Muskie and your experiences with him. You've mentioned that he was highly respected in the Senate and particularly in the work he was doing in the environment subcommittee. What was it about his style that made him so respected?

**RS:** Well, I think he was considered a straightforward, reliable guy, he meant what he said, and he would stand by what he said. And if he was your friend, he was your friend, he would try to help you, and of course he expected you would help him. But I personally liked Ed beyond any official relation or what we were doing, so it was very easy for me to, if he asked me to do something, to try to do it.

I remember that he ran for president, and in my opinion he would have made a very good president had he succeeded. But I remember, maybe this is forgotten, that that sonofabitch who published the paper in lower New Hampshire, Ed came home all tired out from an all night campaign venture and sitting on a park bench somewhere he read a copy of that bird's paper that said his wife was a whore, or words to that effect, and burst into tears. And somehow that turned some of the press, they turned it into a comic up there, or a sad affair, however. But I didn't, I think that in my opinion damaged his campaign somewhat at a critical, early time. But I, had I been a Democrat I would have voted for Ed for president.

**DN:** As you look back on his career and his work in the Senate, what for you were his greatest accomplishments?

**RS:** In my opinion it was his leading the charge successfully for some of the first major pieces of environmental legislation. But he was good at everything he did and everything he handled. And I distinctly remember the senator who followed, the lady senator -

**DN:** Senator Snowe? Senator Snowe? Olympia Snowe?

**RS:** Yeah, I remember her, I think she liked Ed. But I'm trying to remember the name of the guy who is now trying, without much success, to bring the various fighting people, disagreeing people -

**DN:** George Mitchell.

**RS:** George Mitchell, yeah. He became majority leader as I recall, and he was a very able guy.

He once said in a large public meeting that he considered Ed Muskie the leading environmentalist in the United States, and then he looked over at me and I said, AI agree. @

**DN:** Thank you very much, Senator Stafford.

*End of Interview*