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Interview with Robert S. Strauss by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Strauss, Robert S.

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

January 29, 2003

Place

Washington, DC

ID Number

MOH 397

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Biographical Note

Robert S. Strauss, a Texas native, founded the law firm in which he still practices in 1945. He was Democratic National Committee Chairman from 1973 to 1976, Jimmy Carter's campaign manager in 1976 and 1980, special trade representative for President Carter in 1977, and his personal representative in the Middle East negotiations. He was U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union/Russian Federation during the transition in that country.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: first recollection of Muskie; 1972 presidential campaign; personal impressions of Muskie; Lyndon Johnson; Watergate; social interactions with Muskie; Muskie dropping out of the primary; George McGovern; Secretary of State, 1980-1981; and Muskie's post public office years.

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Transcript

The interview has been slightly revised at the request of the interviewee

Don Nicoll: It is Wednesday, the 29th of January, 2003. We are in Washington, D.C. in the Robert S. Strauss building talking to Ambassador Robert S. Strauss. Don Nicoll is the interviewer. Ambassador, when did you first meet Ed Muskie?

Robert Strauss: The first recollection I have of Ed Muskie is that he came to Dallas, Texas, when I was spending about half of my time in Dallas and half of my time in Washington. And he was speaking and I was, it was the year he ran for the presidency, the year before I think, in his senatorial work, so that would have been 1969 or 1970.

DN: In sixty-nine or seventy.

RS: Sixty-nine or seventy, I was spending most of the time in Texas. I was to introduce Muskie at the evening dinner that he was speaking in, it was at a country club, and I got out early to greet him and we went in the locker room where he wanted to change, he was going to change clothes. And this was a paid speech, so he knew he was going to have to give it and devote some time to it, so he showered and changed clothes in the men's locker room. And he and I were sitting back there and I still remember he ordered an old fashioned, and I thought that they were going to order bourbon and branch water here in Texas, and he's ordering an old fashioned. But we had a nice conversation that night, and I don't recall having met him before then. I probably had, but I don't recall. That's my first real recollection. And he spoke nicely that evening, and we had a nice time, and I remember that I was impressed by him.

Then in 1970, this may have been 1970, as a matter of fact, I may have already been treasurer of the Democratic Party and, but I went up in early 1970 to become treasurer of the Democratic

Party. Hubert Humphrey asked me to come up and be treasurer, and I got myself elected treasurer. So when I was serving as treasurer, was when I came to know Ed Muskie really more than just casually.

DN: How did he strike you both as a candidate and as a senator in those days?

RS: It's very interesting. Knowing I was going to talk with you today, I have been thinking back over those days and these questions. As you might imagine, I've done a number of interviews like this with a number of different, many different people, and so I kind of know the routine, and I. It's been so many years that I tend to forget so I was trying to think through them in my own mind this morning while I was shaving, that's about all the time I've devoted to this.

But I was thinking about the questions you're asking, and I remember very vividly that, how impressed I was with Ed Muskie. And I also remember while I was treasurer I did something I really shouldn't have done. Berl Bernhard was working for Ed Muskie then and he was telling me what terrible shape their finances were in, how tight they were, and that he really needed to raise an extra ten thousand dollars. Could I give it to him as treasurer of the Democratic Party? I said, "No, no way, I can't even come out for him. I want to be neutral, but I like him well enough that I'll make a couple of calls to friends of mine and see if we can't put together ten thousand dollars."

In those days, you dealt in cash quite often, and I managed to scrape ten thousand dollars together, a thousand or two I probably put in myself and the rest I raised from two or three people around town. And so I got him ten thousand dollars, and that was early in the game, but it wasn't because I was for him publicly, or that I had any influence, but I did have the purse strings of the DNC and I did like Ed Muskie, I was impressed with him. I thought he would be a strong candidate, and I thought he was a man of great character, and he never did anything to cause me to change my mind.

DN: And you watched him obviously during that campaign, and then in the wake of that had to deal with the Nixon years.

RS: Yes, I wanted, let me dwell just a minute more about my first impressions of him, because this is a very interesting sort of thing I'm getting ready to tell you, I think. Larry O'Brien was the chairman of the Democratic Party, and Larry and I were close, close friends, and Larry gave a series of dinners at his apartment for the candidates, the people running for president, or seeking the nomination on the Democratic side. And there would just be Larry O'Brien, and me as treasurer, and those candidates who were available, and usually they all were.

So you'd have [Henry] Scoop Jackson, and Hubert Humphrey, and Ed Muskie, and I think at that time there was Birch Bayh still and, whoever it was. And O'Brien and I would assess them later that night or the next day in the office, just in a gossipy way of who was the most impressive. And I remember Larry saying, "You know Bob, after several of these, Ed Muskie is still, after several months of this, he's easily the most impressive of these people, these candidates, in terms of electability, I think." And I sort of shared that view. I didn't think he was going to get the nomination necessarily, but I thought he had what it took to get elected. There was something,

as you know, Lincolnesque about him, there was something that appeared strong about him, and a man of conviction of faith. He was a very impressive man.

DN: In your dealings with President Johnson, did you ever get any direct comments about Ed Muskie?

RS: Never, never, I wouldn't have. In the first place, I wasn't as close to Lyndon Johnson as people think. I can't say that out publicly, people say, well he's disowning him, but the truth of the matter is I always worked for Johnson, but I, if Johnson had a meeting for a dozen people, I would not have been included in that. If he'd had a meeting of twenty-five or thirty people, I would have been included in that. So that, you have enough political background to know what I'm talking about when I describe it that way. But Johnson, who I admired and still do, I wasn't that close to him.

I remember when Johnson died, I was hesitant about taking calls from the press and going on television. The day of his death everyone wanted me, I was a natural, by then I had just been elected chairman of the Democratic Party then, and a Texan and close to Lyndon Johnson, quote, unquote, when the truth of the matter is I really wasn't. And I remember telling my wife that you're going to have to tell everybody that calls, I'm out and can't be reached, because I don't want to go on television, I don't want to comment on this. And she said, "Why?" And I said, "Well, if I tell the truth and say I really wasn't that close to Lyndon Johnson, you ought to talk to so and so, and so and so, and so and so, they'll say, 'well that rotten bastard, he's already disowning him, disavowing a relationship before the man's even buried'. And if I don't, if I lie and act as if I know Johnson well, my friends I really care about are going to say, 'well Strauss is just a lying s.o.b., he wasn't that close to Lyndon Johnson'. So I can't win either way and I'm just not going to talk." So that's the story. Ed Muskie never crossed Johnson's lips in my lifetime, in my presence.

DN: In the wake of the '72 election, given your position with the Democratic Party, how deeply did you get involved in the investigation of the dirty tricks and the whole Watergate business?

RS: I really, we didn't really get very much involved, although we did hire counsel to pursue that. Joe Califano is who O'Brien engaged, he was still chairman then. And interestingly, it doesn't have anything to do with Ed Muskie, but I was in Dallas the weekend, the night of the break in, and I remember O'Brien calling me it seems to me on Sunday morning, either Sunday morning or Saturday morning, I was at home, and I was still in bed, I remember. O'Brien called and said, "Bob, we had a break-in in our offices," and so forth and so on. And I said, "Well, that's the damndest thing, there's nothing in there to steal." He said, "No, we had nothing but debt. I said, 'If anybody wanted any debt I'd have delivered it, they didn't have to break in and steal it.'" You know, all we had were unpaid bills.

And he said, "A strange thing, the White House switchboard and an extension number was found in a notebook on one of these fellows that broke in." And I said, "Is that right?" He said, "Yeah, I'm going to go with it publicly, see if these people have some connection with the White House." And I said, "O'Brien, that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. You're going to look like

a fool, trying to link the White House to the break in of a bunch of lousy offices like ours that had nothing going for them.” And he said, “Well, we have nothing going for us, so I might as well, at least we'll get a story out of this.” And so he went and blasted them for that, and at the time I thought he was crazy. But it turned out his instinct to go for it was right, mine was wrong.

DN: The next few years were down years for the party, and during that period did you have much contact with Ed Muskie?

RS: Yes, I saw Ed Muskie, those years, I saw Ed and his wife from time to time, socially primarily, occasionally politically, and he became, we were good friends. I saw him a lot when I was ambassador to the Soviet Union and then to Russia, strangely, I saw as much of him then as I did probably back here in Washington, because he had some, his law firm had some business over there and he was trying to get some business for them over there, and I would always have a little reception for him or we would have a dinner for him or something. So he was a man for whom I had the highest regard, and he thought well of me, I think.

Also, Berl Bernhard, who worked for him, was a good friend of mine and so I had those relationships. I liked Ed's wife a great deal, and used to kid him about her. And he used to say to me, “Strauss, are you ever going to say anything as good about me as you do about my wife?” I said, “No, Ed, I find you a good deal less appealing,” and we'd laugh.

I also recall my terrible disappointment when Ed dropped out of the race.

DN: In '72?

RS: Yes, '72, that really disappointed me. I'd sort of, I had, interesting, if I had an emotional attachment, political attachment to anyone, it was with Scoop Jackson who had several, had a number of views dissimilar to that of Ed Muskie. And people would say to me, “How can you say Jackson or Muskie when they're so different?” And I said, “Well, because they have one common thing a man has to have to be president, I can say two common things, they both have character and they both have brains. And you can take any president who has character and brains and he'd be a good president. Either one of these fellows would be a good president.” And that used to annoy some of my liberal friends and some of my conservative friends, but I remember that very vividly. And when Ed dropped out I thought it was a great loss.

DN: Did you think at that point he still had a chance to get the nomination?

RS: I did, but I was wrong. As a matter of fact, I recall when that convention opened, that was the year the convention was in Florida, and I recall coming into a, a dining room, and sitting there with Ed Muskie. It was Berl Bernhard and Joe Albritton from Washington.

DN: Probably George Mitchell?

RS: And George Mitchell, sitting there, and I sat down and talked to them, well, commiserated with them a while, they were hoping lightning would still strike Ed Muskie down there. And I told them it wasn't going to happen, that McGovern, to my dismay, had this thing wrapped up,

and you better figure out how to make the best out of it. At that time I took a very dim view of McGovern's candidacy, I thought he was way too far to the left for our party, and certainly for my Texas constituency. And I thought it was going to be a shambles--- the election; which it proved to be. But later George McGovern and I became very good friends, and I probably was closer to George McGovern years after that, than I ever was to Ed Muskie. So life has a strange way of working.

DN: Now, what led to that closeness?

RS: Well, I found out, like you always find out when you get to know somebody, instead of him being as evil as you thought or as terrible as you thought, they really are very nice people. And I found George McGovern to be one of the more attractive people I'd ever known in my life after I got to know him, when I originally thought he was one of the most unattractive. And I learned out of that and a few other experiences not to be quite so judgmental. And so I got more out of that than either one of them got out of my assistance, I think. But I had a chance to have a number of experiences with George McGovern afterwards, and they've all been good and I think he's a first rate man. And I never dreamed I'd ever say this, but George McGovern might have made a good president.

DN: And during your time as ambassador, you mentioned spending time with Ed Muskie, particularly as he came to Moscow on law business. Did you have a chance to talk with him much about what was transpiring in the Soviet Union, and then the Russian Federation?

RS: Well, I don't have any recollection of that, but I'm sure that I did. Because at that time, thanks to a first rate staff, I was about as informed on what was going on in Russia as anyone, particularly in terms of the issues that Ed Muskie was interested in then, which were economic things. And he was representing clients of his law firm, American clients of his law firm is what he was doing over there. So I was a good source of information and assistance to a lawyer from the United States, in Russia, trying to pursue some business opportunities for his clients. I'm sure we had a number of those discussions. And by the way, when I sought the chairmanship of the Democratic Party right after the '72 election, I ran against George Mitchell who, as you know very well is from Maine, and he was seeking the chairmanship, as was a fellow named Manatt, Chuck Manatt. The three of us went after the chairmanship and we remained good friends, still are, still see something of the other two.

DN: Now, you served as the president's special representative in the Middle East, and if my memory serves me correctly, that overlapped the time that Ed Muskie was secretary of state.

RS: That's the story I was getting ready to tell, but it didn't fit into this. When the secretary of state resigned following that tragic series of events and accident in connection with the Iranian prisoners, and the secretary of state resigned, that was Cy Vance, Cyrus Vance, the phone rang and it was President Carter calling. And the president said, "Bob, we've got to pick a secretary of state. Cy has just told me he's resigning. What are your thoughts?" And I recall very vividly suggesting the name of, darn it, the names get me these days, but a California lawyer.

DN: Warren Christopher.

RS: Warren Christopher. I don't know why I couldn't remember that, I talk with him frequently and run across him frequently. But, I do know why, that comes with, that's what, when you get a little older you'll know about senior moments. You're just a youngster, you wouldn't know about it yet.

DN: Well, now, I'm not that much younger than you.

RS: But anyway, I said, "Yes, well, Mr. President, I haven't had a minute to think about it, but the first person on my mind is Warren Christopher." And I knew that Carter liked Warren Christopher and I knew Christopher reasonably well, and he was a good lawyer and good attorney general, deputy attorney general. And Carter said, "Well, yes he would be good." He said, "What would you think about Ed Muskie?" I said, "Goddamn," I remember saying goddamn because I was sorry I said goddamn instead of damn to Jimmy Carter. I said, "Goddamn, Mr. President, I wish I'd have thought of that before you suggested it, that's perfect. I think he would be perfect." And Carter kind of laughed and said, "Well I think you're right, every instinct I have tells me that's perfect." And he laughed and said, "I didn't call to get your judgment as a foreign policy expert, but as a good judge of the American political scene." I said, "I think he'd be a ten strike, and he'd be well received and he would do well. And I enthusiastically support him, or anybody else you want." And I said, "Again," I remember, "again Mr. President, I'm sure sorry I have to give you credit for that good idea instead of it being mine." I remember that vividly and I was very pleased about it, and I was always sorry, I don't think I ever told Ed that story, I may have.

DN: He would have enjoyed that.

RS: He would have enjoyed that, he would have liked the story, he liked that kind of story anyway. I remember he liked that kind of story, and I remember he liked old fashioned, there's a lot of things I remember about him. I guess that almost covers my knowledge of Ed Muskie. I'll be happy to answer anything else.

DN: Did you have any dealings with him in your Middle East work?

RS: Not many, no, I didn't. I don't recall any relationship with him there. And, I'm trying to think, any other, the primary relationships I had with him were the ones I've described. I wasn't a natural constituent of Ed Muskie's, coming from the state of Texas and having a constituency of my own that was far more conservative than Ed Muskie personally; probably not more conservative than the state of Maine in those days. But we had a nice relationship, never an intimate one, always a nice one. And as I said, the people around him, George Mitchell was a friend of mine, and Berl was friend of mine, and there were other people around him, I forget the fellow's name, staff man who was around him always. But I guess that's about it, unless you can think of something else.

DN: No, I think that covers it, thank you very much.

RS: Sorry I can't be more informative and precise.

DN: No, that's, that's great.

End of Interview