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Davis, Lanny oral history interview

Don Nicoll

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Interview with Lanny Davis by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Davis, Lanny

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

April 12, 2001

Place

Washington, D.C.

ID Number

MOH 267

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Biographical Note

Lanny Davis was born December 12, 1945 and raised in Jersey City, New Jersey. He attended Yale University and then Yale Law School and was inspired by John Kennedy and the Vietnam War to enter into politics. Those two factors led him to Senator Muskie, for whom he campaigned. He is a close friend of Joe Lieberman and after spending his first couple years of law school campaigning for various Democratic candidates, he spent his last year working for Muskie. He was chairman of the *Yale Daily News* and became the National Youth Coordinator under Muskie. He wrote a book about this titled, *The Emerging Democratic Majority; Lessons and Legacies from the New Politics*. At the time of the interview, he had recently resigned from the Clinton staff and wrote another book, *Truth to Tell: Tell It Early, Tell It All, Tell It Yourself: Notes from My White House Education*. He currently practices law at Patten and Boggs in Washington, D.C.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: working on the 1968 and 1972 Muskie campaigns; having a younger perspective; opinions on Vietnam; humorous campaign stories and mishaps; members of the Muskie staff; future political “spinner”; Anti-Nixon; working as Muskie’s National Youth Coordinator; and the incident in Providence.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Thursday, the 12th of April, 2001. We are at the office of Patten & Boggs in Washington, D.C., and Don Nicoll is interviewing Lanny Davis. Lanny, would you give us your full name and spell it, and then your date and place of birth?

Lanny Davis: Lanny, L-A-N-N-Y, J. Davis, D-A-V-I-S, born December 12th, 1945 in Jersey

City, New Jersey.

DN: And did you grow up in Jersey City?

LD: Yes, went to elementary school and high school in Newark, but lived in Jersey City. Then in 1963 went to New Haven, Connecticut for four years at Yale College and then three years at Yale Law School.

DN: And did you have any brothers or sisters?

LD: I have an older sister, two years older.

DN: And what were your folks' occupations?

LD: My dad was a dentist in Jersey City and my mom was the officer manager of his dental office.

DN: And were they at all interested in politics?

LD: Totally possessed. My father in particular as a Franklin Roosevelt Democrat and as an Ed Muskie Democrat. I must tell you, he was enamored with Senator Muskie during the 1968 presidential campaign.

DN: And had you thought while you were in high school and then to college that you'd like to get involved in politics?

LD: Yes, I became very, very motivated, first because of John Kennedy in 1960, I decided I wanted to do what John Kennedy was doing. Then in 1966 and '67 I became even more motivated because of the Vietnam War, which is one of the reasons that led me to Senator Muskie.

DN: And after graduating from law school did you get involved in politics directly?

LD: Yes, I helped run the campaign of my son's godfather and my best friend at the time and still, his name was Joe Lieberman. First time I met Bill Clinton was when he walked into Lieberman headquarters as a volunteer. Joe Lieberman was running for the state senate in a primary in New Haven. He had graduated Yale Law School several years ahead of me, and I stayed to help him. I was signed on as a speech writer for a Connecticut gubernatorial candidate who was a congressman from Hartford named Emilio Daddario, and I worked for a anti war senate candidate named Joe Duffey.

DN: And this year was?

LD: Nineteen seventy [1970].

DN: Nineteen seventy [1970]. And did you (*pause in taping*). After that campaign, did you go

to work for anyone from Connecticut?

LD: I decided to work for Senator Muskie actually in my third year at Yale Law School. This would have been '69-'70. My father was very influential on me, because he believed that we needed somebody who could bring people together. And although he was very liberal and attracted to McGovern, he and I would talk about our concerns about the Vietnam War and that we needed somebody who could speak to middle America about the Vietnam War. Because, you may remember in those days, the Nixon administration was very polarizing between the hardhat, blue collar, patriotic rhetoric that was dividing the country against students and people on the left of the spectrum. So sometime in my third year in law school I thought about clerking, I thought about working in a law firm, but then I realized that Senator Muskie might run for president.

So I turned down several offers on clerkships and I wrote Senator Muskie and went to Washington and was interviewed by somebody named Don Nicoll. And I was then working for the mayor of New Haven as his executive secretary, which was my full time job while I was going to law school, help me get through law school. His name was Dick Lee, who was a very famous urban renewal mayor in the fifties and the sixties, and quite a legend. And Mayor Lee gave a very articulate speech that I helped him write at the Vietnam moratorium on the New Haven green. And I sent this gentleman, Mr. Nicoll, a copy of that speech. And he called me and he said, "We might be able to use you as a speech writer." And I had been chairman of the *Yale Daily News*, so I thought of myself as a future journalist, not as a future lawyer.

DN: Even though you were, was this while you were in undergraduate work, or?

LD: I was chairman of the *Yale Daily News*, which is a daily newspaper circulated around the world, thirty thousand, the oldest college daily in the United States, in 1966-'67, while I was an undergraduate. So that is what I thought I would be doing when I arrived in Washington in December of 1970 to begin my work for the Muskie presidential campaign. Of course a month before we arrived, I sat on election eve in campaign headquarters for Joe Duffey, and his campaign manager Ann Wexler who ultimately became his wife. Joe Duffey and I and all of the Duffey volunteers, Joe had lost the election, we knew that, and that was the election that Thomas Dodd, former senator, ran as a third party candidate and Lowell Weicker sneaked through as the Republican. We were all very dispirited and very demoralized. We now had a Republican (*unintelligible word*) candidate from Connecticut, Richard Nixon in the White House, and we were quite dispirited.

And we sat watching Nixon give a very politically divisive speech. And that as the, as I said earlier, at the time that the country seemed to be most divided between generations, between feelings about the military, between races. We're talking about after the assassination of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and the riots in the cities. I mean, we were looking at a country that really did seem to be split in so many different ways that was unlike anything previously in American history, maybe going back to the Civil War. That was our feeling then and our tremendous demoralization that, in that split, that cultural, ideological, economic, racial split, that we were on the short side of the spectrum. That the, remember the Nixon expression that made us all feel that way was, the rule of majority, or the silent majority, that became the

moral majority in the eighties under Ronald Reagan. There was always a way for the right to describe the left as being out of the mainstream. They always talk to themselves as the majority. So there we were listening to Richard Nixon give a speech about the silent majority, or we were against law and order, we were all for the wrong things.

And then, after that speech, came Ed Muskie's face filling the television screen speaking quietly, rationally, moderately about the truth and about the country and about our values. I'll never forget that speech as long as I live. In fact, the one line in that speech that I always repeated is that Richard Nixon, President Nixon, says that Democrats are against law and order and are in favor of crime. That is a lie, and the American people know it's a lie. So I was never prouder of a decision before or since that night as I sat in that room thinking, I'm the one person who made up my mind to be for Ed Muskie. Everybody else in this room was for McGovern, everybody, because he was the anti-war candidate. And, of course, he hadn't even declared yet, but everybody was looking to him, or McCarthy. But I saw the wisdom of Ed Muskie that night and that's how I really first felt very close to, and reverence for, Senator Muskie.

DN: And you came and ended up not writing speeches.

LD: I came and I became very interested in a mission to convince my fellow left wingers, my fellow purist liberals, anti-warriors, that Ed Muskie is who they should support. And I spent my first six months on 1660 L Street in Washington writing a list of every liberal anti war Democrat that I could think of. And I went to visit them on the Hill, in the House and the Senate, I called them on the telephone, and I started calling student body presidents on college campuses to try to get them to see that somebody like me could be for Ed Muskie.

And the one person who most inspired me in politics at that time, who was running for congress, the previous election and he lost, was Allard Lowenstein. And before, in fact, before I came to Washington to work for Senator Muskie I had already agreed to work, so that had been a commitment I had made several months before, Al Lowenstein knew that I was going to work for Senator Muskie. So he was running for congress as an anti-war congressman in Long Island, running for reelection, and he'd been gerrymandered by the Republican state legislature. And his opponent was a right wing, very vituperative, conservative Republican. So he called me, and it was a conservative district now, and he said, is there any chance that you could convince Senator Muskie to campaign for me.

Now, (*pause in taping*). It's a good anecdote. I said, you know, "Al, you're for McCarthy, you refused to support Hubert Humphrey when Senator Muskie ran for vice president, a lot of people blame you and others for Nixon's election because we were so slow to support Humphrey. You were critical of Senator Muskie as you were vice president Humphrey, and I just don't think Senator Muskie's going to be willing to do that. And I don't know Senator Muskie that well, I just met him once and, you know, met his campaign people and the Senate office people." So Al said, "Look, I've met Ed Muskie several times and I think he's the real thing, and I'd like to ask you to call him to campaign for me." So I forget who I spoke to in the office, Don, but I think it was Sheppie Abramowitz who called me back, remember that name?

DN: Oh, yes.

LD: And Sheppie, who introduced herself as one of Senator Muskie's foreign policy advisers, said, you know, "We've been battling around this Lowenstein thing," and "do you think he'll treat Senator Muskie nicely?" And I said, "Absolutely." I was worried the other way around. And Ed Muskie wanted to do the trip because he liked Lowenstein, but people around Ed Muskie were not sure that his association with Lowenstein would make him more moving to the left than he wanted to. So I got a call back saying Senator Muskie was going to go to campaign for Lowenstein. And Sheppie Abramowitz said, "Would you like to be the advance man?" I said, "I would love to be the advance man." This is all happening while I'm still in New Haven.

So I went down to New York to be the advance man, and I called my father and I said, "I'm the advance man for this trip by Senator Muskie to campaign for Al Lowenstein, and what an advance man does is get people to drive, you know, the entourage. Would you like to be the driver for Senator Muskie?" My father, who has since passed away, I think it was probably the most exciting thing that had ever happened to him. And it turned out the campaigning was actually a fundraiser in lower Manhattan. And I'll never forget, it was probably in September but it must have been a ninety degree very, very hot summer night in New York City and the restaurant in downtown Manhattan had no air conditioning. And Senator Muskie, who I'm sure Don Nicoll will remember, wasn't always in the best of moods when things went wrong.

DN: Especially transportation.

LD: Especially, well transportation, he and my father got along great. But when he got into the restaurant, which was overfilled, it was absolutely a fire danger, because the place was packed to the rafters. It was eighty or ninety degrees in New York City that night and there was no air conditioning, and no oxygen. And of course Senator Muskie looked at me and said, "Didn't you check out whether there was air conditioning?" And I said, "Yes I did Senator, and I found out there wasn't."

It was a great success. And I segued to this story, because of how I transitioned over into the political side of the Muskie campaign. Someone named Jack Sando was a great speech writer already in place, and I started to gravitate towards the political organization side because Al Lowenstein, as soon as I arrived, called me and said, "We've got to set up meetings and contacts with people on the liberal side of the party to get them to be for Senator Muskie." And I thought it would be very significant if someone like Al Lowenstein chose not to be for George McGovern, and it turned out that Lowenstein didn't ever endorse McGovern. And he always referred to watching Senator Muskie in ninety degrees without oxygen saying, "I really like this man."

DN: That's a great story. And after that enterprise, what did you start doing? In fact, I want to go back to your work in trying to attract people from the youth groups. How did they respond as you called them?

LD: Student body presidents and leaders all, almost ninety percent, wanted to support Senator Muskie. They liked him from, remember what he did in 1968, you of all people, when he invited a protestor and come up to the podium and speak rather than shouting from the audience.

And that one gesture exemplified Senator Muskie in young people's vision of him more than anything as an adult. Rather than saying to a young person, "Be quiet," which is what you'd expect a parent or somebody else to say when you're acting rudely as this young man was, inviting him up and saying, you know, "You don't have to shout at me. I'll listen to you and then you listen to me." Remember how he used to say that. And I do remember that. I don't remember his name, but that young man from 1968 became a great Muskie supporter in the 1972 campaign. So I would get very positive feedback from student leaders and people who understood that you had to win from the center in American politics, you couldn't win from the left and you couldn't win from the right.

The ones that were most hostile were people on the left who were threatened by Senator Muskie's candidacy, because they thought he was much too centrist and not ardent enough on the Vietnam War and on some of the other pertinent issues such as amnesty. And, I guess abortion wasn't really a big issue in those days, but I think amnesty and the Vietnam War were the two issues that Senator Muskie had not quite said we ought to get out of Vietnam, he was talking about a negotiated peace, and these folks wanted just unilateral withdrawal. And he had not quite said that he would grant amnesty to everyone who had fled the country to avoid the draft. George McGovern had said, so he was slightly away from the positions that the left had taken. And there was a lot of hostility to Senator Muskie, and to me, among young people who identified with the Students for a Democratic Society, with the anti-war movements that seemed to be pulled much more to the left than they perceived Senator Muskie to be.

DN: And did you continue to work on the youth program in the campaign?

LD: Yes, I ended up realizing that the best use of my time if I was going to do political organizing, since I was really the only one in the headquarters who was both just out of school, and who had a ton of friends from the anti-war movement. Most other people in the campaign were professionals older than I and had not really participated in campus anti-war organization as I had. So I kind of went in to see Mr. Nicoll and subsequently Mr. Bernhard and I said, "I think the best thing I can do is put me out onto college campuses and let me carry the message of why Ed Muskie should be an acceptable candidate, and we will undermine George McGovern in his base," where he really thought he had his base. And that's what I did. And through that mechanism I became, self-anointing myself as the national youth coordinator, the object of organizing and getting Muskie's campuses in the primary states organized, so that once the primary organizations were put into place they would be able to have students, which surprised a lot of people how well we did.

DN: And as you went forward with that, were the reactions very similar to your early calls, that is the leaders being willing to join and the left, if you will, the ideologues is probably a better (*unintelligible phrase*).

LD: Yes, I wrote a book about this period and about Senator Muskie and I called them the purists, people who saw politics not as achieving a victory in a political system and moving forward incrementally, but people who would rather lose in order to keep their ideological purity. And that was the side that was most hostile, to me or anyone for Muskie, on the college campus. And they were vocal, and they sometimes prevented me from speaking and, we all

remember those days.

But a very interesting cultural phenomenon started to happen, and I was quite amazed at it. I would find that the vocational schools and the community colleges, which are the lower middle class and blue collar kids, were the heartland for Senator Muskie. Ethnically, a lot of the white ethnic groups liked Senator Muskie. His style they liked, and I think they kind of saw the McGovern campaign as elitist and, you know, wrinkling their nose at anybody that goes to a community college. So when I started to pick that up, and as the primary season was beginning, each of the campaign managers for the Muskie campaign in New Hampshire, who was Tony Podesta, this is a trivia test if you can remember. Florida was Alan Barron, Wisconsin was Harold Ickes. There was a Harold Ickes back in 1970.

Somebody of Greg Craig and I lit-dropped the weekend before the Wisconsin primary. And when we went into the headquarters in Milwaukee, Hal Ickes saw us come in, picked up a chair and threw it at us because he said he didn't want us in the headquarters, he wanted us out lit-dropping. A display of Hal's temper that I'm sure he will laugh at. So that's what I did. I basically spent my time in each primary state focusing on the vocational schools and the community colleges first, and then doing whatever I could among the ivy leagues or the private university kids.

DN: Did you find that members of the Muskie campaign staff shared your view on what needed to happen?

LD: No. I had difficulties. (*Pause in taping.*) So my relationship with the other members of the campaign staff, all of whom are now very dear friends, is that I was sort of the burr in the saddle, sometimes to a fault. Because I was so preoccupied, and concerned about winning credibility for Ed Muskie among my old cohorts, that there were times that I think I may have pushed him too hard to campaign and say things that would have taken him away from the center of the road.

And my one example where I got in the most hot water was when Al Lowenstein called me and he said, "We want to have a 'dump Nixon' rally in Providence, Rhode Island, which will be a sort of national rally of anti-war people, but we want to focus our attention on Nixon, not on the Muskie and McGovern battle." And Birch Bayh was running for president and about two or three others. I said, "Boy, that's a great idea." And he said, "We're going to invite Bella Abzug and a lot of other anti-war people." And I said, "That's not such a good idea, because Senator Muskie doesn't believe in hot rhetoric." That's what's made him so effective. And if you put him up there with that kind of assemblage of people, I think he will not be comfortable with that. But because Al Lowenstein knew how to push all my hot buttons, and because I was preoccupied to a fault with winning support for Ed Muskie on the left and in the anti-war movement, I went to I think it was Berl Bernhard at that time and said, "This is very important politically for him to do this."

All of the campaign coordinators, many of whom are now quite famous people, the late Jack English, Jim Johnson, chairman of Fannie Mae today, Mark Shields, now a very famous columnist and commentator, Alan Barron who I mentioned earlier, Tony Podesta. In other

words, the whole higher echelon of the political staff was strongly against his doing this rally with Al Lowenstein. And Berl Bernhard said, "Give it up, because you're going to be opposed by everybody here." Well, not unusually for my personality, I wasn't ready to give it up, and because I believed that I was right.

So I asked Berl for a court of appeal, a Supreme Court argument directly to Senator Muskie. And Berl said, "Boy, you have B-A-L-L-S, but if you want to see Senator Muskie, he's not going to overrule every political adviser in this campaign organization and he's not going to be comfortable doing this event." And I said, "Okay, I want to take my court of appeal." So Senator Muskie said he would see me, he knew exactly what was going on, which always impressed me that he was willing to even see me. And I went into his office and he sat there and he listened to me, behind his desk in the United States Senate. I had an outline, I had notes, I had a whole presentation.

And at the very end of the presentation he said to me, "Will I be speaking first?" I said, "Yes." And he said, "And after I speak will it be all right for me to say I had another engagement and not to have to sit on the platform for the rest of the rally?" I said, "If that's what it takes, I know Al Lowenstein will agree with that," because Lowenstein had told me, which was one of the hot buttons, that this is literally necessary to make this rally a success. If Ed Muskie doesn't come the whole rally is going to fail, you know, that's the pressure I was on under my old friend Lowenstein. So Senator Muskie said, "With those two conditions I agree with your analysis that we've got to reach out to the left of the party, and we've got to be bolder than straddling the center and being afraid of offending anyone, which is what my political advisers are concerned about." And if I didn't love Senator Muskie before that moment, and I mean not just admire but love that human being, and he had a little twinkle in his eye because he knew I was there and I would pay heavily when I went back to campaign headquarters. And I did. I think there were people who never forgave me, at least in our youth. They forgive, I think, now that I'm an adult.

And so he went. Now this is the terrible ending of this great anecdote. I was the advance man for this trip because I wanted to be sure that it worked exactly as I had promised him. Al Lowenstein promised me the conditions would be met and everything was supposed to happen the way we had agreed. The morning that Senator Muskie arrived, it was an eleven o'clock in the morning rally. He was supposed to be on at 11:10 and out of there by 11:20 or 11:30. I look at the program, and Senator Birch Bayh is speaking first, and Bella Abzug is speaking second, and Senator Muskie was speaking third. Well I went absolutely ballistic, but I couldn't find Lowenstein. The way it had happened is, Birch Bayh's top political director, whose name was Arnie Miller, I don't know whether that name rings a bell, he subsequently became director of personnel for Jimmy Carter when he was president. Arnie Miller, who knew the rally organizers, manipulated the program and got the printing to be done Birch Bayh first. Then Bella Abzug heard what had happened because she didn't want to wait around, so she simply went in her soft way, right, I have to be second. And then I'm presented with a *fait accompli*.

I madly tried to reach Senator Muskie on the campaign airplane to turn the airplane around and go back to Washington, that's how angry I was. But then I thought better of it, that it would be a major incident written about in the newspapers, that it would do a lot of harm if he didn't show up because he wasn't speaking first. So I was in the worst untenable, no win situation. And to

make a very long story short, he was not a happy camper. He looked at me and he said, “You broke your word to me.” And I said, “Senator Muskie, I don’t blame you for being angry, this was, I was blind sided but it’s my fault and I apologize to you.” And he was quite upset. And he spoke and he did very well, and he was brilliant in the way he spoke, but he wasn’t a happy camper.

DN: What, after that day, when did you see him next?

LD: I saw him next in Wisconsin at a rally in the University of Madison, University of Wisconsin, Madison. And it was a Students for Muskie rally, so I recovered and rehabilitated myself by packing the rafters with five hundred students who were applauding him, so I, but he didn’t hold a grudge. I think he was amused by me, he felt affection towards me. He knew that I was a little bit the young Turk. And I always loved the way he had a twinkle in his eye when I was around because it looked, I think he respected me but I also think he just knew that I was the young Turk.

DN: Did he ever talk to you about the Providence event again?

LD: He always joked. Never in a serious fashion. He’d always say, “So Lanny, am I going to speak first tonight?” Or, “So Lanny, have any other great advice to give me?” But, no, he was always kind, always kind to me.

DN: What sort of reaction did you get when you went back to the Washington headquarters?

LD: I was *persona non grata*. People were not talking to me, because the next day in the *New York Times* R. W. Apple, who smelled something going on as all great reporters do, especially, you know, back-biting personality oriented stories. He wrote a piece about not exactly what had happened but kind of what had happened. And he did it in a way that gave Muskie credit for going through with it and for winning warm applause from the anti-war audience, it was a breakthrough for Muskie because he had been able to do that. And I actually, it was one of the first times I ever had experience spinning a reporter, because I heard that Apple was writing a story. And I figured if we’re going to get a story out of this, I’d like you to be favorable to Senator Muskie or else I’m really dead meat when I go back to Washington.

So I did, on background, without identification, you can probably find this *New York Times* story by Apple if you look for it, he wrote the kind of narrative of what had happened. And I did shove him in the direction that I thought was very favorable to Senator Muskie and he wrote it that way. And that was my other crime when I got back to Washington. Everybody knew that I was the person whose quotes on background, you know, a Muskie campaign aide said, and they then interpreted that I was the one who caused the story to be written, rather than I heard that the story was going to be terrible and I pushed it in the other direction. So I was in the woodshed, as Berl Bernhard said to me, for several months. Is that a good ending?

DN: Let’s stop there and we’ll come back to this tale again.

End of Interview