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Frye, Alton oral history interview

Don Nicoll

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Interview with Alton Frye by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Frye, Alton

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

April 12, 2001

Place

Washington, D.C.

ID Number

MOH 268

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Biographical Note

Alton Frye was born November 3, 1936 in Nashville, Tennessee. He attended St. Louis University, studied law at Yale, and after graduating joined the Rand Corporation working on policy issues in the field of science and technology. This work got him involved with the political aspects of science and technology, namely, international weapons policies. Later, he worked closely on the Reagan staff to bring in Richard Nixon for private meetings with Ed Muskie and Howard Baker regarding the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. He was a speech writer for Muskie in later Senate years.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: family background; Rand Corporation; working in the Senate and Congress; Robert Kerr; Ed Muskie; Ed Brooke; Model Cities; U.S. and U.S.S.R. during Ronald Reagan's first term; Nixon; Muskie and Nixon; Baker, Muskie, Nixon, and Frye meeting at Nixon's home; Muskie's trip to the hospital after dinner with Nixon; George Shultz; Nixon and Gorbachev; speechwriting for Muskie; and Muskie's memorial service.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Thursday, the 12th of April, 2001. We are at the Council in Foreign Relations at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace Building in Washington, D.C. Don Nicoll is interviewing Alton Frye. Alton, would you state your full name, spell it, and give us your date and place of birth.

Alton Frye: I'm Alton Frye, A-L-T-O-N, last name, F-R-Y-E. I was born November 3rd, 1936 in Nashville, Tennessee.

DN: And did you grow up in Nashville?

AF: Lived in various places in the south as a child, but from the second grade through high school I lived in Nashville. And in fact Nashville was my legal voting residence until my late fifties. I kept that as a home base, family was still there, and I was very actively interested in the political involvement of Howard Baker and a few other friends, though I am a ticket splitter and I confess I've voted both ways over the years.

DN: Now, did you have brothers and sisters?

AF: My brother and sister are still there. My mother has passed away, and my father died when I was a boy. My wife's mother is still alive and she still lives in Nashville, so we go home for her mother and my brother and sister and nieces, etcetera.

DN: Was your, now you lost your father when you were quite young?

AF: I was twelve, yes.

DN: And what was his profession?

AF: He was a manager of a small finance firm, one of several finance offices all over the south. And because he died before I was mature enough to have a sense for what it really was, I don't know much about the actual business. My mother was a bank teller in Nashville, and my father was quite ill for quite a few years. He was a young man who contracted tuberculosis from an aunt when he was a teenager, and so I never knew him as a generally healthy person. He was twenty-six when I was born, and by the time he died, he had been out of work, too ill to work, for about the last two years of his life. He died at home. So the family had those areas of turmoil to go with the loss of their father and husband. And had, both the older brother who

went into the Army shortly after my father died, and my younger sister who was still only two and a half years old when he died so that my mother had the baby at home to deal with in the aftermath.

But I left home when I was seventeen, my wife and I were married when we were teenagers, and so I was a senior in high school when I got married. Fortunately won a scholarship to college, we went away to St. Louis University. The two of us managed to spend four years together in St. Louis getting our undergraduate work done and both graduated in 1958. Then I went to Yale for graduate school, finished my doctorate in 1961, and the story of my involvement with Congress really begins when I came down from Yale as a newly (*unintelligible word*) Ph.D. interested in government. I came to work as a congressional fellow in Washington, so I worked on the Hill.

DN: What was your major in both undergraduate and your graduate?

AF: I was a government major in undergraduate, and then I did a doctorate in international relations, diplomacy, economics, law at Yale with a fabulous experience, I couldn't have had a better graduate season. I'd worked full time through college, so when I got to graduate school and actually had fellowships that permitted me to have reasonable support, and my wife was teaching. We managed to give for three years full time attention, except for some mostly summer jobs that I had, I was able to be a student and it was a wonderful, wonderful period.

DN: And which office, or offices, did you go to under your fellowship?

AF: Well, I came as a fellow onto the Rand Corporation, and I already had become a Rand consultant, but took the fellowship as a year in between graduate school and joining Rand full time. And my interests were already running toward issues of policy connected with science and technology, I'd been writing on that in graduate school. And so I was happy to work on issues of space and science. In the Senate I worked with Tom Dodd who was on the space committee and the foreign relations committee. And in the House I worked with Emilio Daddario, a wonderful congressman from Hartford who was later chairman of the House science committee for quite a long time, and eventually president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, very unusual for a politician. So I had worked on issues that were primarily oriented toward things like strategic arms, space program, did some writing. In fact, a colleague who was later secretary of the Army, Marty Hoffman and I, in those later years picked up some of the themes I'd had as a congressional fellow and worked closely on aspects of the space program when I went back to work for Senator [Edward] Brooke.

But in 1961-62, the great part of that experience was, with Senator Dodd, I was able to deal with the things that I was particularly interested in on science and space program, but I had a much broader experience. I worked with him, I drafted some civil rights legislation on how to deal with literacy tests as an obstacle to fair voting. It was a [John Sherman] Cooper-Dodd amendment which dealt with that problem which I drafted, and enjoyed getting somewhat into a more varied staff role. You know how it is, you can be brought into lots of different things in that life. And I had that first quite wholesome experience, including in that year the opportunity, because Tom Dodd was extremely generous, he gave me extraordinary leeway for someone who

wasn't fully on his staff. He treated me very much as a part of the team, and I was his as it were designated hitter on the space committee work.

So I traveled with Robert Kerr, who had just become chairman of the space committee, and James Webb who had just become head of NASA in the early months of the Kennedy administration. They took their first real tour of NASA and related space facilities in the fall of 1961. I got here in August, and in September they had managed to give me full clearances. I was on the plane with Jim Webb and Bob Kerr for a fascinating exploration of the space structure that the country then had. Edwards Air Force Base, Ames Research Center, some wonderful places, Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and there are lots of memories I carry from that first encounter that cemented my excitement about and respect for the important work serious senators do. Kerr, I don't know if, I don't know when you came to the Senate staff, Don.

DN: In '61.

AF: So you were arriving essentially at the same time, so I don't have to tell you about Robert Kerr. Robert Kerr was a, what Harry McPherson you remember used to distinguish between whales and minnows, Kerr was a whale. And there was a wonderful moment, this is entirely aside from the substance of what you want to talk about, but one of those charming memories of working with senators over the years. We had a briefing at Jet Propulsion Laboratory by the president of Cal Tech. Cal Tech is the contractor that manages this large research establishment for the government. And Lee DuBridge, very appealing, warm human being, was the president of Cal Tech, later President Nixon's science advisor for a time.

Lee DuBridge is someone who once wrote in the Council on Foreign Relations Journal of Foreign Affairs that sci-, when it comes to politics, scientists are just as dumb as the next guy. So I always thought he had a certain appreciation for those realities. But we had a moment in that meeting where Lee DuBridge was explaining to Senator Kerr how hard it was, what a burden it was, for this small superior quality institute, Cal Tech, to manage this large, large government enterprise. And he went on at some length about the burden it represented on an educational institution to do this contract work. Kerr heard him out, didn't say a word for the longest time, and after Dr. DuBridge finished, he leaned across the table. And then something I came to see was a typical Kerr intervention, said, "Well Dr. DuBridge, if you don't want the money, you don't have to take it." DuBridge turned a fiery red, he was deeply embarrassed, realized that he'd perhaps stepped into a discomfort zone at least. And I've always had that little vignette in the corner of my mind.

That's all prelude to the later involvement with Ed Muskie. I did not know him in his early years in the Senate. I knew about him, and had an admiring regard for him, but we began to get acquainted, Don, only when I went back to the Senate as a staffer in 1968 to take over initially just the policy work and then the rest of the staff responsibilities for Ed Brooke. And I have a fuzzy sense of the dates. We did not share primary committee responsibilities, but we had friendly encounters at the staff level. There was a certain sympathetic resonance there, and I can remember being aware of each other in that period, but we didn't do a lot of big projects together

And much of the direct face-to-face encounter with him centered on issues having to do with

strategic arms, ballistic missile defense. In particular was a meeting when we were dealing with the ABM problem and the MERV problem during the 1968 '69-'70 period when Senator Brooke emerged as the lead voice trying to restrain deployment of multiple warhead missiles. That Brooke initiative emerged at a time when most people were focused on ballistic missile defense, not on what was happening in offensive technology. I'd been concerned about MERV from my years at Rand, because I felt it was a highly destabilizing possibility.

DN: Now, were you with Rand here or out on the west coast?

AF: No, I went to California, taught some at UCLA and at USC during the period I was at Rand, and then came back to Harvard in the mid sixties, I was a fellow at the Center for International Affairs, did some teaching in the government department, but I was finishing a book in that period. And that's when I met Ed Brooke actually, in the 1966 campaign for the Senate that he ran. And I did not join Ed Brooke when he came to the Senate, I came back to Rand in Washington in 1966. But I found myself moonlighting, having formed a friendship with Ed which I treasure. I still see and speak to him I'm happy to say, he's still around Washington and his farm in Virginia not far away. But in that period of 1967 I was back at Rand working on other things. In fact, I had helped launch a different program at Rand when I was there in California, I did the national survey and the briefing to the board that led to the Rand policy decision to move beyond the national security research program to include other aspects, domestic programs. I had worked as a consultant for Rand at the Housing and Urban Affairs Department on urban issues, did some drafting in the Kerner Commission work on civil disorders and riots.

DN: When did you do your work at HUD?

AF: During 1967, '66-'67 is the period when I was still primarily a Rand person, though I was beginning to be active with Ed Brooke in his early months in the Senate when he came in with January of '67.

DN: Did your Rand work involve you at all in the model cities?

AF: Yes, in fact I did, with a colleague, a lot of work on model cities, and I must admit that the biggest warning that our analysis gave is the one that was, that failed to be followed for political reasons. Our main argument in the work I remember doing for Tom Rogers, who was the assistant secretary at HUD. The main argument was, take these resources, recognize this as a model or a demonstration program, concentrate them, focus on ten, twenty, maybe twenty-five cities, but don't dissipate the resources. Well in the end as you perhaps recall, they were dissipated, they went to a hundred and fifty cities or more. Understandable why that happened, but in terms of achieving the objectives of the model cities program, it was a disappointment. But that was a part of the labor I did with friends at Rand and at HUD, and that kept me in close contact with Ed because he was on the Kerner Commission and we did something connected with that.

I can't remember direct encounters with Senator Muskie on those kinds of issues, but as he got into the Senate I think very early on he formed a friendly relationship with Howard Baker. And

Howard had come in the same class of senators as Ed Brooke. I had not known Howard Baker. There was a Tennessean who grew up, my first votes favoring Estes Kefauver and Albert Gore, Sr., I was always concerned about the one party aspect of Tennessee politics. And when Howard Baker emerged I was immediately drawn to him as a very constructive demonstration of Tennessee's capacity to become a two party state. And I think he performed a historic role in that regard, as did Bill Brock, Lamar Alexander and some others. But my memory was that Howard Baker and Ed Muskie worked together from very early in the Baker tenure in the Senate. I'm trying to recall whether they both were already on the public works committee from the first days of the Baker tenure, I don't remember it exact.

DN: Yes.

(Pause in taping.)

AF: Howard Baker and Ed Muskie as fairly early in Howard Baker's tenure in the Senate, we began to become friends. In part because we worked on civil rights issues, fair housing legislation which Ed Muskie again was involved with. But mostly my first impressions in a closer reading of Ed Muskie stemmed from both Ed Brooke's enormous regard, and Howard Baker's enormous immediate regard for Ed Muskie. I don't have a detailed knowledge of what they were doing together.

DN: Mostly issues of water pollution legislation at that point.

AF: But also just the personal chemistry was extremely good I think from the first day. John Sherman Cooper I think was a factor in some of those relationships, another wonderful human being. And I remember another much more conservative Republican, I have no idea what his relationship was with Ed Muskie, but another of those who smiled upon Howard Baker as a promising figure was John Williams of Delaware. Remember Senator Williams? And my guess would be that, also having been a former governor, there was a certain kinship, policy differences, but there might have been a kinship between John Williams and Ed Muskie. But that's sort of a cluster of references that occur to me, that come up in my mind, when I think about first impressions of a closer nature.

But what I really recall is I guess two things, one, the contrast between the occasional personal direct I would have with Ed Muskie, and his reputation as a guy who was tough on staff. And the reputation I used to hear was that he was very hard on staff. He was never hard, of course I wasn't a staff person, but he was never abrupt, rude. In fact the strongest negative thing I ever remember Ed Muskie saying in those years was in Mike Mansfield's office when we were trying to work out an agreement to get support for a measure, an Ed Brooke-Tom McIntyre amendment dealing with the ABM. I think that's too detailed for me to rehearse for your purposes. But in the course of that conversation in the majority leader's office I can remember, I was explaining the concept for the amendment, which in brief was instead of supporting a radar for a second ABM deployment elsewhere, our argument was that a second radar for the system should be built close enough so that it could reinforce the first radar and reduce its vulnerability. You could defend, under what's called in the strategic business, you could defend preferentially. You could only, if you had two radars close enough so that the interceptors could protect both radars,

but the attacker didn't know which radar you were going to protect. They would have to double up the attack load and so it increased the number of required attacking weapons. It's not a simple thing to think through, but take my word for it, it was a sound strategic concept.

But as I talked it through at somewhat greater length than I have just done, I can remember Ed Muskie, in a very gentle way saying, you're never going to get anybody to understand that. It was a very understated, negative, but understated and not unfriendly view. And in the end, I think, I'm rusty on this, I would have to check the detail, but I think he ended up probably voting with us on the amendment but not thinking it had much promise. There were a whole series of amendments in that effort.

DN: Did you succeed with the amendment?

AF: No, no, we did not. There were a lot of things happening with that issue, which never goes away. We have it back on us in a different way as we talk in April of 2001. Where I really began to get acquainted with Ed, and I don't know exactly why, why he turned to me. I have some missing pieces in this sequence. But he asked me to work with him in connection with a television simulation. After he had been secretary and he did an ABC television simulation of a Persian Gulf crisis where he played the role of president. And I can't remember exactly how it came about, but David Newsom and I, David had been the undersecretary, it could well be that it was Cy Vance before we started, Mitch and Cy. Cy may have made some reference to me as someone who could be helpful to Ed. But we were sort of the pol-, in this simulation, we were the political advisors to Ed as the president in this scenario, which went on over a couple of intense days. He had been traveling and was quite tired, and that's when he had, shortly after that exercise, within a day or two, had a heart attack. I think it was the first heart episode that I remember, and I can't date that exactly. I would say maybe 1981?

DN: About that.**AF:** Somewhere in that time frame. Which leads up to what I think is the series of involvements that I think are most important for Ed Muskie's history. In the course of the first Reagan term, there was a widely shared distress that the U.S. policy was counterproductive in its rhetoric about the evil empire, and its animosity toward the Soviet Union, because it was disrupting the serious attempt to negotiate restraints on strategic arms. And at some point, after I had launched with Bill Cohen and Sam Nunn the strategic build down initiative, which was a major attempt to find some common ground between those who were advocating the freeze, which the administration was deeply hostile to, and the administration's failure to move vigorously to negotiate restraint, we put forward this strategic build down concept and bargained it into policy frankly by Senator Nunn, Senator Cohen, and some others holding the MX missile program as hostage. That was the lever that finally had the effect in the fall of 1983 of producing President Reagan's commitment to advance the strategic build down concept, in which in essence the United States would put forward a comprehensive strategic arms control proposal.

Previously, the administration's proposal had taken off the table entirely any reference to the American bomber force. It was non negotiable as I think Sam Nunn repeatedly emphasized, because it was basically saying all we're going to negotiate about is what the Soviets had an advantage in, the big missile force. And to get a negotiation going and a deal possible, we

needed a comprehensive package which, though imperfectly, the strategic build down did elicit in the fall of 1983 by which time Secretary George Shultz at State and a number of others I believe had helped President Reagan to begin thinking that the policy should be tempered, partly in response to the congressional demands to get on with arms control, and partly in response to a perception that maybe it would be possible now, having demonstrated we were strong in our defense investment, we could negotiate from strength. So those factors were moving.

But we still didn't have in early 1984, measurable or noticeable movement toward a serious negotiation with the Soviets. And in the course of lots of meetings around town many, many people from all points of the compass, conservative to liberal, were concerned about that and didn't know quite to do about it. And I would occasionally speculate that what we needed was someone that Ronald Reagan respected who could offer him counsel he would take seriously, rather than having it come from quarters that he would find unsympathetic.

And I thought from time to time that whatever one's feelings about Richard Nixon might be, and mine had oscillated all over the map, including deep, deep sense of disillusionment and betrayal after the Watergate episode, sufficiently that frankly I greatly resented President Ford's pardon. So I had strong feelings, but by 1981 and 1982, 1983, I had come to feel that the country's interest would certainly be better served if we had the Nixon perspective at work on our national foreign policy. So I wondered if from time to time it would be possible somehow to get Nixon in touch with Ronald Reagan. But at that time, Nixon was anathema. He was isolated, in exile as it were, from constructive engagement on any issue because he was so resented by almost everyone on a variety of grounds.

But in meetings around Washington, just to capture a couple that stand out in my mind, we were trying to ask the question, what could be done to help Ronald Reagan move toward a more substantial negotiation. I would occasionally raise Nixon's name, and I would hear from someone like Dimitri Simes, who only then was beginning to have contact with Nixon, and later became president of the Nixon Center that is existing today. Dimitri would say, "Well that's the kind of mission to Moscow that Nixon could be successful on." And I remember it very vividly that at some time. And I think after I heard Dimitri make the observation, which I agreed with, I don't think it was a leading question but in some exchange I had with Paul Warnke, who had been of course the main arms control negotiator, a brilliant and gifted man, main arms control negotiator in the Carter administration, had a luncheon at 11 Dupont Circle on the ninth floor. I can remember Paul saying, sort of as an aside in a conversation, Nixon is the kind of guy who could do that, who could open the door to Moscow for a serious discussion.

At that point I started thinking, how could we make that happen? And to me the issue became pretty quickly whether there was any way that you, this would be somewhat offensive, I think, to people who are in the Nixon family or close to him politically, but the question for me became, 'how could you legitimize Richard Nixon's involvement?' And it seemed to me that that could only be done if he were part of a bipartisan coalition. And so I began to ask the question if that could be possible.

I went to see Ed first, because I felt it just wouldn't do to try to bring Nixon into play from the Republican side, and I had by then, partly as a result of that collaboration in the simulation and

some other (*unintelligible word*) encounters where we felt very much a sympathetic, philosophically compatible orientation on these issues, that he was deeply concerned about the strategic arms issues. I went to see him and said, "Is there any way that we could explore with Nixon whether this would be something he could coach the president on as a part of a bipartisan team?" I don't recall Ed even pausing before he saw the merit of that possibility. He was concerned enough, we were sitting in his law office, he was concerned enough about the problem that he felt Reagan and his advisors had placed at risk the promising negotiations that had been carried to the stage of a completed treaty in SALT II in the Carter administration, but at the end of the Carter administration had been stymied because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and some other things, Ed felt immediately that years had been lost, that the administration was exposing the country to greater risk by having dislocated the negotiated restraint process. So he was open to it.

And then the question became, would he be willing to be part of an approach to see if we could have a bipartisan conversation with President Reagan, and again he was amenable, he was not himself pressing for a role, that would not be accurate, but I would say he was immediately intrigued. And that sense of possible service on a great issue completely overrode any reticence that you might have expected him to have about meeting with, to use unflattering language, a contaminated political property. That's -

DN: Did he ever raise the question of his own history of opposing Nixon in the '72 primaries and having been the victim of the dirty tricks?

AF: Don, the actual experience is one that is remarkable on that issue. It was implicit throughout the conversation that I had come to him knowing that if anybody, having suffered from bad experiences with the Nixon, if anybody could legitimize a former senator, former secretary of state, former distinguished presidential candidate who had been a victim of Nixonian tactics, was someone who was the most qualified. And I think we, the answer to your question is, the most that that implicit awareness brought by way of awareness, was a slight little Muskiesque smile. No explicit reference was ever made to that by him or by me, it was understood, it was known by both of us that that was in the play here, in the mix, and it heightened in some sense the intrigue that one felt in thinking about it. If you could get Muskie and Nixon to do business, think similarly about a large issue, one had to believe that Ronald Reagan would be himself intrigued, more than curious, impressed.

And at that point I went to talk to Howard Baker, and I told him that this line of thought had been something that struck me as worth pursuing and that I talked to Ed Muskie and found him amenable to considering an active role if it looked promising, and if Howard Baker thought it was something worth pursuing. Howard also immediately picked up on it. And one recalls that his relationship with Nixon also had quite complexity, both because of his famous, "What did the president know, and when did he know it?" theme in the inquiry, and more generally because he had been a Nixon loyalist in the early days of the Nixon administration but had demonstrated independence on a range of issues. And he, of course, had this special relationship with Ed Muskie from their years in the Senate together. So it wasn't just that Howard Baker was someone that I had known and worked with, I'd been involved in Howard's series of leadership campaigns to become leader of the Senate, so we had developed other political relations in this

period and we had stayed in close contact long after I had stopped being a Senate staffer and joined the Council on Foreign Relations.

In talking with Howard about it, the key question was, once he decided that this was worth pursuing, would he be the one to make the approach to Nixon? He did so, and the approach was initially general and vague. We were concerned about the strategic arms control shortcomings in the administration, worried that the policy could lead us into risk and difficulty. Is there something that we might be able to design as a way of conveying independent counsel to President Reagan, and would you be willing to have a conversation with Ed Muskie to see if common ground existed?

I've often wondered, since, I wasn't present when Howard first spoke to him, wondered what Richard Nixon looked like and thought on the other end of the phone. His wariness is not something I have to tell you about. He was always a suspicious personality in his public life. I will report, and I think it is a fair reflection of Ed's evolution of attitude, and Howard's evolution of attitude, and mine certainly, that the wariness that I started with moved toward a sense that once you had a discussion with Nixon, I'm anticipating the way this story unfolds, once you had a discussion with him, at that stage of his life, you found a serious public man in a far more attractive personal stage than I or I think the others had ever perceived him to be when he was in public life.

The sequence that unfolded is a very straightforward one. This was a sensitive matter, the notion that there might be a conversation between Ed Muskie and Richard Nixon in the run up to a national presidential campaign. It was a delicate matter, it needed arranging, it produced some risks. So we did it with a minor degree of camouflage. Ed came to see me in New York at my counsel office after we had set a time and a date to meet with Nixon. We arranged to have that meeting take place in the apartment of Tricia Nixon Cox and Ed Cox. Ed is a lawyer, Nixon's son-in-law whose, their apartment was right around the corner, two blocks away from my office at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. So we arranged for such a meeting.

Nixon and I did not know each other well, you should be aware of this as one factor. When I was Ed Brooke's administrative assistant I had encounters with Nixon. I had encounters at a more distant stage during the 1968 campaign, where Nixon did some things that bore on my later attitude on the subject matter, and perhaps I should back up to report them.

In the fall of 1968, after Ed Brooke and I as his staff person, had spent most of the early part of the year attempting to defeat Nixon, working to launch a Nelson Rockefeller presidential campaign. Nixon, after the convention and after he got the nomination in very sensible political form, turned to Ed Brooke and asked directly for his active participation in the campaign. Ed was skittish, not committed to Nixon. He was prepared to sit on his hands. But Nixon asked him to take the first campaign flights with him in September.

He did that and Nixon conveyed confidentially to Ed Brooke, this is on my mind right now because Ed and I are working over the manuscript of his memoirs, so I've been back to this. And he, Ed himself had not recalled some of these details. But on that first campaign swing in September of 1968, Richard Nixon said to Edward Brooke, "There are two foreign policy

priorities that are urgent and must be attended to. First of all, we have to reverse this insane strategic nuclear competition. It is out of bounds. We must seek to govern it. And secondly," he said, and I remind you that this is September 1968, before he had met Henry Kissinger or any of the people that later were central in his administration. Richard Nixon extended an argument that he anticipated to a degree in a foreign affairs article that he had published, namely his second big point to Ed was, "We must end China's isolation. We must open a path to relationships with China."

Now those were big strategic principles on which to build a foreign policy, and let's give him credit, they were in his mind at the beginning and his administration moved on those paths. I will set aside all the frictions that we had between Brooke and Nixon when Ed Brooke led the Republicans that were needed to defeat both the Haynsworth and the Carswell nominations and a host of other things we had frictions on, but on foreign policy, Nixon pointed the way and kept his word. And that, of course, was a part of my orientation as I thought about how he might be engaged on strategic arms issues with Reagan.

So we had a good conversation, Ed Muskie and I did, in a back office at the Council on Foreign Relations one day there in the spring of 1984, and then went over to see Nixon at Ed Cox's and Tricia Cox's apartment. I went in with Ed, we did the courtesies briefly. Nixon betrayed certainly no edge of hostility, he was absolutely cordial, but cordial with the edge of reserve, I think that's a fair description of the moment. Ed's approach was not excessively jovial, he was professional, the demeanor was not cool, it was a bit formal. And Ed Cox was not there, Tricia was, and within a moment or two she left and a moment thereafter I left. So the first conversation was simply, the extended discussion was a man to man, Ed Muskie, Richard Nixon. I would say air clearing and probing. I didn't see Nixon after that meeting that day.

Ed came out and had a pretty firm sense that this was worth carrying forward. I don't know what was said in the meeting exactly, but I believe that they immediately shared an understanding that the strategic nuclear issues were too important to permit them to indulge any previous animosities. They needed to see if there was some common ground they could find. And I don't believe, this I should say, I don't believe it's an example of staff hubris, neither of them had the details in mind. Both of them had a general conviction. Ed a good deal of knowledge that he acquired as secretary somewhat more than his Senate years, because he'd gotten into it more deeply. But in the Senate from his Arms Control Subcommittee work and other things he had had in the Foreign Relations Committee he had developed a basic knowledge, so he came with some background. And Nixon thought mainly at the broad strategic level, not about which weapon systems and which characteristics of weapons systems. But he had had a great education during the strategic arms negotiations of his administration. And while he was not fresh on them as we started this conversation in 1984, he had a base on which to focus pretty quickly. His focus mainly was, we don't have the sound relationship with the Soviet Union, and we need to keep these things from going off. And I think that was a shared perspective.

Not long after that, after that first meeting between Ed and Nixon, we, I'm trying to think of the exact sequence here, Don. I think it was after that that he and Howard Baker and I flew to New York and went out for a private meeting in Nixon's home. In the meantime, I'd have to go back

and check the records about the details. I was generating some memoranda about ideas that might specifically be conveyed and I could not re-, at this stage I couldn't give you any substantive description of what those ideas were other than that they represented some notions about how you would advance toward a successful strategic arms reduction agreement with the Soviets. There are papers that I could, I have to dig out of my own archives, but I have a file somewhere called 'the bipartisan initiative', which collects all the papers mainly as a way of provoking fresh thought. We went up for a dinner with Nixon. Howard Baker flew us up on his plane.

The evening, again, was one that had some memorable features. I don't recall Ed's actual birthday, but in the course of the evening, and I think it impressed Howard as much as it did Ed, Nixon walked into a nearby wine cellar, it wasn't a cellar, it was a room with his wine collection, and brought out a bottle of wine for dinner that had been laid down in Ed Muskie's birth year. And we were meeting in this very Chinese decorated dining room there in Saddle River, and Nixon was an incredibly warm host. The discussion picked up a degree of bonhomie, there was a certain friendly, experienced politicians relating to each other that had none of the memory of the negative edges that had existed in their prehistory. So it was more than a civilized discussion, but it was a discussion that still was at a broad and general level confirming that they wished to see if they had a message that they could convey to Ronald Reagan, it reinforced that desire. And shortly thereafter we set a meeting, now I think we're into the summer, July of 1984, we set a meeting with Reagan.

In the course of those weeks, Ed and I had stipulated at the beginning of the process that obviously in a presidential campaign year, this could not be exploited as a contact that would be advertised, suggesting there was some sort of Muskie-Nixon collaboration at work in support of Ronald Reagan or his policy. It would not have done, it would not have been fair for Republicans to advertise they've got this former Democratic senior statesman as an advisor to Ronald Reagan. So we were very careful about that and we made clear that we weren't going to talk about it, and that they shouldn't talk about it. And the only person that Ed told was Fritz Mondale, he called him and said, "I'm in a process that could involve some sensitive conversations, I consider it important obviously for the country or I wouldn't be doing it, and you should know about it but it is not to be mentioned. And the only contingency in which it should be mentioned is if at some point it is exploited in some way that is unfair."

But he did tell Fritz about it, he felt obligated to make sure that the candidate of the party was aware that this was going on in the background. I have the feeling from something that David Aaron said to me much later that Fritz may have told David Aaron. David was his key national security and foreign policy advisor. I don't know for sure, and I've never asked David quite exactly what he knew about this, but I know Ed reported to me at the time that it certainly did not relax Fritz, he was a little nervous about it. But he did not make any reference to it, didn't say anything about it, and again to telegraph the story, neither did the Reagan administration. I had made the first approach for scheduling meetings with Reagan through Jim Baker. You want to change tapes, it looks like you're -

DN: It's almost over so let's not -

End of Side A
Side B

DN: This is the second side of the April 12 interview with Alton Frye. Go ahead, Alton.

AF: Thanks, Don. After we'd had the dinner in New Jersey with Nixon, I approached Jim Baker in the Reagan White House with the same stipulation, that there were private conversations occurring among Richard Nixon, Edmund Muskie and Howard Baker that could offer some useful counsel to President Reagan, some views that we thought he would like to hear and take account of. But that, for that encounter to take place there had to be a clear understanding that this was not to be advertised. It had to be entirely, genuinely a private channel. Jim undertook to make that so. I think he again immediately vibrated to the enormous political implications associated with anything that had Muskie and Nixon in the same sentence. And Baker and I were not close, we were acquainted. It was not a personal friendship act for me, it was related to the substance of the enterprise and the fact that these were heavy hitters, big players.

I cannot be sure, but I suspect that as conscientious a staff, a chief of staff as Baker was, he also may have been deeply concerned that the administration was not quite on the right path in dealing with the Soviet Union. I don't know that for sure, he did not say, that's a great initiative, I need you guys to do that, we got to have your weight. None of that came through. But I infer that he was sympathetic to what, in historical terms, we know was more of a George Shultz position on seeking a negotiated agreement with Moscow than a Casper Weinberger position within the defense department. There was a cleavage in the Reagan administration -

DN: And the president was getting divided counsel.

AF: Absolutely, absolutely divided counsel, that persisted in some ways through his second term. But at the end, these last months of the first Reagan term, I had the feeling that Jim Baker felt it was important for the president to hear these other views. And so it was more than curiosity, I think there was a substantive appreciation that it could be important. That is consequential for a reason I'll come to in a moment. Jim Baker arranged for an unlisted moment on the Reagan calendar for us to have a meeting with the president on a Saturday as I recall. And he did it very quickly, so once the approach was made the schedule was adjusted quite quickly. Richard Nixon, Ed Muskie, Howard Baker and I met for preliminary conversations that day at the old Dolly Madison Hotel, which was, diagonally across from the Madison Hotel there used to be a small building that was the Dolly Madison Hotel. It's now been torn down and there's an office building there. But Marshall Cohen arranged for us to have a private space there. He had no idea of what was going on, but we did manage. I don't remember if we told him who all the players were, but he arranged for us to have that space. And we had a very good full discussion among us, looking to the afternoon meeting we were scheduled to have with Reagan.

But, we learned that the press was sniffing around and they were, how they got the lead I don't know, and they did not know who it was, but they had picked up that something important was happening in this blank spot on Reagan's schedule. And once we learned that, we felt we could

not risk traipsing over to the White House through any back door we could think of with that particular group. For Richard Nixon to show up on the scene was going to be an inflammatory moment that would have blown out of the water any possibility for a genuinely private counsel. So we scrubbed the meeting, we did not have that meeting. And then to reschedule it was quite a feat.

We ended up not having that main encounter until September of 1984. And we arranged it by getting the three of them to the Waldorf Astoria on the day when Ronald Reagan was addressing the United Nations, and about the same day that Andre Gromyko was addressing the United Nations, I think I'm right on my sequence there. I think both of them were speaking at about the same time. So it was one of the typical fall parades of major statesmen. We, with Richard Nixon's, I guess he still had Secret Service protection at the time. In fact, he was arranging for us to be picked up on the contacts we had. There was another meeting I'd forgotten, I can't date it for you, but at some point we went to a, I think it was maybe after the meeting I'm going to report on now. At some point Nixon took us all to dinner in New York at Le Cirque, his favorite New York restaurant.

DN: Took you and Muskie and Baker.

AF: Muskie and Baker. And I think that probably was later. This is disruptive, Don, but let me again put in a parenthesis here. There's one other notable detail about Ed from the July meeting with Nixon in New Jersey, I believe that's the evening, I'm sure it was. We were flying back on Howard Baker's plane and Ed began to feel very badly, he was in real pain. And after we landed at General Aviation terminal here at Washington National, he was practically doubled over in pain. So I took him to Georgetown Hospital where he spent much of the rest of the night. We were there, I have the feeling it was until three or four, and as I recall it was a gallstone or a kidney stone problem. It was not a heart attack, but it was a deeply, it was an excruciating painful physical problem that hit him on the plane coming back from New Jersey. And I remember being deeply worried that somehow, being aware of his earlier heart attack, I was very worried something more like that was happening. But it was not, it was some, I think a gallstone.

At any rate, in September we did finally have the direct face-to-face meeting with Reagan. It was at the Waldorf Astoria, and we went there before Reagan got to the hotel, that was a part of the arrangement to get the group in quietly and unnoticed. When the president got there, George Shultz was with him. I had deliberately made a point of not informing George Shultz. I believe I confirmed that decision with Howard, I think that, I was, I believe I had his concurrence that since we felt George Shultz was himself on a similar wavelength, we should not jeopardize his standing by doing anything that suggested we were somehow his agent. And not telling him seemed to be the wiser course. And Jim Baker had respected that request.

But when Shultz walked into the Waldorf Astoria, as imperturbable a man as he is, when he walked in and saw Richard Nixon, Ed Muskie, and Howard Baker waiting for a private meeting with Ronald Reagan, it's the only time I've ever seen him rattled. There was just a, he kept it under control, but there was a degree of fluster that you never see in "the Dutchman" as he was known. I have a great regard for George Shultz, I think he's a fine public servant. And I look

back on that with some distress, because the fact that we had not told him certainly did cool his subsequent relations for a period with Howard Baker, in Howard's leadership in the Senate, and I think it was one of several factors that profoundly chilled later relations between George Shultz and James Baker. Now I don't want to overweigh this, but Shultz had a compulsion, a strong conviction, that the secretary of state should never be out of the loop. And I understand that, I respect that. I think we were serving him well by keeping him at a distance from this, but I do believe it contributed to what was a bit of a grudge in later years between him and Jim Baker.

And I think Jim Baker, when he became secretary of state, certainly gave other cause for the Shultz resentment, but, having to do with the fact that the Bush administration did not call on George Shultz, and that he was kept at a distance. Bush and Jim Baker began that presidency with a sense that Reagan had, in the second term, gotten too soft on the Soviets. And so there was an initial sternness which they worked their way through in the first months of the Bush term and did serious, very serious arms control business and other business with the Soviets. But there was a period in the early months of Bush administration with Jim Baker as secretary where they really fended off George Shultz, did not invite him in at all. So that relationship deteriorated, and I've often worried that a part of it was the fact that Jim Baker had respected our demand not to tell him about the fact that Richard Nixon was coming into play.

I guess that the final vignette of note on this concerns, maybe not just a vignette but a couple of post hoc developments. Howard Baker may have said to you as he has said with me in print in a short article we wrote after Ed passed away, that Ed Muskie played an essential role in making it possible for Richard Nixon to become a constructive counselor during the Reagan administration. I believe this initiative was instrumental in bringing Richard Nixon back into play as a public statesman. I believe prior to this passage, he was really isolated and alone and not, although he was writing books, not legitimized as a major voice for subsequent administrations. Before Ronald Reagan made his one trip to Moscow, Howard Baker found that the only outside person that Reagan really wanted to talk to was Richard Nixon, and that flowed from this Muskie-Nixon collaboration.

A lot of other things flowed in terms of the work that I later did with Nixon. Ed and I continued to have happy and useful encounters on a variety of things, we met generally as perhaps Carole [Parmelee] has mentioned to you whenever Ed was doing one of the annual secretaries of state programs or other things. I did a lot of writing for Secretary Muskie, a variety of addresses and speeches, including one I remember particularly for his Cornell Law School address which I drafted for him. So we did a lot of things together. But I also found myself working closely with Nixon on some particular efforts to move the ball forward in U.S.-Soviet relations. One of the, I think was quite notable. I would never have had the opportunity to make the proposal if we hadn't had this prehistory, but in the second term and during this period, I still felt that things were not moving very satisfactorily and urged Nixon to have a direct meeting with Gorbachev.

He did go to Moscow to see Gorbachev. At that time, well, I'm trying to put this together in a reasonable sequence. Nixon, when I first made the suggestion to him, was immediately interested, intrigued. He'd done some international travel, this was a particularly big possibility that I think excited his interest, but wanted to be sure he was proceeding responsibly. So I brought Brent Scowcroft into that conversation to give him an independent affirmation. Brent

said to me at the time, “Well, I think he’s asking what I think about this, Alton. He’s already made up his mind he wants to do it.” So Brent knows the story from that standpoint. But also in that same period Bud McFarlane welcomed, embraced and encouraged Nixon, was a factor influencing the context of the Reagan administration on these issues. And McFarlane also conveyed that to Nixon when invited to express his view about some of these contacts with the Soviets. So Nixon in his later years made several trips to the Soviet Union. And I had done a lot of drafting and staff work in connection with the early part of the process, and continued to do some drafting of ideas and suggesting notions for Nixon to consider in his own consideration of these matters.

But after meeting with Gorbachev, Nixon wrote a long private report to Reagan, entirely his own. I did not see it until some time after it had been written and submitted. And it was typically Nixon in painting the big picture, getting the priorities arrayed in what I’ve considered a pretty sensible fashion. I don’t think Ed ever saw that paper. I’m just thinking back on that aspect of it. Because by that time the relationships had changed, not in a negative way, they just had shifted beyond the early first approach designed to convey weighty counsel to Reagan, more must be done to get this relationship right, and he must not fail to move on the strategic arms negotiations. That basic message had been conveyed in that first encounter with Reagan, and I think it had some bearing on what did represent an evolution. Nixon and Muskie and Howard Baker, and Howard I think will testify to this, were a part of the process in which Reagan began to move toward negotiating, which was the primary thrust of his second term. Though he did not complete the start agreement, it was ripe for the plucking when George Bush got there, so it was really a good staging.

The vignette that I started to share is, having respected throughout the campaign the fact that these overtures and communications were occurring privately and that Ed Muskie was involved, nothing was said until January of 1985 when the White House press office released for *Life* magazine a photograph which *Life* ran of this meeting at the Waldorf between Reagan, Muskie, Nixon and Baker. I think it was a glitch, I think that it was in their archives and they weren’t as strictly under control as they had been when Jim Baker was on top of the day-to-day routine. So I believe it was pulled out of the White House photo archives as an interesting thing and it showed up in *Life* magazine, at which point calls deluged upon, deluged both Ed Muskie and Howard Baker. And trying to respect the fact that we were still operating confidentially I got, they ducked a lot of them to me in a way that I didn’t quite know how to handle because at the time they started calling, I did not know whether some violation of our understanding had occurred, or that some game was being played. But we had essentially a no comment posture permanently. We did not say anything about what transpired other than obviously the picture shows a meeting occurred.

Anyway, by the time Reagan was going to Moscow, Senator Baker was then his chief of staff and it was Richard Nixon alone that Reagan wanted to hear from before he went out there. And according to Howard, Nixon wasn’t all that keen to fly down to Washington. His health was not such that he was, he was not an invalid but he’d had prostate surgery in the course of those years. And, again, one more aspect of the personality that showed up in those later years. If only he’d had those qualities during his public life, Don. After his prostate surgery, he’d occasionally call me about some aspect, and in the course of the conversation he would say, have

you had that prostate examined yet, don't fail to do that. I mean, he would interject things like that that you would never have expected from your earlier knowledge of Richard Nixon. I think Ed felt as I did and as Howard did, that the man we saw was far more becoming. Still credible as a thoughtful man of statecraft, in fact maybe more credible because he'd had a lot of the work stripped away and he was above self-interest, focused only on national interests. But beyond that there was just some, he wasn't a joker, but he was a cheerful fellow in that period, despite of all the gloom that surrounded his life. At this stage, his wife was becoming ill during some of this period and she did not, for example, show up on that evening when we had dinner at the Nixon home, I think she wasn't well.

But I had a lot of contact with Nixon in his later years, generally, sometimes face-to-face as when I went up to urge him to go see Gorbachev. Very often on the phone, he was calling to talk about something. And he was continuing to write, not things that I agreed with all the time but, like reflective pieces. I know coming out the collaboration on the strategic build down, at some point Bill Cohen became aware of the fact that we were having conversations with Nixon. This was after the '84 election, sometime in 1985 or so, and I could see in Bill Cohen a continuing regard for Nixon that one needs to put into context of the fact that of all the Republicans who were party to forcing Nixon out of office, Bill Cohen, judiciary committee member in the house, and Howard Baker, senior Republican figure in the Watergate hearing, those were special members of Congress in their relationship with Richard Nixon, both in the early period and then in the later period when there was a kind of special regard that developed for Nixon as statesman. And I don't want to overstate what this did, but it seems to me that Howard and I share a view that as a part of the process of tempering the edges in the first Reagan administration, these men by overcoming the political afflictions that had divided them, played a very constructive role.

It's only in the mind of Ronald Reagan that one could have gotten a firm sense for how decisive this was, but I think it's plausible to say that by Ed Muskie being willing to risk a collaboration, and I think that's the right verb, to risk a collaboration with Richard Nixon. I started to say with his nemesis, I don't think Ed Muskie had a nemesis. I think he had political competitors and adversaries and felt strongly about issues in which they disagreed, but he was a man of such measured balance that he was not locked into prejudice and hostility. And I developed such an affection for him in these years of collaboration. Since you worked for him as a staff person, you have a different window on his life and his career, but I saw him at a stage where everything we did together was a happy experience. He was not always well, so some of the time we were together, you know, he was feeling some discomfort. He'd had some surgery in the latter part of his life. But he never gave up the struggle to do good, he was, every time he went into preparation for one of the secretaries of state annual television programs, he was focusing again, trying to bite into the day's serious current problems and be ready to make a contribution. Never lost that quality in my observation of him.

DN: What was it like writing speeches for him?

AF: Do you know, again, you had an early, different track. I had, I mean it's hard work to write any speech, to do it for anybody, but I had a very easy collaboration with him. We seemed enough on the same wavelength and, having done an awful lot of it for Ed Brooke and some for

Howard Baker, and in my early life even some for Hubert Humphrey and a few others over the years, I had an awareness that you have to get the mind of the man you're working with inside your own skull in order to come at the issue that way. So I don't know that I had a particular feel for Ed. I'm sure you and others who worked with him had a special feeling for how he thought and what he wanted to do, but we had a very warm kinship about which issues were important.

They weren't all foreign policy issues. As I recall, the address for the Cornell Law School, which is one that sticks out as particularly intense labor, I think that ran to constitutionalism and issues that were not at all primarily foreign policy. But I had an easy time writing for him. I certainly never had to redo an entire draft, you know, there were small things that we would adjust, fine tune, and I'm certain he varied things as he spoke them. But he was always appreciative and supportive, so I didn't come out of these experiences feeling I'd been bruised by an unappreciative speaker. He was very generous to me.

As I say, all the relationship I had with him was so cordial and so comfortable, that I don't have anything that runs in the direction of those rumors that he was a tough man to deal with, you know, hard on staff. I had none of that in the years that I was involved with him. You have some other interviews that might have stories from the early years. I can remember dealing with Ed when he was in the Senate, and I can't remember the exact occasion, but Leon was involved, Leon Billings. And I can't remember the subject but as is often true, I had the feeling that Leon was more suspicious of me than Ed Muskie was for whatever the issue was. I was, after all, a Republican staffer and Leon was not personally hostile, but I had the sense that there was a good deal more wariness on his part than there was on Ed Muskie's part. My last immediate thought, and maybe you were there. Were you present for the memorial service?

DN: Yes.

AF: I had never seen, I've never been present at a more wonderful set of tributes. George Mitchell, whom I, despite the fact that Ed and I were together and crossed paths with George Mitchell occasionally. I remember Ed and I were going to some affair, I think either the Russian embassy or the University Club and we had a momentary chat with George Mitchell. George and I didn't know each other except in the most casual sense. We've come to know each other better now that he's on the Council board; he's a very good member of our board of directors. But I think George did a fabulous job at the memorial service. And I've never seen Jimmy Carter present himself in a more attractive fashion than he did in reminiscing about Ed Muskie coming to Georgia when Ed was the primary Democratic prospect for the presidential nomination, and Jimmy Carter thought he might be interested in a progressive southern governor as the number two. Carter really shone in his reminiscences about Ed. So I found that one of the most moving and beautiful services I've ever attended, and I guess you and I both have been at too many of them to count.

DN: Yes, more and more.

AF: But they all did a great thing and Ed really did elicit the regard of people, at whatever level they were related to him, as a peer, as a Senator and a governor, or a secretary of state. Or,

I think even if there were some staff who came away feeling he had been tough on them at times, I have never met a Muskie staffer who didn't retain a regard for him.

DN: That's absolutely true. Thank you very much.

AF: Okay.

End of Interview