

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Robert S. “Bob” Tyrer
(Interviewer: Brien Williams)

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Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview with Robert S. Tyrer for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College in Maine. Mr. Tyrer is co-president of The Cohen Group. We are in his office in Washington, D.C., and today is Thursday, March 12, 2009, and I am Brien Williams. I’m going to ask you to give your full name –

Bob Tyrer: Okay.

BW: - and spelling, date and place of birth, and your parents’ names.

BT: Okay. Robert Stanley Tyrer, T-Y-R-E-R, born April 30, 1957, in Hamilton, Ohio; parents are James and Margaret Tyrer.

BW: Give me a little bit of your own personal background, where you grew up and went to school and so forth?

BT: I grew up in suburban Detroit, Michigan, and during my high school years met then Congressman Cohen who was giving a speech in the little area that I lived in. Was planning to go the next year down here to GW to college, a number of people in my dorm were volunteering and doing internships for congressmen and senators, which seemed interesting, so recalling the experience of having heard Congressman Cohen give a speech, I decided to volunteer in his office, and that was thirty-four years ago, so.

BW: So you went to G[eorge] W[ashington University].

BT: I did.

BW: What was a Maine congressman doing talking in suburban Michigan?

BT: [p/o] He came to Birmingham, Michigan, to the Birmingham Unitarian Church, gave a talk about the pressures of being asked to judge a president of your own party and how to weigh issues of right and wrong versus party loyalty, things of that nature, which I thought was pretty interesting.

BW: What was your family’s political background? Very active? Republican/Democrat?

BT: Not very active. They were Republicans. I had volunteered in the McGovern campaign, which was very annoying to them. I think like all seventeen year olds, you tend to be pretty liberal, and they were supportive of that, if puzzled and unenthusiastic, but supportive.

BW: So you must have gotten a bug to pursue politics at a pretty early age.

BT: I did, it was always an interest, for whatever reason. And following the Watergate hearings that summer became something of real interest, while most kids were doing more normal types of things. And so when I heard this young congressman, who I'd seen on TV, was going to come and speak, it seemed like an unusual opportunity to hear him. So yeah, I'd always been interested, and had always planned to go down here to college.

BW: And because it was in Washington.

BT: Right, right.

BW: So when were you interning then, when you were at GW?

BT: I started in September '75, just in my freshman year. I was a capable student, but it quickly seemed to be much more interesting to hop on the bus and go up to the Cannon office building and actually do stuff, even though it was all appropriately menial, it just seemed quite interesting to be, even if only by osmosis, starting to see how things actually worked.

BW: And this was in Cohen's office.

BT: Yes, he was in his – one, two – third term in the House at that point, in September '75, so the Watergate stuff had been the year before.

BW: So did you make the connection that led to the internship in Michigan, or when you got here?

BT: It's funny how these things work. I hadn't, I don't think I'd spoken to him when he was giving his speech, but when I got here and heard people talking about who they would work for, I thought, "Well he seems interesting." So I wrote him a letter explaining what an incredibly valuable addition I would be to the operation of his office, as an eighteen-year-old who knew nothing. I got back what I came to learn was the form letter you send back to people to say, "We have no jobs for you," but at the bottom of it the chief of staff who signed the letter just happened to write a P.S. saying, "If you'd like to come in and volunteer, give me a call." So, on that small twist of fate a big chapter of my life started. So I did, came in and started volunteering. That was that.

BW: And you were at GW for four years?

BT: Actually three years. I moved up to Maine for his 1978 Senate campaign, finished

school, that's right, at the University of Maine, because I stayed on and managed his office in Bangor after he won in the Senate, so I did three years at GW and finished up at Maine.

BW: So over the course of those three years, all three years you were working for Senator Cohen.

BT: Yes, and more and more. I would try to put classes at night or arrange them in some way that allowed me more time at the office.

BW: And at some point you went on payroll?

BT: Yes, I think after a couple years, for \$4000 a year, something like that. Which seemed like pretty big dough at the time.

BW: Right, right. So after graduating from the University of Maine then you came back down here, is that -?

BT: Yes, I think I stayed in Maine, after Secretary Cohen won his Senate seat I managed his office up in Maine, then came back down here in 1981. His press secretary left, and I was given the opportunity to take that job so I came down at that point.

BW: Eighty-one. Hmmm. I hear a lot about the value of being a Mainer working for a Maine congressperson. So how difficult was it for you to ingratiate yourself as his representative in Maine culture?

BT: It was difficult in several respects simply because – I had grown up in a very bland suburb of Detroit that looked like a million other places. Maine's quite distinct, and not in just the obvious ways of geography or accent, but in a lot of cultural ways. And I had a lot of enthusiasm for the job, which was helpful, it helped to balance off the staggering lack of knowledge that I had at age twenty-two, generally, but of the things that you would just, become knowledge if you were actually from somewhere.

Not to digress, but I was asked to come and, come represent him in a meeting down in Machias, Maine, which is about a two-and-a-half hour drive from Bangor. And there are two roads to get there, you can go down Route 1 along the coast, or you can go along a road that is known colloquially, though not by me at the time, as the 'Airline Road,' which goes right above here.

So I was talking to the guy, "Okay, when's the meeting and what time would you like me there?" And he said, "Oh, about this time, sort of depends whether you take Rte. 1 or the Airline," and I said, "No, I'll drive." And this guy, who became a great friend of mine, must have told that story a thousand times, as if, "How stupid could you possibly, had you been from Maine you would have known that the Airline is also a road."

So there were things you didn't know that made you look pretty dumb if you decided to open

your mouth. But I found, and it's not commonly thought to be true perhaps, but if you showed enthusiasm for the people in Maine, they were very responsive to that. Those were great years and I made a lot of good friends, who could clearly tell I wasn't from there; I didn't try to pretend to be. But you can get past that, you can get past that.

BW: And you had easy relationships with his Maine people.

BT: The staffers, I think so. It was a time where I think it was more common to insist on your staff being from your home state. I think that's a little less true now. And there were probably, the chief of staff happened not to be from Maine, so he might have had a little broader perspective on what people bring to the table, in addition to their geography. So yeah, it was never, I found that there seemed to be situations, in any case, where my enthusiasm for Maine greatly surpassed that of those people who *were* from there.

Because to them it was something they'd seen their whole life. To me it was a really unique and interesting – I don't mean this in an anthropological sense – just an interesting way of life, and interesting reality of being so far away from the supply chain of things that one needs to live comfortably, and such a difficult place to make a living, and such an isolated place in many ways, due to climate, geography and whatnot, that that seemed to me to breed a stronger sense of community, because people kind of only had each other to rely on in cases like that. So I thought everything, thought then and think now that everything about Maine is quite interesting, and I knew friends of mine from the staff who were from there who were less charmed by Maine, having lived there their whole life.

BW: So you came down in '81 to be the press secretary?

BT: Yes.

BW: And what was that like, and was there a learning curve at the beginning of that?

BT: It was a pretty big learning curve. I was twenty-four, so it was illogical to give me the job in any case. And so by this point Secretary Cohen was in the middle of his first term as a senator, [] he still had an overhang of popularity from the Watergate experience and was, had a degree of prominence so there was an attendant amount of news media interested in him. And it was back in the day when there were just far more serious reporters than there are now paying attention to the Senate and a paper like the *Post* would have five great reporters covering the Senate, where now you're just seeing less and less of that. And a hearty band of Maine reporters who were covering for the Maine dailies, all that's gone as well.

So yeah, it was a lot to learn about how to serve the dual needs of protecting and supporting your boss, but being candid with the press in a way that built trust for the long-term. And having not been a reporter before, trying to achieve credibility with them nevertheless.

BW: And you were pretty successful at the job?

BT: I think I was reasonably successful. Again, much as with the Airline Road, there are things I didn't know, and things that it took some time to know. But it seemed true in that job as it had in the job before it, as it now has in all subsequent jobs, that a certain amount of enthusiasm, a certain amount of willingness to get up an hour earlier, can solve a lot of problems that you might have.

BW: So then what was the next position you took in his office?

BT: Chief of staff in, I guess, '89; something like that.

BW: So what kind of transition was that, and how did that work?

BT: That was less difficult I think, only because by then I'd been with him for fourteen years so I knew, even though I was still in my early thirties, I knew a fair amount about him. We didn't have a lot of staff turnover, so I knew most of the staff people pretty well; there were, it took you into the different and challenging area of managing people and trying to resolve conflicts between employees and things of that nature, but it was, I think it was an easier transition than the other two. I felt less stupid, I felt like I, you know, if you're the press secretary you're exposed to a pretty good percentage of what happens in the office, so there wasn't too much I had not seen before.

The guy who had been the chief of staff who left had done it since '73, so he'd been there sixteen years, and had done it extremely well, so there were big shoes to fill by a new younger person type of factor, but by that point it was a pretty stable office and the people who were there in significant jobs had been there a while and people knew what to do, so it wasn't too mysterious.

BW: Who did you succeed?

BT: A guy named Tom Daffron, D-A-F-F-R-O-N, who Secretary Cohen and I just toasted a seventieth birthday party for him the other day, along with Senator Collins, who was also an intern at the same time I was for Bill Cohen. And Tom had been Senator Percy's chief of staff before going over to Congressman Cohen, and has gone on to work for Fred Thompson and other folks after that.

BW: Was chief of staff mainly administrative, or was there a lot of, for lack of a better word, intellectual component to the job?

BT: From a policy standpoint? I think of it as having been more administrative, or more managerial. You know, you've got a staff by that point of, counting committees, fifty or sixty people, so those are your fifty or sixty potential problem areas on any given day. So there, and the inflow and outflow is pretty constant on Capitol Hill so you're always doing a lot of hiring, hopefully not too much firing, people are leaving on their own to do other things., but the finding, keeping, retaining and occasionally getting rid of people part takes a lot of time.

You're never too, this may be truer then than now, but you're never too divorced from whatever cycle you're at in the reelection campaign. When I came on we were gearing up for a 1990 reelection, which turned out to be the last campaign he ran. So the, staying in touch with the political organization back in the state, working with your fellow senator, Senator Mitchell, being – and it's really quite dependent on, and this leads to I think an interesting observation about Senator Mitchell – it's really quite dependent on the nature of your boss.

In Secretary Cohen's case, he never had any enthusiasm nor the ability to show any false excitement about partisan politics or campaigning or fund-raising or those sorts of things, so you kind of have to make up for the things that your boss isn't paying attention to. And so if someone was going to call the Republican county chairman in Franklin County, Maine, and yuk it up with them and see how their uncle's knee operation was, that was more likely to be me than Secretary Cohen. It just wasn't his thing. And I would make the argument that his time was more valuably spent being a senator.

But you know, the world was changing at that point, I made reference to Senator Hathaway's, or Congressman Hathaway's victory against Senator Margaret Chase Smith. That was such an unthinkable thing at the time; senators weren't sort of put out of office, especially one as well known and as well loved as Senator Smith. But it was starting to become an era where you couldn't just work hard back home during your election year and then work in Washington the rest of the time. If you skipped the Potato Blossom Festival or the chicken throwing contest or whatever it happened to be too many times, you couldn't, it became less and less okay to say, "Hey, remember, I'm really busy writing laws." You were expected to keep that plate spinning at the same time. So I think a good chief of staff kind of gauges the things his boss isn't inclined to pay attention to, prompts him to pay as much attention as you can get him to pay to those things, and pick up the slack yourself, whether it's talking to your big donors or your big organizers back home, or making sure that you're getting the money raised, things like that.

BW: How did, in Cohen's case, how did the breakdown occur between chief of staff and LD? How did that divide?

BT: You know, we had two LDs during that period, both really good guys, and I've seen them both lately. And this goes to your other question which I didn't fully answer – the chief of staff can't be divorced from that whole process of, "What legislation are we supporting? What are we going to focus on in our committee agenda this year? What hearings are we going to do?" et cetera. But I don't think you want to, you don't want that person to be driving it necessarily either, you want to have a good legislative staff, a good committee staff, and they're going to come in and say, "Here are the five bills we're going to sponsor this year." And if you're the chief of staff you look at it and say, "First four look great, this last one however, which would call for the outlaw of the Maine potato industry, while meritorious perhaps, may not be the wisest choice, so I think we're going to do four out of these five."

And you try to have, in our office politics was a supporting factor, not a dominant factor.

Secretary Cohen knew that post-Watergate, he was never going to be in charge of anything in the Republican Party so it didn't matter to him. If a leader he respected like Senator Dole would call and say, "Hey, I really need your vote on this one," and it was more or less a coin flip, then you might be inclined to help Senator Dole out. Most of the time, though, that wasn't his inclination nor was it our inclination to say, "We can't possibly do this because of the political facts back home." I think if you've, if at thirty-two you voted to impeach your own president, you feel you can do pretty much anything at that point and stay – by that I mean you can focus on the merits to the exclusion of the politics since you're, you've limited your political future already from having made those choices.

So it was a close relationship. I didn't try to overdo my role in it. It worked closely together as a process, and I think my role was more to say, "Hey, these first two are really great so let's hit those hard; the third one's extremely substantively valid but otherwise totally dull, so let's figure out, if we're going to do it, how do you get people interested, other senators, the press and whatnot; and the fifth one just won't fly for a million other reasons." So to kind of apply a layer of judgment to the process of figuring out what legislative initiatives get pushed, what hearings get focused on, what you want the process to come up with.

BW: From the perspective of the press, and lobbyists perhaps, who is the more valuable person to get to, if you can't get to the senator himself? Is it the chief of staff, is it the LD, is it the press secretary or -?

BT: It's never the press secretary. Well, unless it's a case where the titles belie the influence inside the office. It probably depends at what stage the problem is. If you're trying to head off, if you're worried about a hearing that might be held two months from now on your industry and you want to start to shape the debate, you'd probably go to the legislative director or the committee staff director and say, "Hey, as you're figuring out how this issue's going to play out, I'd like to talk to you about what the such-and-such industry brings to the table." If the timetable has advanced to a point of greater peril from your vantage point, you're probably a little more agitated and probably likely to call the chief of staff to say, "We have a real problem here from the vantage point of the whatever industry, I really need you to get in there and weigh in with your boss."

And again, these are, in the Senate it's a hundred different banana republics that all function different ways. In many offices, including ours, it was never a very good idea to go straight to the Senator, because that sort of carried with it the presumption that you had run out of useful things to say and you were now just hurling it into the end zone, that there was no real, that the substance of the argument had been exhausted and you're still sort of pleading your case.

So I think it's the chief of staff's job to sort it all out. If you call the LD and he says, "Well, clearly the history of the steel industry suggests that if we apply tariffs on Tuesday, that's how it has to work." It's the chief of staff's job to say, "We have a lot of steel workers in our state here, my friend, so let's figure out some other way to do it." So it probably just depends on how evolved the problem is.

BW: And who, between the two positions, gets the most quality time with the senator?

BT: Well, in most offices I think it's the chief of staff is kind of the final arbiter of how – because oftentimes you're mediating a dispute between your legislative director and somebody else on the staff. It might be a legislative director feels strongly about X, but the committee staff feels strongly about Y, so if you're the chief of staff it's your job to make sure that no game can end in a tie, you've got to figure out, 'What do we do here?' Although I think if you're a good chief of staff, you're constantly balancing the question of whether your role is essentially a management role or a labor role, and you want to make sure that your senator is also spending time with other people who have something useful to say. You can get into the habit where every issue just gets resolved through that small channel, and that's not always good either, you want to broaden it out sometimes to make sure that, even if the outcome is the same, the people feel they had a chance to make their case.

BW: I think a moment ago you were going to make a contrast between Cohen and Mitchell in terms of interests back home and whatnot.

BT: Well, an interesting thing about Senator Mitchell, and it's as true now as it was then, is Secretary Cohen always valued and benefitted from, and it's how we run our firm now, very collaborative approach. You know, we have The Cohen Group, it's fifty people, everybody has a role. Senator Mitchell, in his private life work and even to an extent in the Senate, though he had staff, he really was the center of gravity in his organization, and up 'til fairly recently, 'til he started this new job, his role at the law firm here, where we actually do some work with them, it was him and a secretary. There was no staff. If you needed Senator Mitchell you'd call him, and if he could do what you needed him to do he would do it, but it wasn't filtered through ten other people.

And he has a very – this isn't said in any way critical of the way we do it – but he has kind of a self-reliance of being the only person involved in his process. And I think it's just purely stylistic, some people work better with a group, some people more on their own, they're equally valid. But whoever his staff people were, it never really seemed clear that they could change any outcome that he felt strongly about. You know, in some offices the senator can kind of rail around and the staff will say, "Well yes, but now that we've done all that, here's some possible realities to the outcomes." You always had the sense that he was kind of the final judge and jury of things.

BW: What about his campaign style and his, was he happier being at the chicken-throwing contest, or not?

BT: Well, there's kind of a long answer to that question. I think he had the ability to make it look like he was happier than Secretary Cohen did, who just could not wear the mask quite as easily. But Senator Mitchell's story is kind of a remarkable one, you already know its history, but he, after toiling in the Muskie vineyards for many years, he ran for governor in 1974, a very

good Democratic year, a year where the Democratic nominee should well have won, and for any number of reasons – there was a sort of a flash-in-the-pan but very attractive Independent candidate that year – Senator Mitchell lost that race.

And I wasn't there obviously at the time, but in understanding the history of it, his very, critics would have said his very wooden, plodding, twenty-page position papers on everything, approach to campaigning was part of what accounted for that outcome, that no one was excited about the campaign or about him being governor. A certain percentage of Democrats voted dutifully for him, but not enough to win the race. And he then really moved into kind of a very elegant backwater of Maine, of the Maine political world, he was appointed by Senator Muskie to U.S. attorney and then ultimately judge, but nobody would have thought at the time that he had a political future.

When he did reemerge from the ashes and was appointed and then ran in '82 and ran in '88, it was a very transformed person who made those campaigns, and who clearly had come to understand the fact that being the smartest guy in the room didn't necessarily translate into votes, or did not take into effect the fact that voting is an emotional type of behavior. People want to feel connected to the candidate in some way. Most people after they're already fully formed adults have difficulty making changes like that, but he became a very good candidate and got a bunch of jokes. Both he and Cohen are sort of cerebral, analytical, detached type personalities, they're not barn burners, but both in their own way, but Senator Mitchell became a very good candidate and learned from whatever had happened in 1974 and had adjusted. And I think that was an interesting phenomenon because he wasn't thought to be the most obvious choice for the Senate seat when that came along.

BW: He was a surprise to you?

BT: Well, it wasn't a surprise that Senator Muskie wanted him to succeed him because of the closeness between them. If you made a list of who are the politically prominent Democrats in Maine, he wouldn't have been one of them. He wouldn't have been one considered in that context from, being a judge you're considered to be sort of cloistered to begin with, and absent this dramatic event with Senator Muskie, most Democrats would have said, "Yeah, George Mitchell, the guy who kicked away our governorship in 1974, let's give the chance to somebody else who's got more legs."

BW: And when you heard about the appointment, did you say, "Oh wow"?

BT: Well, it was interesting and dramatic when it was happening, because there were other people who wanted it, including the governor of Maine who wanted it for himself. Senator Muskie, who had a very tactical way of using his temper said to the White House, "Okay, if Senator Mitchell's not the appointee, I'm not going to be your secretary of state, so you guys go work this out." So the Carter White House had to scramble pretty hard. They'd already signaled that they wanted to appoint Senator Muskie and they had to put the hammer down on the governor pretty hard to say, "Let's be for what's going to happen here. Senator Mitchell's going

to be the, Judge Mitchell's going to be the senator." So there was, that played out semi-publicly for a few days.

But I thought it was an inspired choice, because he clearly had the capability to do the job very well. And more so, there were other very good choices at the time that the Democrats could have made, but I thought it was, it showed characteristic loyalty on Senator Muskie's part to say, "This has been my guy, so he's going to stay my guy, and if you don't want it, find a new secretary of state."

BW: You – let me just check my notes here for a second. What are your recollections of being, I guess at the time, the press secretary for a member of the Iran-Contra select committee?

BT: Well, it was pretty dramatic. It was one of those stories that unfolded in stages, and people had, it was hard enough to get used to the idea that arms had been sold to the Nicaraguans, and then harder to get your arms around that the proceeds had gone - So it was intriguing. It wasn't quite, you never had the sense that the presidency was going to fall, so it didn't quite have the Watergate life-and-death feel to it, but it was, in those times, pretty dramatic.

And you had, as any good story needs to have, you had a lot of compelling characters. Colonel North and some of the other folks who, right or wrong – and clearly we thought wrong – were pretty interesting and would obviously grab people's attention. So it stirred up a lot of interest for that period of time.

BW: Any observations about how Cohen and Mitchell worked together on that?

BT: Well I think it was, Senator Mitchell's about six or seven years older, they'd been to the same college, they both have kind of lower middle class backgrounds in Maine, they're temperamentally similar, so they traveled in the same circles. But until they were senators together, they'd never worked that closely together.

And then when Senator Mitchell came in in 1980, they worked together in ways that people do in a small congressional delegation to try to get this money for that bridge, or this approval for this ship, but never in a way like this. So it kind of gave them the chance to have proof of concept on the question of their similarities and how well they would probably work together. They wound up writing a book together out of it, and I think it, it was the first platform for them to apply, they'd both been prosecutors, to sort of apply that prosecutorial fact-finding aspect of the job. And there are times where being a member of Congress has that as its central aspect, it isn't just introducing bills or going back home, it's a multi-faceted job, and sometimes you're a finder of fact, and I think that's a role that suits them both, both very well.

In fact the law firm, DLA Piper that Senator Mitchell is associated with, that we work for, work with, has called to say, "Now that Senator Mitchell's no longer with the firm" – he had been doing some of these high profile, baseball investigations and other monitoring roles for boards of

directors for internal investigations – and the law firm now wants Secretary Cohen to take that role because they said, “Well, we can’t think of too many other people who have the same rough level of gravitas or probity or thought to be fair-minded, wouldn’t sign off on any b.s. investigation or something.” So in a way, these roles just continue over time if you’re in enough situations where people see you as someone who’s going to let the merits dictate the course of something like that.

BW: Before we move on, I want you to just expand a little bit more on your comment that, because of Senator Cohen’s role in the Watergate, he was a kind of lonely man in the Republican Party.

BT: Well like all things it had its pros and cons. That was such a, I think, a seminal event for Republicans, even those who would acknowledge, however grudgingly over time, that clearly there were some misdeeds here. But for years on end there were Republicans in Maine who – and this was before the rise of crazy Republicans as a subset of people. These were just normal Republicans who would still refuse to shake his hand, or still wouldn’t talk to him. You could see that reflected in the committee with some of the – these are long forgotten names, but – Congressman [Charles Edward] Wiggins or Congressman [Charles] Sandman, who were the diehard defenders of Nixon, who finally ultimately had to admit that, “Oops, there’s more going on here than meets the eye.”

So it suited him pretty well that he wasn’t therefore going to be a party leader, because it wasn’t really a fit for his personality anyway. It, on the other hand, won him friends and supporters among Democrats and Independents to the degree that when the time came to seek higher office, he was a pretty logical choice for them. So I think from his vantage point, the bargain was just fine. He, had the evidence suggested that Nixon was innocent and being railroaded, he would have looked at it that way. But as things came out, I think it seemed a very open question to him whether he could be reelected that year, because the anger among Republicans was so strong, even though the factual basis of what was occurring within the Watergate saga was also pretty clear.

But, I found working for him over the years, one of the nice things about letting the merits dictate is, you don’t have to think about that too much. You know, if you say, “And we’re going to go by the merits,” and doing so gives you a reasonably clear cut set of conclusions, then there’s not much left to talk about. I mean you can try to manage the fallout as best you can, but. So I think it happened to suit his slightly outsider approach to politics. He was never comfortable being sort of in the partisan club and having that be the lens through which you make judgments on things: “Well this must be good because the party says this is one of our main things for the year.” Well, what if it’s not good? So, each Senate has its people who play the inside and outside roles; the number who play that now are smaller and smaller, but, so I think it worked out fine for him.

BW: So what kind of a standing from a kind of collegial standpoint did he have in the Republican caucus?

BT: You know, it's always been easier for Bill because he's a fundamentally good guy who makes friendships and maintains them well so – there's no way to go off the record here, but –

BW: Do you want to go off the record?

BT: Just for a sec.

BW: Okay.

(Pause)

BT: I mean I didn't want to say something awful like that. I think his standing was improved by his ability to maintain cordial relations as a colleague. The Senate, more true then than now, operated under kind of club rules of being respectful to fellow members, and seeking common ground when you could, so. There was definitely a segment within the Republican Party that would have viewed him negatively, but it didn't slop over into being personal based on style. You had other senators who kind of matched the independence of their views with a certain disdainfulness, or a certain bombasticness that would then make them, even harder to kind of welcome them back into the fold. Cohen's more low-key in his relationships and not somebody who burns bridges.

So it was clear that there was a center-left group of Republicans, and a fair number of them then, and that he was in that group. But he had good friends on the conservative side, he had a close friendship with Senator Jesse Helms our whole time here and shared, you know - Senator Helms asked Secretary Cohen to spend time with his granddaughter, because she was a basketball player in high school and Cohen was a basketball player in high school, so if you have the personal touch to any degree, it can forgive you some other sins.

BW: Who were some of his other buddies?

BT: In terms of the people he probably spent more time with and had really good relationships with, he had cordial relations with Senator Helms; he wasn't somebody you got real close to. Senator Rudman from New Hampshire, Senator Gary Hart, still a friend, Al Simpson from Wyoming, Dave Pryor from Arkansas, Nancy Kassebaum to a lesser extent, Senator Baker. When Secretary Cohen came into the Senate in 1978, he was, and he was a young guy, he was thirty-eight, he was mentored by a great many people, by both sides of the aisle, who were – that was back when that happened more, and you had people who I think were really kind of giants of the Senate. This was Muskie, Javits, Ribicoff, Mathias, Tower, Goldwater, from all sides of the aisle, but people who were serious, serious legislators over a long period of time. So he benefitted from that, learned a lot from it.

BW: Did he in turn mentor Mitchell when Mitchell arrived in '80?

BT: You know, Senator Mitchell's seven years older, and I wouldn't say-, no, he's in no need of mentoring. There were things we did to try to be helpful to a new colleague, to get up and running as he got into this new job, but he didn't need any mentoring. And he had been mentored in a very serious way for very many years by Senator Muskie, and that was about all the mentoring he'd need to have.

BW: How did the Maine delegation work together? What was the sort of dynamics there and whatnot, when Mitchell was part of the team?

BT: You know, in a small delegation there's always the requirement for cohesion, and always the opportunity for lack of cohesion also because of the size. The membership is always shifting in various ways, but the two House members tend to feel like they work just as hard as the two senators and they should get just as much attention, which of course they don't.

I think that there's always a healthy competition for headlines, and that was true in a kind of a good-natured proxy battle sort of way between the staffs, but it was clear that there was a mutual respect between Cohen and Mitchell so that always stopped kind of at the water's edge. And I'm trying to think of the House members, well, when Senator Mitchell came in it was Dave Emery who ran against him in '82 and then lost, Governor McKernan came in as a House member in '82, Olympia was a House member for a long time, for many, many years 'til '94. So I would say by and large pretty good. [You] had to be because you, if you've got four people and not everybody's on the same page it's pretty hard. You don't have, you're not playing a very good hand, for openers, so it was pretty good.

BW: And expand a little bit more on how the staffs interacted.

BT: This is one of the things I think a chief of staff has to worry about – you could wander into some proxy battles if you didn't, or some overdeveloped senses of competition if you didn't monitor that. You know, we would take some glee if we could announce a sewer grant in Waterville, Maine, or Senator Mitchell's home town, and he would take great glee if he could announce something in Bangor. And finally I said to Mary McAleney, I think, or it might have been the person before that, "Let's just announce everything jointly, we'll beat the House members, and then everything has everybody's name in it and it'll annoy certain partisans in each of our camps but then we don't have to stay up all night saying, 'Did you get the press release out on this or that?'" So we finally just created a kind of a monopoly of information and we'd put everything out, "Cohen-Mitchell today announce..." and that kind of characterized our approach over the years, our joint approach.

BW: You probably spent a fair amount of time in the Mitchell office.

BT: Fair amount.

BW: How were they, as little cosmoses –?

BT: Yeah.

BW: How were they different, Cohen versus Mitchell's office?

BT: I would say the Mitchell staff, reflecting their boss, was a more partisan group than the Cohen staff. You know, we never even asked what party people belonged to and didn't really care for our purposes, so - There, Senator Mitchell was at that time, in his role, a very partisan guy. He softens it by his approach and his demeanor, but he'd been a very hard-nosed chief of staff, he'd been a campaign manager, he was the chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, so he was an unabashed leader of his party and saw that as a role that he played. That was never something that was true of Secretary Cohen, or that was comfortable for him.

So their staff had that difference in makeup, but I would say the environments were roughly similar. Again, they're pretty small offices and you worked very closely with people, and you tended to know them and whatever they did before, they were doing that. So nothing, no dramatic differences in culture.

BW: Did things change dramatically when George Mitchell became the majority leader?

BT: Yes indeed. Well, it became sort of a point of comedy between them that Secretary Cohen was always the senior senator because he was elected first, but that quickly came to have no meaning of any kind. And it's, like all of this, it's a long time ago but it's important to remember that Senator Mitchell's achievement in becoming majority leader was significant. He ran against, if I can remember it right, Senator Inouye, who's a beloved person in the Senate, far senior to Senator Mitchell, Senator Johnston, not beloved but capable. Mitchell I think at the time had just been in the Senate two or three years. I think he was elected leader in, when?

BW: Eighty-nine.

BT: Eighty-nine, okay, sorry, seven years, but not long. Inouye had been in the Senate probably twenty-five years by then, Johnston fifteen. So a pretty interesting outcome. And if you were in our shoes you couldn't help but feel like ninety percent positive and ten percent the fact that your guy just moved down a notch in the great pecking order of life. But that seemed fine, it was good for Maine, Mitchell was a good guy, he and Cohen would joke then and joke now about who speaks first and who speaks longest and whatnot, but it was good, it was good.

BW: Where would you rank Mitchell in terms of being a leader, as compared with the other leaders that you were familiar with?

BT: I think he replaced Senator Byrd of West Virginia -I have no expertise as a student of the Senate other than whatever time I spent there. My observation is that Senator Mitchell became leader during the last period of time where the job was as significant as it once was under Senator [Lyndon] Johnson and other leaders over time. I think he caught the last tail of

what has now become a truly hellish and thankless job, that I think you can tell, with all due respect, does not tend to be held by hugely distinguished individuals, or individuals who are held in dramatically higher regard than other senators.

It's become now more of a, I don't want to say a scheduling and housekeeping function, but it's, it's a different job. You know, people don't feel that they need to be beholden to the leader in any way, it doesn't affect them, because the system is now kind of transparent enough where, the leader can't keep you off this committee or that committee as easily as he once could, so they're all out of sticks, they've got a couple of carrots here and there. So I think Senator Mitchell kind of had it during the end of the glory days of that job, and did a great job, was a great leader. Was well trusted, not to be trifled with, run up against, I think he was there – I'm trying to remember if Senator Dole was his counterpart the entire time, or whether Senator Baker was still in the game. I may have that fuzzed a little, but he was up against some very capable Republicans. And again, the difference in moving from a Bob Dole to a Trent Lott is a very significant difference, moving from a George Mitchell to a, whoever came next -

BW: Tom Daschle.

BT: Daschle, yeah, it was a big difference. So I think he did well at a time when it was hard, still hard to do well, and required the quality that he happens to possess in great abundance of being very patient, of giving everyone their say, and of still driving towards some conclusion other than chaos after every party has laboriously sounded off about their own particular piece of the pie.

And I think if you talk to the leaders now, or their staffs, and they're honest about it, their life is an unending series of, "Hey, Harry, I've got a fund raiser in Las Vegas, in Los Angeles on Tuesday, so don't, please don't schedule that vote for then but I'll be back Wednesday," and another guy whose daughter's bar mitzvah *[sic]* is going out, so it's not, no leader has gone on to anything great for a long time, that I can remember. It just ha-, it stopped becoming a pinnacle type job, it's become, you have to have one, and the people they've got are the best people they can find who everybody will vote for, but it's a different job.

BW: How did you take George Mitchell's announcement that he was not going to run again in '94?

BT: I think I was just surprised and disappointed, because he did such a good job. And, again, if you have some feeling for Maine, it's a small state, and you hate to see people lose that influence. I had more of an appreciation for it when we went through the exact same process two years later. And I think, when Senator Mitchell made his announcement, he was probably – I get confused on the numbers here – early sixties? And when Secretary Cohen made his, he was fifty-six. And the same true for both of them, safe seat forever, could have stayed in the Senate forever and ever and ever. I think they both had the sense that the Senate was becoming a bit less consequential and a bit more tied up in partisan dots, a bit more like the House. And they were at an age where there's still much to contribute but if you keep staying for six years at a

crack, then the number of sixty-two-year-olds that people hire is smaller than the number of fifty-six-year-olds that people hire. So I came to have more sympathy for his view that there were other things to do in life, because Cohen went through the same process.

BW: When Cohen decided to do that, did he discuss it with you prior, or did he spring it on you?

BT: No, we, there is a cyclical to this, so you're said to be in-cycle in the first year of the two years leading up to when your election would be. So our cycle would have been '95-'96. And again, that's all been blurred now, people never get out of cycle, they just raise money forever, but back in these happier times we had a little money in the bank but we got serious about it in '95, and fund-raising was among the things he liked least and so it was a chore to go out and raise this money. A particular chore, because people thought, correctly, he had no race and no reason to think he would have a race, "So why do we have to give him money when there are more deserving people?" So there's no end to the indignity of this process.

But the goal is, if you take that first year and don't raise money, and at the end of the year the press reports that your cash on hand is \$38,000, then you are controlling the quality of your opposition by sending them that signal. Then five really good people look and say, "Hmm, maybe he's not going to run, or maybe he's just lost a little bit off his fastball, so let's get in the race." We wanted to send the signal, "Don't screw with us, we're going to have all the money in the world, we're going to win by acclamation, so your job, Democrats, is to nominate some Joe Bag-o-donuts to run and get thirty-eight percent and let's move on."

So we did our part, we raised, at the time, this is a long time ago, I think we had a million-two, a million-three, our opponent, a guy named Phil Merrill, had \$317 dollars in his campaign treasury. So as the clock turned to January 1, 1996, things were looking pretty good. And that was my job, to make sure that they *were* looking pretty good. I knew there was a possibility that he would still spit the bit and say, "I don't want to do it." But you can't, you still have to do the things you have to do, or else you'll limit your options and you'll look weak.

So we did the first part fine. And then we started to talk about it in January, and he had had things happen in his life, his father had died in October of '95, he was going to get remarried in January '96, he didn't think it was hugely germane but, from a political standpoint, but his wife's African American, so that wasn't going to be a plus up in Maine. And I think he mostly looked at the world through the lens of his father's death to say, "I'm fifty-six, there must be other things I can do, and why don't we form a little company and we'll go out there and see what happens."

And so, I can't remember exactly when he made his announcement, mid-January sometime, so we didn't tell anybody, we just flew to Maine the night before, made the announcement that day, and that was that.

BW: Did Olympia Snowe get, oh, wait a minute, now I'm confusing -

BT: She was already in, yeah.

BW: She was already in. That's right, that's right.

BT: But we called Susan that morning, before the announcement, to say, "And we can't tell you why, but come on over to Bill's press conference so you're just standing there looking good." I mean it wasn't our, not within our control from that moment on as to what happened, but she would have been somebody who would have been there as a long time loyal staffer of his who had herself recently run for public office, so we thought if it helped her, so much the better.

And I think she decided pretty quickly to get into the race, because it, without any intent one way or the other, the announcement was kind of late in the game, you know, some people decide right away, "I'm not running," or they say in May of the odd numbered year, "I'm not going to run." I think it was legitimately a question of not knowing for sure, and therefore our job was to be prepared until his thinking took shape in one way or the other.

BW: So you began The Cohen Group entity, I guess, and then?

BT: Well we had another year of work in the Senate, so we began thinking about it, what would we do outside of government. And then just as we had literally printed up a couple of business cards and looked at some office space, President Clinton saved us from that unhappy fate, or postponed it for four years. So, and I actually went up and managed Susan's campaign in 1996 for a few months, starting in the summer I guess, and then his appointment came along for DOD and then everything changed pretty quickly from there.

BW: So you went with him?

BT: To the Pentagon, yes.

BW: And we've, it's beyond our scope to really talk about that.

BT: Sure.

BW: Although he made the observation yesterday that he was, that was a very happy experience for him and he felt very fulfilled.

BT: Yes, I think it was the happiest professionally that he's ever been. For him, the high watermark parts of being in Congress, the Watergate investigation, Iran-Contra, major legislation, being the pivotal Republican vote that could go either way, those were issues of real interest, but those were sort of things, perhaps by their nature, or indeed by the partisan, increasingly partisan tenor of the times, were fewer and far between, whereas the Maine chicken festival was never-ending, the fund-raising was never-ending. And the feeling that his own party was moving to the right, so the value of being a moderate was increasing of limited value.

So at the Defense Department, they pressed the 'on' button on January whatever in 1997, and it just never went off. You were engaged every minute of every day in matters of consequence, and matters that had, indeed, life-and-death realities to them. So there were good days and bad days, but there were never days where you didn't feel like you were completely engaged in what you were doing, and that had not been true for him in the Senate for a while.

BW: Let's backtrack. You mentioned legislation.

BT: Sure.

BW: And I guess it's a little counterproductive to get into all of the legislation that occurred over this long period of time, but were generally Mitchell and Cohen pretty much on the same side on the big ticket legislative items, or not?

BT: Well, I think you'd have to segment those into, there would be things affecting Maine where I think their position would have been pretty similar. Mitchell was just a far more partisan Democrat than Cohen was a partisan Republican, so the national issues that would have come down the pike that were in effect party-line issues, Mitchell's position would be much more predictable based on what the orthodoxy was of the Democratic Party at that time. Cohen could have gone different ways, depending on his point of view.

So I would, I have never seen an analysis of how often they voted together, I would bet it would, I bet they voted together more often than they voted separately, simply because they have a pretty similar worldview. There would have been times in probably certain types of economic issues where Cohen would have been more conservative, but I think they had a generally shared view of things.

That might, that analysis might falter when you look at the specific pieces of legislation in some respects, only because Mitchell also had a role after he was elected leader of being the guy who wore the t-shirt from the party on those particular issues. But I would, it'd be interesting to see, and it's probably doable through the magic of software, the number of times they voted similarly compared to the number of times they voted differently, but I would guess it would be more similar than not.

If you look at the rankings that are, the kind of, the common quantitative measurements of the labor groups or the business groups or this and that, Cohen's always pretty much between forty and sixty in any group that ranks, and Mitchell was more in the eighty side on the Democratic groups and the twenty side on the Conservative groups, so you know, probably some labor issues would have been a point of departure.

(Outside interruption - taping paused.)

BW: I read the other day an interesting thing, that Hedrick Smith said in his book, *Power*

Game -

BT: Great book.

BW: He said that staff members take an oath to be anonymous, and that it's always the big guy out there in front. Is that true?

BT: I think it should be true. It was true in our case, I think it was very true in Senator Mitchell's case. Even as leader, you didn't see a lot of high profile coverage of his senior aides, even though they're in a much more prominent position. Having been press secretary, I had been quoted and interviewed more frequently, so it wasn't uncommon to see my name in a story during those years, but there are times when a press secretary would be the person who would prefer to make the statement rather than having the senator make the statement on a given issue.

But yeah, that was very much our orientation, to highlight the Senator and kind of keep the rest of it low. I think you, that's probably diminished a bit over the years, there's been a little bit of a glorification of staff in certain ways you can see. I think some of the earl-, some of the first term Clinton stuff, you saw so much attention to some of the people around him that seemed, some of it's naturally a press vacuum that gets filled, but I think some of it, they didn't mind it either so much.

BW: What were the best times for you during this time with the Senator, in the Senate?

BT: In the Senate? I think that we, we took a lot of satisfaction out of building a team of people who really cared about folks in Maine, and worked very hard on the day-in-day-out problems that people would bring to you. It isn't maybe the first thing that's on any senator's to-do list, compared to legislation or hearings or this or that, but that was a big focus for us, and I was proud of a lot of the work that we did.

I think that in Secretary Cohen's case, he left a good legacy of thoughtfulness and of having the merits dictate his view. One might disagree with how he interpreted them, but there was never a case where I felt I couldn't feel proud of the outcome of a particular process of, "How is he going to vote on this?" Or, "How are we going to approach that?" You never had, there were things that I never had to worry about that colleagues of mine had to worry about all the time. You know, "How much influence from contributors was part of the process that got you to this or that outcome?" I had to worry about the pissed off contributors who wondered why their view didn't prevail, but that's a far preferable set of problems to have.

So I don't remember it as a, too many high-five moments, more just a period of eighteen years that I felt was approached in a way that respected the institution and respected the notion that you're, both you and your staff are supposed to make sound judgments and be helpful to people. And I think we held up, we held that up pretty well.

BW: How do you think Senator Mitchell should be remembered?

BT: Limited to his Senate service, or generally?

BW: No, not -

BT: Generally?

BW: Hmm-hmm.

BT: I, I'm biased, but I think, and some will depend on how this goes now, what he's doing, but I think people will look back on his career with an increasing sense of appreciation, because if he had tapped out after being a judge and had stayed a judge for a long period of time, that's a pretty amazing career. Now, we appointed a number of judges in Maine, I'm still close to them, and these are among the most respected citizens of the state and they've given great service. To go from that point, and having been presumed to have no political future based on his previous outing, to kind of somewhat miraculously make it into the Senate, win a race he was supposed to lose in 1982, become majority leader by beating Senator Inouye, walking away from that to some pretty amazing chapters – I'm half Irish, I know what kind of knuckleheads my people are – you know, to demonstrate the ability to continue to contribute, for a lot of people, and understandably so, their Senate experience is such a high watermark that anything after that is a bit of a disappointment.

And his service as a person has, I think, gotten more profound as it's gone on, now into his mid-seventies, with young children, to take on this completely thankless responsibility is financially illogical, it's illogical from the standpoint of being a husband and a father, it's illogical from being seventy-five years old, or seventy-six years old, it makes no sense of any kind. But that's who he is, to take on that kind of challenge. And I think, however it turns out, and I suspect it will turn out better because he's doing it, I think that whenever people start to reflect back, either if he ever slows down or when he passes away, I think people will think of it as a career that is not defined by any one exalted position.

The obituary won't say, "Former Senate majority leader," it'll say something broader than that. It'll say, "Peacemaker," or it'll say, "global statesman," and usually Senate majority leader's, you know, if you've gotten that far you're doing okay. So I think he's one of those rare people who is, that have taken the accumulation of his experiences and continues to add on them, and does it in a very modest, workaday sort of way. He's not a flashy guy at all, but continues to pile up accomplishment after accomplishment at an age where it would be just as easy to cash it in, spend time with your kids, and that's a, I don't know if it's a type of service you don't see as much any more, or if there are just fewer people who would be capable of doing it, but I think it's some combination of the two. And I think that has to be admired.

BW: Are we leaving anything unsaid here?

BT: The first day I met Senator Mitchell I was working in Secretary Cohen's office in

Bangor. I knew who he was, he was the judge based in Bangor. We got out of the elevator together and he said, "How did you get today's *New York Times* so early?" This was in the morning, and at that point it was hard to get, this is 1979, so - And I said, I forget how I got it, but I said, "I ordered it and it comes delivered to a certain store." He says, "Well I don't get mine until four in the afternoon." I said, "Well, you're a judge and I'm a twenty-two year old, it seems like you ought to be getting the better deal." He said, "Well, can you get me the same deal that you got?" I said, "Sure, I'll throw in an extra copy of the *Times*, drop it off." He says, "Okay, I'm, name's Mitchell, third floor, but I'd really like to get that *New York Times* every morning, not just, not four in the afternoon."

And it just struck me as sort of a dogged approach to things. And when he first came to the Senate in 1980, and at that time - and boy, how things changed - but he was kind of the slightly accidental senator, Cohen was the senior senator, which counts, you know. Senator Fritz Hollings was the junior senator from South Carolina until he was eighty-one years old, it always pissed him off. So, and Cohen and Mitchell would meet on the Senate steps to get their picture taken with school groups, and Senator Mitchell would come over afterwards, he'd say, "Now I got the name of that one guy, the guy, third in the back row who said his parents were from Rockland, but do you have the names of the other three kids? Because I want to send them a note."

And it became, over the course of time, a matter of kind of gallows humor, because you could not be ill in Maine, you could not be dead in Maine, without Senator Mitchell being the first person to call—call your hospital room, call your widow—and it used to drive us crazy. Because we'd hear, "Okay, State Senator So-and-so's on his deathbed," I'd say to Cohen, "please call, please call today," either, "call the almost dead guy," or, "call the wife," or, "call somebody before Mitchell calls, sends flowers," comes by and does twelve other things. So he'd call up, they'd say, "Oh yeah, I was just talking to Senator Mitchell." I swear, you could never get the drop on him, he had this, and it was him, it wasn't staff-driven. And watch him go around and get all the names of all the kids, he could have had a staff person doing it.

And so I think he combined this attention to detail with the ability to perform at a higher and higher level over time. And both of those traits still serve him very well. If you're negotiating over Ireland, or negotiating over the Middle East, it's, among other things, a vast command of minutiae and people's styles and reading people and being that analytical person. And long before we had any reason to be impressed by him on a grander scale, before he became majority leader, it was just fascinating to watch him operate. Somebody who paid attention to every little thing like it really mattered, and it did really matter.

You know, he was appointed in 1980. All the political scribes would have said, "*Pshht*," you know, "he'll get blown out the next time by the powerhouse congressman, Dave Emery or somebody else." And so he was working it like it mattered. He'd lost an election that he was supposed to have won in 1974, and I think that never lost its power for him. And one thing he knew was that that wasn't going to happen again if he could do anything about it. And I thought those were admirable traits, to say, "Okay, maybe I've just been a senator for a month, and

maybe the best thing I can do today is get those five autographed pictures to those five annoying kids from the Rockland marching band, but by God I'm going to do it, I'm not going to have the staff do it, I'm going to do it myself." And I think that just over time you could see that in everything he did and every way he handled things, he owned that experience.

It wasn't something where, and just different styles, but Cohen's view is, "I'll do my part, and everybody else do their part, and then it'll be better because more will get done." You know, he said, "I don't want to have to do this, because that's not my job to do, I have to be good at other things." So different styles, but I think people will remember him with increasing respect.

BW: Great, thank you very much.

BT: Thank you.

End of Interview