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ROBERT J. DOLE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with

GEORGE J. MITCHELL

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Interviewer

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[Senator Mitchell reviewed this transcript for accuracy of names and dates. Because no changes of substance were made, it is an accurate rendition of the original recording.]

Smith: Senator, I want to ask you, first of all, you came to the Senate as a protégé of Ed [Edmund S.] Muskie, and I'd love to know—I would think that they might have had real profound political differences, but it seems to me that there's actually some parallels in character and humor and regional identity. Did Ed Muskie ever talk to you about Bob Dole? Did he ever have a conversation?

Mitchell: I don't recall any specific conversation about Bob Dole with Senator Muskie. I was present when Senator Muskie discussed many members of Congress, and I can recall him including Senator Dole among others whom he admired, who he thought was a good legislator, someone he could work with. I think Senator Muskie had a bias toward those who, in fact, were what he called good legislators; that is, people who actually tried to get bills passed as opposed to making statements and holding press conferences. I know he held that view of Senator Dole.

Smith: In your experience, how do you define a good legislator? And I would preface it by saying I think to the general public this is so mysterious, people have so little idea of what actually transpires in the legislative process.

Mitchell: It is true that people regard it as mysterious, but the same principles that apply in virtually every walk of life apply in the legislative process. You establish yourself by demonstrating knowledge, willingness to work, willingness to respect and listen to other points of view, and be at least as interested in an outcome as in getting credit for the outcome. I didn't want to exaggerate by saying disinterested in getting credit, because I don't think that's really true of most people who have reached that level in the political process.

It's awful tough to get things done in the Senate. I always think of the Senate as a microcosm of the system of checks and balances that the founders wrote into our whole system, that the Senate, separately, viewed independently, contains internal checks and balances, although it itself is part of a larger scheme of checks and balances. The way I

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put it, with only modest exaggeration, is that the founders wanted to prevent bad things from happening, and the easiest way is to prevent anything from happening. In the Senate, that's not quite, but almost true, so it's tough to get things done. It takes a lot of work, intense personal effort senator to senator. The predicate upon which you build is how you are viewed by other senators, whether they trust you, whether they respect you, whether they like you and like to work with you, and that's a tough thing to do. It really is time-consuming. It requires focus, effort. And the reality is that a very large number of men and women who come to the Senate and leave never devote that kind of effort to it, because it's easier to do other things and there are a lot of other demands on their time.

Smith: It's fascinating. I cannot tell you how many times I've heard Bob Dole say that in this job your integrity is everything. Your word is the end-all and be-all. And almost as often he's said in this place you can't hold a grudge.

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: Obviously you and he found yourself working with people you probably didn't like.

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: How do you do that?

Mitchell: Because you have to. The Majority Leader doesn't elect the other senators; the people of their states do, and they're entitled to representation whether I happen to like or dislike the person that they elected. You have to respect them and deal with them. Bob and I were able to achieve a high level of mutual trust and confidence because we shared much of the same what I would call foundational beliefs that your word is everything and you can't carry grudges because your enemy today is your ally tomorrow, then is your enemy the next day. You're constantly building coalitions based on different issues, different times, different circumstances, and you can't ever afford to be permanently mad at anyone.

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Smith: Do people outside the Senate exaggerate the importance of ideology in terms of building those coalitions?

Mitchell: I think ideology has become increasingly a factor in the Senate's deliberations in the dozen years since I've left the Senate. It clearly has always been a factor. It was a factor when I was there, but I think it has intensified, in some respects calcified, since Bob and I were there. I think it's gotten a lot tougher. There's a lot more of the view that compromise is a sign of weakness and that sticking to your position is a sign of strength and conviction, and I think that loses sight of what real strength is, what real conviction is, and what a real desire to get things done is.

Smith: Do you think the media reinforces that growing perception?

Mitchell: Very much so. Very much so. You now have this all-out competition between cable news networks, between the media. You don't have daily deadlines anymore; it's minute-to-minute deadline. And there is a constant search for controversy, sensationalism, for slogans of a few words that capture a position, a disdain—

Smith: A caricature.

Mitchell: Caricature, yes. Well, a disdain for nuance, disdain for reasoned discussion. It's a much tougher place now for political leaders, and I must say in the Senate. I worked for Senator Muskie as an aide in the 1960s. I then served in the Senate in the 1980s and '90s, and there was a huge increase in that twenty-year period in the workload, in the demands, and I think it has continued in that direction. So now senators are besieged as never before by people who want to talk to them, get a point of view across to them. It's the number of issues, the number of visits, the number of things that you're supposed to know and talk about. I think they've all made it very difficult to maintain some level of collegiality, some higher institutional loyalty over party and personal ambition, and so I think it's much tougher on the individuals now.

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Smith: It's also been suggested that thirty, forty years ago—I used to hear President [Gerald R.] Ford talk about his experiences—that basically members of both sides just woo each other as individuals, often as friends. They would socialize together. They stayed in town more. Has some of that evaporated as well, that there's just less of the kind of almost social interaction from the colleagues?

Mitchell: Oh yes. That's been a dramatic change. I can recall when I worked for Senator Muskie, his family would go to Maine for the summer. In fact, I drove up with his family frequently when I was a young aide. He would stay here until the August recess, and almost every night he'd have dinner with a group of senators.

When I was there, we were in session all the time, although one of the reasons I think that Bob and I were able to maintain a good relationship is that we did see each other not socially outside the Senate, but within the Senate. Many, many an evening we had dinner together, either he and I, or with a small group of senators in the senators' private dining room. We talked a lot. We tried to maintain an ongoing sense of communication.

I can recall clearly that when I ran for Majority Leader I made up my mind that one of the first persons I was going to go see when I was elected was Bob Dole, because I knew he would be the Republican leader with whom I'd have to deal. And I did go to see him, and I told him that I regarded this as a very difficult job. He knew more about it than I did. He'd been in the Senate much longer, had been in the leadership. I had not been. But I told him my impression and that it would be a lot better if we could agree in advance on certain basic, very basic principles. I told him that I'd never surprise him, that I wouldn't try to embarrass him, that I'd try hard to keep the focus on the issues and the Senate would ultimately decide who was right or wrong. He welcomed it. He was very receptive, had the same views, and that established the basis for what has become a very good friendship over the years. I say publicly often now that to this moment Bob Dole and I have never exchanged a harsh world in public or private. We disagreed almost all the time on virtually every issue. We negotiated as best we could. We tried to work them out. Most of the time we had to let the Senate decide, and sometimes my view prevailed, sometimes his view prevailed, and then we went on to the next issue the next day.

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Smith: And I take it you feel that there's been a downhill progress, if you want to call it that, since then, that there's not that kind of understanding, for example, in today's Senate between the Leaders.

Mitchell: It's become much more difficult, I think. In the first place, as I'm sure Bob has told you, will tell you, when you're a Leader you have several different constituencies. The members of the Senate from your party is one constituency. They're not unanimous by any means on almost any issues. One of the most deceptive statistics that's published are the figures that some of these publications that follow the Congress put out showing how often members of the party voted the same way, but if you dissect them, you see that there are very substantial number of procedural votes in which all of one party vote one way and all of the other party, …. If you took those out, it would show a much more diverse view within each caucus and among the entire Senate. So you've got to deal with conflicting views in your own caucus. You've got to deal with a Leader who has conflicting views within his or her own caucus. It's not an easy job, I'll say that. It's not for the faint-hearted or for anyone who's not prepared to put a heck of a lot of time in it.

Smith: Now, you arrived in the Senate in 1980.

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: Presumably expecting to be in the majority.

Mitchell: Yes. I was in the majority when I arrived.

Smith: That's right. To remain in the majority while you were there.

Mitchell: Right. [laughs] It was a short-lived majority.

Smith: But you regained it. What do you remember about election night 1980?

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Mitchell: I was surprised, disappointed. I already knew that I would have a very tough time being elected myself in '82, and that this would make it much more difficult, given the change. But mostly it was one of surprise. I didn't expect it. I don't think a lot of people expected it. If you'll recall that election, [Ronald W.] Reagan and [Jimmy] Carter were fairly close until maybe a week or ten days before the election when the tide suddenly swung, and almost completely to Reagan.

Smith: And one debate which crystallized—

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: Reassured voters on the one hand and crystallized their doubts on the other.

Mitchell: Yes. So I think everyone was surprised, even the Republicans, at the scope of the victory. So it was a big surprise, and I thought, oh god, this is going to be tougher than I thought.

Smith: Let me ask you, because my sense is, from the conversations I've had with Senator Dole, you know, that night was a real turning point for him, and it wasn't that he was irresponsible before or responsible afterwards, but that once you're in the majority, you have no choice. I suppose you have a choice, but basically you can legislate, however difficult that may be—

Mitchell: You're the governing party.

Smith: Exactly.

Mitchell: You're the governing party.

Smith: And you're no longer governed by press release. You've been in the majority, been in the minority. Describe the difference psychologically.

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Mitchell: It's a huge difference. The truth is, it's much easier to be in the minority. It's much easier to get cohesion among your colleagues than it is when you're in the majority, because you know that your position is not going to prevail on many issues, and really what you're doing is presenting an alternative to the position of the majority. So it's very tough, very tough to go from the minority to the majority.

Smith: Do you have, in a sense, more room for political maneuver in the minority than you do in the majority?

Mitchell: Yes. Sure. And I think that's true of most democracies. I don't think that's unique to the United States. There's much about the American political system that is unique, that doesn't exist elsewhere, but in that respect I think that's true universally. In fact, I think opposition parties, which is what they call themselves in most parliamentary systems, do it more overtly, more directly, and not self-consciously. In this country it's somehow viewed as a pejorative to say we're in the opposition party. Here people think you're in the minority party because the American political system uniquely requires a blend of competition and cooperation, but there's no universally accepted standards or rules or code of conduct for determining that. We have that in the judicial system. We have rules. We do have it in sports, we have it in business, in all walks of American life. We like competition. It's the toughest in the political arena because there aren't any rules. There are no guidelines. There are no standards as to what is proper, what is improper. When does competition become inappropriate? So it's awful tough on the Leaders because you sort of make the rules as you go along and you define it not so much by writing out and publishing a set of rules, but you define it by your conduct.

Smith: Do you have a theory as to why legislative leaders, including highly successful ones, are at such a disadvantage in running for the presidency?

Mitchell: Because you have to compromise. I remember Bob Dole who I regard as a close friend, who I greatly admire, when he ran for president he was being criticized in the primary contest because he had compromised while he was a senator, and it was a

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pejorative. It was a negative argument. "He shouldn't be president because he compromised with the Democrats while he was the Republican Leader in the Congress."

Smith: That argument being made to the party base.

Mitchell: Right, that somehow you sold out, you don't have any conviction, you're not strong if you reached a compromise with these evil guys on the other side. It's tough. The other reason is, of course, you've got this enormous legislative record. You voted on thousands of things that can easily be taken out of context. You recall when Al [Albert A.] Gore [Jr.] and Bill [William W.] Bradley ran against each other in the Democratic primary in 2000. They were so similar that they were reduced to arguing about votes that they'd cast fifteen years earlier. It was hard to imagine anything less relevant to the contest that they were engaged in, but they had to struggle so hard to find differences, and what they did is they mined that legislative record.

When you're a governor, you never have to cast a vote. You might make a lot of statements, but you can always explain away the statements. So I think those are the two principal factors, and the third one is that you've got a job. You've got to be there, and you don't control the calendar. When you're a governor, you can come and go as you please. You set the calendar. When you're a senator, an individual senator doesn't set the calendar. Even the Majority Leader doesn't individually set the calendar. You've got to accommodate ninety-nine other people. So for all of those reasons I think it's very tough.

Smith: Is there a fourth reason, and that is the nature of persuasion. Harry [S.] Truman famously said that the chief job of a modern president is persuading people to do what they ought to do but don't want to do.

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: But a president we think of with the bully pulpit, television and all this, it's a very different kind of persuasion than what goes on here, often one on one or behind closed

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doors, and combined with that is the whole lingo of the legislative process. I mean, Dole was criticized for talking "Washingtonese."

Mitchell: Inside baseball talk.

Smith: Precisely. I wonder if over a period of time that, in fact, is a threat.

Mitchell: It makes it more difficult, that's right. You—

Smith: The better you are at the job, the more disqualified you are for—

Mitchell: That's right. You do come to talk in legislative jargon, but I honestly think while that is a factor, it's not the major factor. I think a big factor is that you've come to understand that issues are complex. This is a big country. There are a lot of points of view in this country. There are a lot of different interests, and there are nuances in life. When you run for president, all of that's a handicap because what the presidential campaigns require is clarity, simplicity, understandability, and likeability. None of those are helped—maybe the likeability part, to get along with your colleagues, but none of those are helped by experience in the legislative process.

Smith: In a sense, if you're running for president, you exploit differences. If you're a legislator, you try to narrow them.

Mitchell: Yes. That's a good way of putting it. I've got to remember that the next time I give a speech. [laughs]

Smith: [laughs] It's all yours. Now, in 1981 Bob Dole suddenly finds himself in the majority. Were you on the [Senate] Finance Committee at that time?

Mitchell: I got on the Finance Committee in '81, yes.

Smith: So you were there for the whole of the Reagan tax cuts.

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Mitchell: I was, yes.

Smith: There had to have been, beginning with Russell [B.] Long, an enormous cultural tectonic shift there. What was it like internally and then dealing with the White House? And obviously Dole was not a supply-sider.

Mitchell: Well, two points. First off, I was the most junior of junior members. I was sort of a senator with an asterisk, "appointed senator." I had not been elected, and while nobody said to me that's a stigma, it was very clear in everybody's mind, and it was compounded by the fact that I was widely expected to lose. I was way behind in the polls, so there is no reason why anybody should have paid any attention to me, and most senators didn't. So I saw this from way at the far end or kind of at the bottom end of the political spectrum.

But I thought Senator Dole captured it best when he said, with his great sense of humor, when he got elected chairman of the Finance Committee, "Yeah, but who's going to tell Russell Long?" [laughs] He asked the question. But he handled it well.

Smith: How did Long [unclear]?

Mitchell: Well, you know, I thought they both handled it well. I really do. Russell is a very engaging guy, like Dole, a great sense of humor, completely different sort of humor.

Smith: Storyteller?

Mitchell: Great storyteller. Sometimes you had to really listen closely to get the point of the story, but he was a great storyteller. [laughs] And a very engaging guy. Senator Dole, of course, had a great sense of humor. So I think both of them handled it well, but I want to make clear and confess that neither of them consulted with me. [laughs] I wasn't part of any inner circle at the time.

Smith: That was an incredibly eventful period.

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Mitchell: It was an incredibly eventful period, and a lot of important legislation was enacted.

Smith: I get this is, to most people, ninety-five out of a hundred Americans don't know what the Finance Committee is.

Mitchell: Ninety-nine out of a hundred. [laughs]

Smith: What it is, what it does. What is the Finance Committee?

Mitchell: Well, the Senate Finance Committee is one of the most important committees of the Congress. It deals not only with taxation, which the name suggests, but it has jurisdiction over hugely important institutions like Medicare, Medicaid. The whole subject of healthcare falls within its purview. Trade issues. It really is at the center of significant issues that country and the Congress have to deal with. So being chairman of the Finance Committee is one of the most important, powerful positions that any member of Congress can hold.

Smith: How did Dole do that job?

Mitchell: He did a great job, I must say, and I was a member of the opposition. I didn't agree with everything he did. I didn't agree with all of his issues. I didn't agree with some of the tactics and processes that were followed, but given the fractious nature of the people with whom he was dealing with, given the difficult issues, I thought he did a great job at it.

Smith: Did you have the sense that while he was carrying water for the Reagan White House, it wasn't always a comfortable assignment?

Mitchell: Yes, of course that's the case, but, look, that's true of everybody who serves in leadership positions. I was the Majority Leader for two years under a Democratic

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president, and I didn't agree with everything that the President proposed. So you do the best you can under circumstances which, from your perspective, might not be perfect, but you have to keep reminding yourself you're not the president, and you've got to try hard to influence policy internally, and then you have a party responsibility and a public responsibility. I think clearly on fiscal issues, it was pretty obvious that Senator Dole wasn't what I would say a zealous supply-sider, and with that great sense of humor, he could get that across without actually saying that often. But he did a good job for the President, and he pushed through that '82 tax cut—tax increase. I'm sorry. He called it tax equity, the Tax Equity Act, which I thought was pretty good.

Smith: Nomenclature counts, doesn't it.

Mitchell: Yes. Well, I have a theory about that, and I'm not sure this is true, but I think it is. If you look at President Reagan's speeches, he tended to regard taxes and income taxes as synonymous. I don't think President Reagan really thought of a tax other than the income tax as a tax, so he could say and believe that "I never raised taxes," when, in fact, he signed a bill that had huge tax increases. I think Senator Dole recognized all of that and masterfully pushed through legislation that really did raise some taxes, but was able to persuade the President and others that it really wasn't a tax increase, that it was a tax equity mechanism. So I thought it was a masterful job both in terms of the legislative process—just getting one of these big tax bills through is a hugely difficult task—and in terms of doing it in a way that didn't rupture relations with the President or with the Administration.

Smith: '82, of course, is also the Social Security bailout.

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: Describe that.

Mitchell: I was not directly involved. As you know, we had a commission. No, the commission was '83, I thought.

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Smith: That's right.

Mitchell: The commission was later, after '82.

Smith: Of course, Democrats had picked up twenty-six seats in the House.

Mitchell: Yes, that's right.

Smith: Based on the Social Security issue.

Mitchell: That's right, and we did well in the Senate as well in '82. That's the year that I was elected to my first full term, and it's quite clear that public sentiment swung away from the Administration and toward the Democrats in that election. So Social Security was an extremely difficult issue for the Republicans. They've always had a kind of a political schizophrenia about it. They were obviously strongly opposed to it at the outset, but it became so deeply imbedded in American life that politically you couldn't ever stand up and say, "I want to abolish Social Security." In fact, I remember in one debate I got up on the Senate floor and I challenged any Republican senator to "Come out here right now and say that you want to abolish Social Security," and of course not one of them came. So they put him in a tough spot. Same thing with Medicare. So how that was handled was both significant for the country and politically difficult for everyone concerned. To be frank, it's obvious that some, perhaps many, Democrats tended to exploit it as a political issue because they recognized the vulnerability of the Republicans on it. It wasn't consistent with their theme of small government and "Government is bad" and so forth.

The commission was essential. The members did an important job, and I've heard both Senator Dole and Senator [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan, who were on the commission, describe the encounter that they had, the meeting that they had out on the steps of the Capitol or on a balcony outside the Capitol, in which they spoke about the need, when it looked like the commission was not going to be able to come up with a compromise, how they talked about the importance of the issue to the country and that

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they should make a new effort at it, and that did bring a resurgence back and they were able to get it done and got a good vote in both the Senate and the House. I think it was a great service to the nation.

Smith: And yet it's interesting, I suspect when Dole ran in '96, for that matter even in '88, I don't think it was a plus.

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: I mean, it ought to have been in demonstrating the seriousness of purpose and in wanting to get things done, but I think going back to what you said earlier, the notion of compromise and—

Mitchell: But the problem is politically when you face a potentially catastrophic situation and then you resolve it before it becomes catastrophic, well, nobody knows for sure that it ever would have been a catastrophe. So you, in effect, by doing the right thing, you minimize the impact of your own argument.

Smith: Historians are enamored of presidents who are great crisis managers.

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: They're much less inclined to appreciate presidents who avoid a crisis.

Mitchell: Yes. But isn't that true of human nature generally?

Smith: Sure.

Mitchell: Just think of, if you go back over a long period of time, the extent to which political leaders will take the most extraordinary risks in time of war. In effect, the future of their nation or state, of their society, may hang in the balance, and they'll take extreme risks. But in terms of peaceful outcomes to avoid war, risk-taking is minimal. There's

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very little risk-taking, because until it happens, you can't convince the public of the severity of the situation. After the fact, then it's not difficult to do, but the time may have passed when you can achieve the peaceful result.

Smith: Have you read [David] McCullough's biography, *John Adams*?

Mitchell: No, I have not.

Smith: You should, because Adams, in effect, sacrificed his presidency doing exactly that, for his own party to avoid war with France in 1800, and was defeated and went home bitter but with the knowledge that—

Mitchell: He'd done the right thing.

Smith: He'd done the right thing.

Mitchell: Well, you know—

Smith: Which is why historians appreciate him.

Mitchell: I've just recently gone through that in a personal sense—this is a digression here—in northern Ireland, where the two major centrist parties were the ones who created, conducted, and completed the negotiations that led to the end of the conflict, but in the process were overtaken by the less centrist parties in both communities who've now assumed control, even though the others, the centrists, the more moderates, are the ones who got the whole process going. It's an interesting commentary, but it is consistent with the point that you've just made.

Smith: That brings me—I'll jump ahead, because, of course, like you, [unclear], Senator Dole's had some diplomatic missions, pretty painless ones at that. I mean, did he ask your advice or talk to you about your own experiences before he got involved with the Balkans or—

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Mitchell: No, no, we didn't discuss that. It wasn't necessary. He knew more in his little finger than I'll ever know about any of this stuff. [laughs]

Smith: In '86, of course—let's back up. You were surprised by the outcome in '80.

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: Were you surprised at all by the degree of success you enjoyed on election night '86?

Mitchell: Well, I was very much involved in that. In that cycle I was the chairman of the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee and I worked at it for pretty nearly two years. The answer is yes, I was surprised. You think that mathematics and human nature are such that if you have a whole lot of separate close elections, that they're not all going to break one way. But in fact, in '80 and in '86, there were a whole lot of close elections. In 1980 the Republicans won almost all of them. In '86, we won almost all of them. It's not the outcome you would think rationally would be the case. I'm not sure of the mathematical explanation for it, but the answer is, I was pleasantly surprised. I thought we would regain control of the Senate. We had a lot of good candidates.

It's interesting, now that I try to look back on it, because President Reagan was still quite popular. The Iran Contra event did not break until immediately after the election. It was not a factor in the election. But we had things going for us pretty well in terms of individual candidates, in terms of the national issues. There was no overriding issue either way, and we were lucky.

Smith: Isn't it also possible, without naming names, but that, in fact, that tidal wave in 1980 brought in some relatively weak Republican candidates—

Mitchell: Sure.

Smith: —who might be more vulnerable than—

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Mitchell: Yes, without commenting on their strength or weakness, the fact is, the most difficult time and the period of greatest vulnerability for incumbents is their first reelection, and that clearly was the case there.

Smith: Do you remember what Dole said the morning after? You had played a leading role in transforming him from Majority to Minority Leader.

Mitchell: No, I don't recall that we discussed it.

Smith: Did he take it in relative good humor?

Mitchell: Oh, he took everything in relative good humor. I don't know how he was in private, but with me and other senators at that stage he took everything in good humor.

Smith: Why don't you comment on that. Because as long as I've known him, people have been coming up to him and saying, "I didn't know you were funny. If you'd been like that during the campaign, I would have voted for you." This discrepancy, it's now largely disappeared, but earlier in his career, certainly when he first arrived in the Senate, he was pretty often somewhat harsh.

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: A partisan figure. He's still a partisan. He still likes to win.

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: He's still a party man, but that whole image seems to have largely evaporated.

Mitchell: I have to tell you, it's one of the reasons why I admire him so much. I think it is very difficult for any human being to change his way of thinking and acting, and I think the older we get, the more difficult it becomes. My theory of this—and I've never

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discussed this with Bob—is that when he started, he was funny, but it was more of a sharper-edged humor, outwardly directed at times. Gradually—and I don't know whether this was conscious on his part or not—he began to use humor that was more self-deprecating. Nobody could be offended by it. In a curious way, he became more funny. He is just tremendous when he gets before an audience.

I have to tell you that—again, a digression, but I have a scholarship program in Maine which I think Bob has created one similar to it in Kansas, and each year we have a big dinner to raise money. Senator Dole came one year. I've had lots of senators and other important speakers. Nobody compared with Dole. He got up and he told one story after another. There was a message in it, there were some serious comments, but always interspersed with humor. He went on for about forty minutes. He had the audience in stitches. I don't know, for months after, people said, "Oh, that was really great that Senator Dole came." And I thought about it. There was not a single comment or humorous remark to which anybody could take any offense. Nobody's feelings were hurt. Earlier on, I think it was a little sharper. He might have got a laugh from here, but at the expense of over here.

Smith: That ability to communicate and move people, why do you think it doesn't appear to translate on a presidential campaign?

Mitchell: Well, I think, for one thing, he was in a tough spot for the following reason. American presidential campaigns are characterized by two phases. First, you've got to get the nomination. Since the activists in both parties are to the right or left, respectively, of the broad mass of their own party, let alone the general electorate, Republican candidates go to the right, Democratic candidates go to the left, and then they scramble back to get to center, because it's clear that the center is the dominant position in American political life. I think Bob Dole had the disadvantage of having a primary contest in which he had to move to the right clearly more than I think he was personally comfortable with, while President [William Jefferson] Clinton had no primary contest, he occupied the center very skillfully during all the time that Senator Dole was out there seeking the nomination, and so I think by the time they got to the general election campaign it was very tough to get back to the center. So I think it was very difficult right

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from the time he got the nomination, for that reason. Had President Clinton had a primary contest in which he had to go out to the left, I think it would have been a big difference.

It's the reverse of the [Richard M.] Nixon-[George S.] McGovern campaign. I was involved in Senator Muskie's campaign, and I loved Senator McGovern. We've been good friends. But he ran as though the purpose was to get the nomination, as opposed to win the election. By the time he got the nomination, what he'd said and done meant that he really couldn't get back to the center in a way that would contest an incumbent president. So it's an awfully tough circumstance, and I've always felt that election was probably predetermined. The general election was largely predetermined by the nominating process.

Smith: It's almost a badge of honor that Dole looked so awkward trying to be something he wasn't. I mean, I was one of those people writing memos which he would then leak to the press, saying, "You're not being yourself. The thing you have going for you more than anything else is authenticity, your Midwestern plain-spoken truthfulness, and now you're feeding the crocodile on the right. It never works. You don't look like a leader in doing it." And going out to Hollywood, for example, the famous speech when he went out there and lectured them about their moral obligation and so on. You could see the checklist, you know, and yet in an odd kind of way he didn't look comfortable doing it. He wasn't very good at it.

Mitchell: Yes. Also, you know, on the question of humor, presidential campaigns inevitably breed restraint. It's so risky. Every word is captured on television and by a group of radio and people, and every word is parsed and examined and turned upside down. I think the candidate's risk-inhibitor is turned on, and I don't think anybody acts, quote, normally in presidential campaigns, because you're so much on stage. It's one thing if you get up in a crowd of five hundred people, maybe even a local radio station, and you tell a joke and it doesn't go over, it falls flat, or comes across the wrong way. It's another thing if you're a candidate for president and you do it. Within twelve hours everybody in the country knows about it and they replay it.

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Smith: If you stop and think historically, stop and think of the last candidates who were totally themselves, I mean, there's Barry [M.] Goldwater and Adlai [E.] Stevenson.

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: And admirable as that might be, that's not much of a—

Mitchell: No. And Howard Dean.

Smith: More recently, yes. [laughs]

Mitchell: So I tell you, I'm sympathetic with people who run for office. I've been through it myself, and it's tough. It's awful easy for people to criticize, belittle, ridicule politicians, and, look, there's much to belittle and ridicule, but it takes a lot of courage to get out there and put yourself on the line and take the kind of abuse that everybody gets in this process.

Smith: I want to talk about your becoming Majority Leader and the relationship you had with Dole, and in particular, the [George H.W.] Bush Administration, and this shift that's going on in the Republican Party in the direction [unclear], which would accelerate and in some ways blow up—some would say blossom in Clinton's presidency. Was Dole comfortable, in your opinion, with where his party was evolving?

Mitchell: Well, there was, of course, some degree of discomfort between him and President Bush. I was there on the Senate floor when Senator Dole went up and confronted then Vice President Bush, who was at the podium. It was an extraordinary scene.

Smith: During the '88 campaign?

Mitchell: Yes, during the '88 campaign.

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Smith: What do you remember about it?

Mitchell: Well, I remember I was standing right there down on the floor. He walked up and he said something like, "Stop lying about me," or something like that. I don't remember the exact words.

Smith: I think there's something about Mrs. Dole's trust at that point.

Mitchell: I don't remember the issue, but it was obviously a tense moment. So there was some tension between them, which, of course, was resolved, although probably not entirely forgotten after the election. But I thought he did a really good job in a very difficult circumstance, because the fact is, the Republican Senate Caucus was more sharply divided than was the Democratic Caucus.

Smith: What were the sources of that?

Mitchell: Well, I think more ideology. I think Republicans came to power on sort of an anti-government platform. Then when you have to govern, you're kind of in an uncomfortable position. I think that bred what I would call two categories, and I don't break it down in business and Christian Right; I break it down in sort of pragmatists and those who have more ideological zeal. Bob was clearly—is clearly a pragmatist, that he had strong beliefs, but he recognized that nobody's going to get 100 percent of what they want, and you're almost always better off taking 60, 70, 80 percent of what you can get and moving on to the next issue.

Smith: What kind of conservative do you think he is?

Mitchell: Well, you know, it's interesting, President [George W.] Bush used this phrase "compassionate conservative," and I don't think it characterizes him at all. I don't think he ever was and I certainly don't think he's been one in office. I think Bob Dole is, and I think in part that arises from his personal history. I can remember clearly the Americans with Disabilities Act. He and Tom [Thomas R.] Harkin were the prime movers. It's

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obvious that that bill would not have occurred but for Bob Dole—and this is speculation, and only he would know this, and maybe not even he—but it seemed clear that his interest was, in fact, in part at least, derived from his own personal history, that he is able to understand the feelings of people in that position because he himself has been and is in that position. He's been a powerful advocate. So although I've never heard him use the phrase to describe himself, I think the phrase fits him better than those who have sought to apply it to themselves.

Smith: He was also a little bit of a populist. I mean, there's a Kansas tradition. He grew up dirt poor in a small town, where people really kind of looked out for each other.

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: In the Dust Bowl.

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: And I don't think he's ever forgotten where he came from.

Mitchell: Yes. I think that's true.

Smith: He jokes about Gucci Gulch and "They'll be shoeless in the morning." There's almost a delight in—I mean, first of all, he can't stand a stuffed shirt, I mean pomposity in any form, and self-importance.

Mitchell: Yes. I think that's right. You know, we're all products of our environment, of our bringing-up, of our culture. People may think that they've gone beyond it, but in fact you never really shed who you really are. And I think all of those contribute to it. But the most important thing I think in terms of Bob Dole's political makeup is a pragmatism that is rooted in trying to get something done. I think that Bob's outlook differs from those conservatives for whom the government never doing anything is a desirable objective, and I think Bob's conservatism is rooted in "You guys," meaning we

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Democrats, "have tried to do too much, but there are some situations in which there is an appropriate and legitimate role for the government to play," and I think the Americans with Disabilities Act is kind of a metaphor for that attitude.

Smith: Can you kind of walk us through that? Maybe that's a great case study of however Dole operates. Again, getting back to this notion—I mean, I have known him for thirty years and worked with him on the autobiography, and it was very frustrating. I never felt I could get in an anecdotal way or understand what he does.

Mitchell: I'll tell you what he does, and I'll do it in an anecdotal way. You meet and most people meet in life some who have a natural talent for discerning certain things. Let's take real estate. How many of us say, "Oh god, I wish I'd bought that house. I wish I'd bought that apartment. I wish I'd bought that lot"? And yet there are some people in this country who, with limited education, limited worldly knowledge, just have a knack. They can say, "That piece of property is going to be worth ten times its current value in ten years, and that one is not going to be." They just understand it and know it. The phrase we use in Maine, it's in their bones.

Bob Dole's great talent as a legislator is that it was in his bones to figure out where the point was that two competing positions could be reconciled. If you had ten fingers and you brought them together so that only the thumbs overlap, he knew where that point was. He knew the phrase. He wasn't a master at getting up and giving the greatest speech on the philosophical foundations of the legislation. He wasn't a master at writing down language, but he had the darnedest knack for figuring out "I hear this guy, I hear that guy, and here's where the two of them can come together." I guess I don't think it is solely a product of legislative experience. I think there are people who've been in the Congress even longer than Bob was who had no such talent whatsoever. They knew their position and they knew the other guy's position and that's all there was. There was something about him, because I saw this over and over again, I saw it in dealings with him, where he just could figure that out, had a knack for it. As I said, I'll repeat the phrase, it was in his bones, and that's what made him such an effective legislator.

Smith: It's a psychological gift in some ways.

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Mitchell: Well, I'm not sure what it is. People said it's intuitive. My own view is, it represents both an understanding of the issues and understanding of the people, and they're not the same thing. Some of the people with whom Bob and I served in Congress knew every issue up and down and back and forth, and sort of could rattle it off like reading a dictionary or encyclopedia, but they didn't know anything about psychology and dealing with people. And there were others who were just the reverse. I think that there are very few who kind of had the knack of both, who understood both the issue, what was important. I don't think Bob ever sat down and read these five-hundred-page bills. I think someone told him what the issues were. He understood where the key points were. He understood the people very well.

Smith: That last point is fascinating, because presumably you have to spend time getting to know people in order to have that kind of instinctive sense.

Mitchell: Yes, you do. You do. He did.

Smith: That's part of the job.

Mitchell: He did, yes. That's part of the job. You deal with people all the time. As I said, when I tell this to people, they think it's kind of foolish, but this business of sitting down at lunch or dinner with these guys in a situation where you can be as candid as politicians ever can be with others like that—there's a small room. I don't know if you've ever been in there. It's called the Senators Dining Room. When you walk in, there's a buffet on your left and there's a large table. The Republicans tended to sit in there at lunchtime. In the far room there's a series of slightly smaller tables where the Democrats used to sit. That was at the lunchtime.

At dinnertime Bob and I used to come in, and I don't know how long the practice went on or where it started, but we would come in and sit together sort of at the big table in what was, quote, the Republicans' room, and people would come in and join us. You know, you'd sit there for an hour and a half, two hours, shooting the breeze, you might discuss an issue, you might not, you might talk about things that are relevant, or might

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not. I tell you, it made a huge difference, it made a huge difference in getting to know people. Not always good what you learned. [laughs] Get to know a lot of things that weren't so good about people, but also a lot of good things. And because, first, I think his personal history, I mean, the guy was a hero. People kind of looked up to him. I know I looked up to him. I admired him, what he'd been through in his life, the determination that he'd had. Secondly, because of his sense of humor. Third, because of the point you made, his plainspokenness. There is zero pomposity, artifice about Bob. Anybody who doesn't like him, whatever criticism they have, that's not a criticism. I mean, he is who he is. That's it. So I think people tended to like him as a person for all those reasons, and that enabled him to get to know and understand people, I think, in a very good way. And he had a lot of good staff people, too. Don't underestimate that in the leadership position.

Smith: Tell how important that is.

Mitchell: Oh, it's really important, because you can't speak with fifty senators—let's assume fifty-fifty split. You can't speak with fifty senators every hour. You're making decisions on the go all the time. He's negotiating with me, and he makes a deal with me. Now he's got to get it out to fifty senators, and some of them aren't going to like it. I encountered that a lot. I would get a lot of flak. "Why did you do that? You sacrificed my position," or something. So you need a bunch of good aides, and he had them, to get out and talk to people, explain things to them, massage them a little bit, particularly the ones who weren't too happy. I made it a point when I was Leader, when I reached an agreement that I knew a lot of people wouldn't like, is I kind of took the ones who would be least pleased and said, "I'll deal with them," and I'd have staff guys going to talk to everybody else. The ones who'd be happy were easy. The ones in the middle, you needed an explanation. The ones who needed persuasion, I kind of took those myself.

Smith: The '90 budget deal. Paint a picture for how it came about and what his role was.

Mitchell: Well, his role was central, as it was in all these things, because, of course, he was the Republican Leader. That was a tough time. I personally had had good relations

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with President Bush for the first two years. We passed a lot of important legislation. The Clean Air Act was the best example. Reagan had been opposed to the whole notion of a Clean Air Act or the Clean Water Act, and we couldn't get anything done on major changes to it. When President Bush took office, he said he believed there should be a major action on Clean Air, which instantly transformed the debate from whether there should be a bill to what should be in the bill. So we had a very lengthy, difficult, controversial process in which we worked closely, and Senator Dole played a key role in that. We negotiated various provisions, brought it to the floor, got a compromise, and we got a bill, and a good strong bill. We all made mistakes in the process. I made some on our side; the President made some on his side. But it was really a good result.

The relationship turned downward after the '90 election. A variety of reasons. I always regretted it. In that circumstance Bob's role became even more important because the communications between the majority and the Majority Leader and the White House weren't as good as they were before, and so the Republican Leader's role rose in direct consequence of that. He really became sort of what I would call the middle man, the fulcrum on which the entire legislative process turned in the Senate.

Smith: Which also parenthetically suggests that whatever bitterness had taken place in '88 had dissipated.

Mitchell: I think it had.

Smith: Dole's a good soldier.

Mitchell: He is a good soldier and he also, as you pointed out at the outset, is smart enough to know that holding grudges doesn't pay off in the political process. You do the best you can at the time, you accept the result, and you move on. If you're human, you may exhibit flashes of anger, which he did, which a lot of people—almost everybody does at one point or another, but you understand that your self-interest lies in going on to the next issue and dealing with it. And he was a good soldier and he represented the Administration very well.

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Smith: Of course, there's the lead-up to the Gulf War.

Mitchell: That was also a very controversial period in which he was, in fact, doing the speaking for the Administration. One, I remember very clearly, one issue. As you recall, in the first Gulf War, in sharp contrast to the second, the Administration decided to seek U.N. support and a broad coalition. Secretary [James] Baker was very actively engaged in it. Bob came to me—I can't remember when, but it was prior to the election, probably between Labor Day and November—and said that the Administration and he felt that it would not be wise to have a vote in the Senate until they got things squared away at the U.N., until they were able to build the broadest possible coalition. Would I, as Majority Leader, agree to that and make no effort to push it to a vote?

I took it up in our caucus. We had a few people who became very angry at me, and I think are still to this day angry, that I thought that was the right position. We hadn't made a decision on what we should do about the actual conflict, and the question was when we should have that kind of debate and discussion. I felt that Bob was very persuasive in his presentations to me and to other senators in making the case that you've got to give the President time to put together the best possible coalition. If you guys want him to go to the U.N., you've got to give him a chance to do that, and then there'll be time for a vote later.

Now, later on, President Bush agreed to a vote, although he said he wasn't going to be bound by the results, that he didn't need it but he was willing to go ahead. He knew at that time, I think, that he had the votes. Bob managed it very skillfully. That was a closer vote than people now tend to think. It was about a five-vote margin. I thought he handled the whole thing from the President's perspective brilliantly in a very difficult circumstance.

Smith: Go back to the budget deal, which obviously the President took a lot of heat for, and I think probably Dole, in his own way, I think it was held against him.

Mitchell: Yes.

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Smith: Was that a factor at the time? How did people sit around, having dug themselves in as deeply as Bush, in particular, had, and Dole is his agent, in effect?

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: Mindful of his caucus, of how do you get across that [unclear].

Mitchell: That's a long story. I'm happy to tell you. It was a very difficult time, and that, I think, contributed to the deterioration of relations with the Administration. In retrospect, the fact that we are facing a deficit that the Administration estimated at 100 billion dollars and the Congressional Budget Office said 150 billion, seems like chickenfeed compared to what's happened since then, but at the time we were all shocked by it. It was a big deal. Here we faced this deficit and we had to deal with it. Don't take offense at this—I know Bob wouldn't—but that was the time when Republicans really did believe in balanced budgets and they talked about them and it was a big issue. We were all concerned about it.

We reached the conclusion that you couldn't stop the tremendous increase in the deficit without some form of revenue increase. You had to have a combination of spending cuts—we were clearly spending too much—and some tax increases. But President Bush had made this categorical statement at the Convention, you know, "I'm going to say no. The Democrats are going to come and I'm going to say no. They're going to come back. They want to raise taxes. I'm going to say no and I'm going to say, 'Read my lips.'" You remember the statement.

And so we knew that it would put us in an impossible political position, so we were able to persuade most of the Democrats to not propose their own budget. "Let's wait till the President proposes his." And we got a lot of flak from the press. "You have an obligation to present a plan," and so forth and so on. But we were able to keep most from doing it.

Then the President's budget director, Dick [Richard G.] Darman, a very smart guy, very smart, and a good guy, I liked him a lot, I like him now, I remember him coming up and saying to me, "Well, we've got to have a meeting with the leadership and the Administration." He said, "I think that we could end up with a tax increase."

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I said, "Well, how are we going to do that?"

He said, "Well, it's going to just emerge from the discussion." He made this kind of fluttering motion with his hands. "It will emerge from the discussion."

Meantime, the President's chief of staff was saying, "Absolutely not." He said something to the effect—

Smith: John [H.] Sununu?

Mitchell: Yes. He said something to the effect that, "Well, we want to have a discussion, but the discussion will be that the Democrats are going to come in and ask for a tax increase and we're going to say no." [laughs] So it wasn't exactly conducive to having a discussion.

So we were able to kind of hold our ground. We went through this long process. This is a matter of months. This is very, very long, extremely difficult, very, very tough discussions, but finally, almost incredibly, one day I got a call at seven o'clock in the morning, would I come to the White House and meet with the President. Of course I said, "Sure." When the President calls you, you're going to go.

[Thomas S.] Foley and [Richard A.] Gephardt went with me, and we met with President Bush, Governor Sununu, and Dick Darman and Nic [Nicholas F.] Brady, who was then the Secretary of the Treasury. Basically they agreed that they would support a tax increase in the process. That was the discussion. I mean, Tom Foley did most of the talking for us, and Darman did most of the talking for the Administration. I remember Sununu and Darman went out and typed up a statement. The President asked them to go out, and they came back.

There was one last-minute hitch. The statement was a joint statement by the President and congressional leadership. I asked for a Caucus with Foley and Gephart. I said, "Look. You know they've already told us, they said publicly they're going to blame any tax increase on us, so this has got to be a statement by the President, and we'll go back to the Hill and support it," and they agreed readily to that, and that's the way it happened. I mean, history was made just like that. Senator Dole was not in that discussion. I honestly don't know what he felt, because I never asked him, about the President's decision to do that. We've never spoken about it, to the best of my

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recollection. But that was the breakthrough, and we then had a very difficult time implementing it because so many Republicans were very angry about it, particularly on the House side, but including in the Senate.

Smith: Among them, Newt Gingrich.

Mitchell: Newt was angry. I remember, I think, Bob Packwood, who was then chairman of the Finance Committee, was upset. I remember being down at the White House. We were supposed to walk out to the Rose Garden. We couldn't all go out because they were still arguing among themselves about who would actually go out and who wouldn't go out. It wasn't our doing. It wasn't our show, so we didn't say anything about it. But it was very tough on everybody. You know, you've got to get something done. You're staring at this terrific deficit. It's impossible to get a solution that's 100 percent one way or 100 percent another way. I guess I kind of always felt that Bob was pragmatic enough that he figured this is the right way to do it. I'm not sure how he felt about the President's making the absolute pledge at the Convention. I just don't know. I've never discussed it with him. I rather doubt in my own mind that had Bob won that nomination he would have made a comparable statement.

Smith: Remember the primary, the famous debate before New Hampshire in '88, where Dole came out of Iowa with a head of steam, was ahead, and he refused to sign the no tax cuts, on camera, which is a pretty gutsy thing to do.

Mitchell: It was, yes.

Smith: And I do believe it led him to his defeat—

Mitchell: Yes. I'd forgotten about that.

Smith: —in the primary.

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Mitchell: I remember he always used to joke he'd introduce Dick Gephardt and himself as the presidents of Iowa. [laughs] That was one of his favorites, always got a great laugh about it, and of course Gephardt also laughed about it. But I don't know. I never discussed it with him. He would, I'm sure, tell you, but I rather doubt he would have made such a categorical pledge, particularly since he knew, having been chairman of the Finance Committee, what the fiscal circumstances were, that it really just couldn't be sustained. That was the message that we got from the President's aides and ultimately from him himself.

Smith: It's interesting, in retrospect it was a gutsy thing on Bush's part.

Mitchell: Yes. Oh, it was. It was.

Smith: And history's been pretty kind [unclear] electorate.

Mitchell: I think Foley and Gephardt and I, I think, were surprised when the President said, "Okay, let's do it." There was a discussion, wasn't really long. I don't think we were there more than forty-five minutes or so. Then, as I said, he sent Darman and Sununu to draft the statement. They came right back. It led me to suspect they already had the statement, because it only took them a couple of minutes. It wasn't very long. Then after we caucused and came back and said, "Well, this is fine, except we want—," not we, I. "You make the statement and we'll go back." And we did. Within five minutes after he put out the statement, we put out our statement. But it was a gutsy thing to do.

Smith: What does that tell you about the classic divide between political necessity as encompassed in Peggy Noonan's rhetoric, and the need to govern, and the two clash?

Mitchell: Yes. Well, I remember [Ariel] Sharon saying, when he got elected prime minister—I was very deeply involved then because I was asked to chair a commission in the Middle East by President Clinton, was announced in election day in 2000, and when I first started, [Ehud] Barak was the prime minister, and while we were there, Sharon got

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elected, and sometime later—I don't remember the time—-Sharon was asked about some change in position, he said, "The view's a lot different when you're inside than it was when you're outside." And it's true. You do what it takes to get elected, but I think you make it a lot tougher if you get elected in a way that makes it difficult or impossible to govern. You've got to try to balance the two.

That's why I've always felt, going way back to Muskie and McGovern's campaign, is that the successful candidates are the men and women who have vision to put themselves into a general election context when they're seeking a nomination and conduct themselves in a way that sees it as a seamless whole, obviously with variations and nuances, but simply doesn't say that "First we've got to do this, then we'll do that." It's all one steady stream, and people shouldn't get in the position where they can't govern once they get elected.

Smith: A couple of quick things and then I'll let you go. Obviously then Bill Clinton comes in at the beginning of 1993, and the wheel turns again for Dole.

Mitchell: Yes.

Smith: Did you get a sense of what that transition was like and what kind of relationship—because remember I think there was a stimulus package.

Mitchell: [laughs] I remember very well.

Smith: Tell us about—

Mitchell: Oh god, we had an awful time with that. Clinton's package included a major deficit-reduction program of tax increases and spending cuts, but it also had this sort of separate element of an immediate stimulus package to spark the economy.

Smith: Which we now know was actually coming out [unclear].

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Mitchell: Well, I was just going to say, as often happens in public policy, the circumstances which led to the creation of the stimulus package no longer existed by the time the stimulus package got up to the Hill, and it was put together in a careless way, not anticipating such intense Republican opposition, so it gave them targets so inviting to attack, a swimming pool here, something like that, that made it easy for them to attack. So we had the worst doggone time trying to get that thing through, and we never did get it through. In the end, it didn't make any difference. It had no economic effect. It had a political effect, I think, of causing the President the pain of suffering a defeat early. I don't think he really cared much about it, frankly. A lot of the members of the Congress did. They had a lot of good stuff in there. I thought Dole handled the opposition brilliantly and was able to prevent us from passing it.

Then we got on to the main event, which was the budget, and we were able to pass that, even though no Republican voted for it. Fortunately for us, it turned out well. Whether because of that or for other factors or some combination, the economy then did extremely well and we were able to point out that we now produced surpluses, etc., etc. So it went on very well.

Smith: It was almost a role reversal between the parties.

Mitchell: It was. It was, yes. It's the old story. When you get in power, you've got to govern. You have responsibilities. You've got to meet them. We had to deal with the deficit.

Smith: I wonder if at some level Dole was almost envious, because much of his career was predicated on the traditional economic notion that deficits are bad, and certainly something he had fought for and paid a price for within his own party, and yet here comes Bill Clinton and the Democratic majority, who eliminate the deficits, and suddenly it's a topsy-turvy world.

Mitchell: Well, of course it is quite common that a legislative proposal could be presented by one side and the other side oppose it, but if they had put their label on it first, they would have supported it. I mean, there are many circumstances like that. I can

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remember very clearly on the healthcare issue, Clinton sent a bill up in November of—what would that be? '93. In December, John Chafee, former Republican senator from Rhode Island, put in a bill that had twenty Republican co-sponsors, including Dole, and it was a good bill, different from ours, but it was a solid bill, and I had many discussions with Chafee—we were quite good friends, both coming from New England, and we got along well personally—about working together to try to work the bill out. But the opposition to the whole Clinton effort was so strong and so successful that seven months later when we get to the Finance Committee to mark up a healthcare bill, we had moved to the center in a vain effort to induce them to compromise. They had moved the other way. I remember joking to Chafee in the Finance Committee, I said, "John, I'm going to introduce your bill as an amendment and force you and Dole and all the Republicans who have sponsored your bill to vote."

"Oh, don't do that," he said. "You'll just embarrass us all." So I didn't do it. It was just a joke.

But what happens is, you adopt the position that, in effect, preempts the other side and takes an issue that they want, and all of a sudden they find themselves arguing against it because you are the one who proposed it. In other words, arguing against the sponsor as opposed to the legislation. I don't think it would have been a huge stretch for many Republicans, including Bob, to support Clinton's package. I think the reverse is true on many circumstances. I don't want to make this sound like a one-way deal. We did the same thing. Democrats did the same thing when they've been in the minority. But the tax increases were fairly narrowly targeted to those at the very highest income scale. I don't think that ever would have bothered Bob. The rest of it was sort of general deficit-reduction medicine which I think both parties would have agreed to.

Smith: Do you have a sense of what the chemistry was initially between Clinton and Dole, and whether it evolved over time?

Mitchell: I think they get along pretty well. I think they get along pretty well. [laughs] Dole…. One of the great things about him is what I call his use of the stage whisper. I'm going to give you two instances, because I want these to be recorded for history. One of them was at the White House. We'd go down to meet with Clinton, and traditionally the

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president—this would be the leadership, about four or five of us, Dole and I, the House Speaker and Majority Leader and the House Minority Leader and sometimes another. Sort of by custom, at least since I was there, you'd talk for a couple of minutes. You'd give your view. "Yes, Mr. President, I agree with you. Here's the reasons." "No, I don't agree. Here's the reason." Then you'd go around the room.

A couple of guys would give very, very long statements, and Dole would get across it was time to go with kind of a stage whisper. "Well, uh, we've got to get back pretty soon," he'd say to me in a voice loud enough so everybody could hear, and everybody would [unclear], you know. He had a way of conveying a message that it was time to go or time to end or something with a so-called stage whisper.

Now, the best story of the stage whisper is a little long, but it's really kind of funny. Just prior to Thanksgiving of 2000, President Bush called Dole, myself, Tom Foley, and Dick Gephardt, and asked us would we go with him to Saudi Arabia to have Thanksgiving dinner with the troops who were out in the desert in Saudi Arabia. He said, "Look, I'm not asking you anything about the policy. This is about the troops." So of course we all went that whole long trip over. We had a very long day, going to several different—by helicopter, hot, dusty, dirty, sandy, everything else.

We got back to Dhahran, which is in eastern Saudi Arabia, late at night. Everybody was exhausted and covered with sand and sweaty and dirty. We were informed that the King of Saudi Arabia was in Jeddah, in what is the western part of the country, and would like us to come for a visit. I said, "Look, I don't want to go. I'm coming back in two weeks with a delegation. I'm going to see the King then, so I'm against it. We're all tired. You don't know how long it's going to take. No." And Foley, Gephardt, and Dole said, "No, we've got to go out of respect." And of course they're right.

So we flew from Dhahran to Jeddah. They got us a hotel room. We took a shower. I remember there was only one room, so one bathroom. We had to take our turns taking a shower. Then we went out to the palace. They have palaces all over the place. This one was in Jeddah. Of course, we had to wait quite a while. We finally come in to see the King. It must have been midnight, maybe one o'clock in the morning. Everybody was really tired by then. It was like at a table like this. The King was seated at the head of the table, and immediately to his right was Tom Foley, then me, then Bob

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Dole, then Bob Michel. I'm sorry, Bob Michel was the other person on the trip; it wasn't Dick Gephardt.

So this discussion begins, and the King would say just a few words in Arabic, then the translator would speak for fifteen minutes, and it became clear he was saying, "Tell them about my last meeting with Saddam Hussein." It was all about Iraq and the problem of Saddam Hussein.

Foley had just started a program where he was dieting and exercising and getting up at 5:30 in the morning to exercise, so within about fifteen minutes his head drops on his chest and he's pretty nearly fast asleep. Bob Michel's at the other end; he's fast asleep. So it's basically just Dole and I engaging in this conversation with the King. And the thing goes on and on. It was really long. We were really exhausted. And over on the other side, not at the table, but seated back with several aides to the King, including Prince Bandar, who was then the ambassador.

So finally after a while, Dole says in this kind of loud stage whisper, "I wonder when this is going to finish. We've got a plane waiting for us. We've got to get going," or something like that in a stage whisper, in English, but loud enough so that Bandar heard it.

Within seconds, Bandar jumped up, went over, spoke to the King, and literally within minutes the King said, "Well, thank you very much for coming," and so forth. "You should go on." [laughs]

So I told Dole, "Well, first off, I think you were wrong to insist on a meeting. I predicted this would happen. Ended up you and I having to do all the discussion." But I said, "Thank you very much for bringing it to a conclusion." And those are just two incidents, but there were many of the type where he uses this mechanism of an aside comment that conveys a message and everybody gets it very clearly and acts upon it.

Smith: Wonderful story. Next-to-last question. Did you have a sense of his chemistry with Gingrich?

Mitchell: You know, not much of a sense. I didn't know Gingrich as well then. I do now. I worked as co-chairman with him of a commission. I don't think it was close; I'll put it that way. I don't want to go beyond that. I don't know, but that's just an

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impression that I have. I think a couple of times he may have made remarks to that effect, but I don't have a good sense of that.

Smith: Summing up, if you were talking to a young person maybe ten years from now for whom Bob Dole is a name in a textbook, what's important to know about Dole?

Mitchell: I would say that he was the stereotype of the American Midwesterner, tall and lanky, plainspoken, very direct, not a lot of adjectives and adverbs. He was what I believe to be the true embodiment of the compassionate conservative. He did have conservative views socially, politically, and in other respects, and again I'm repeating now, I think probably based upon his own life experience, had a profound compassion for people who suffered for a variety of reasons. I don't think his compassion was limited to those who were specifically disabled, physically disabled or mentally, but, who were handicapped in any other way by circumstance and so forth. Very pragmatic. I don't ever remember him making ideological statements. There was a real intention to get things done. "Here's a problem. How do you solve it?" To me that's quintessentially American.

I think Americans, more than anything else, are problem solvers. People bemoan the lack of knowledge of history, and I think that's a correct criticism, but the fact is, I've seen in Europe, and specifically in Ireland, how too much knowledge of history can be a burden as opposed to a benefit. So I think Americans are problem solvers. I think one of the reasons for Bob's political success—and he really was a success; didn't get to be elected president, but in every other respect he was a success—was that he was quintessentially American in that he is basically a problem solver.

As I said earlier, I don't think Bob spent thousands of hours reading the fine details of legislation. He figured out where is the problem and how do you solve it. And that's what made him effective in public life, because I think it was so representative of what Americans are, what Americans like, and why Americans have been successful.

Smith: Dan Rostenkowski told me the story once that right before the budget negotiations—well, and the shutdown, the government shutdown, that Clinton called him and wanted a little inside information on trying to get a leg up on Dole, how he operates,

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and Rostenkowski went on singing his praises, "But I tell you, he's the most impatient guy in the universe. At some point he'll agree to almost anything just to get out of the room." [laughs]

Mitchell: [laughs] Well, he didn't give or like long speeches. He wasn't much on kind of what you would call pomp and ceremony. But the truth is, isn't that part of the American character? You're there to get a job done, it doesn't mean you can't kid around a little bit, you can't tell a joke here or there, you can't use humor to ease tensions, but the purpose is to get something done. So I think he was impatient in that respect, but impatient in a good way.

Smith: A little bit of Gary Cooper. [laughs] More Gary Cooper than Al Pacino.

Mitchell: Yes. I think that's right. Probably more, in real terms, more Gary Cooper than Gary Cooper.

Smith: Probably true.

Senator, this has been wonderful. I can't thank you enough.

Mitchell: Thank you. It's a pleasure.

Smith: I've learned a lot, and this just marvelous.

Mitchell: Well, I think it's obvious I think the world of him, I really do. We were good friends, we've been able to maintain that friendship. We worked together in a law firm for a long time.

Smith: That's right, you were in practice several years.

Mitchell: Yes, and we continue to work together, occasionally appear at functions together. I regard it as one of the highlights of my Senate career and my life that I got to know Bob so well, got to like him, and—

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Smith: What is the bipartisan group?

Mitchell: It's called the Bipartisan Policy Council, which he and Tom [Thomas A.] Daschle and Howard [H.] Baker [Jr.] and I have become affiliated with, in an effort to demonstrate that you can have bipartisan solutions to some problems. Bob and all of us put it at press conference, announcing that "We're not going to agree on the war in Iraq, for example. A lot of things we're not going to agree on, but let's take those things that we think we can agree on, that are significant, and work on them." To me it's so basic common sense that I hope it works out. We're working at it now.

Smith: Isn't it frightening, in a sense, that's exactly what the American people say they want in a president, and yet, for reasons we discussed, there's something about the way we elect presidents today that tends to make it difficult.

Mitchell: But don't blame it all on the presidents or the politicians. The public plays a big role in that. You talked about the budget. Let me conclude with this story, which doesn't affect Bob, but it makes the point about that. When we were involved in that budget discussion, we were buried with criticism, both sides, and there was a column that likened us to children in a sandbox, throwing sand at each other. I used to go back to Maine every weekend and hold town meetings, and I'll never forget I went back right during that big budget discussion and I had a huge crowd, as was often the case, disproportionately elderly, and the first guy that got up issued this ringing denunciation of me. "We're very disappointed in you, Senator. You're letting us down. You don't represent the people of Maine in this, fighting with the President all the time on this budget. We, the people of Maine, your constituents, want you to go back and solve this." And there was a thunderous round of applause. Then he said, "I've got one question. What are the issues? What are you guys fighting about? We can't figure it out from the paper."

So the big issue was Medicare, Medicare cuts. That was a big issue in those discussions. So I got up and I explain that to them.

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He stood up and he said, "Well, Senator, you represent us. We want you to go back there and don't give an inch on Medicare." And the crowd erupted in thunderous applause.

So I went back. I had two very clear messages, "Settle it, but settle it our way." And so you've got to be careful in blaming the politicians. The great leaders like a Bob Dole are the ones who can reconcile those two tensions, who can take those conflicting positions from their constituents and bring them together in a way that achieves a result that is good substantively and that is politically acceptable.

Smith: Very nice summation. Thank you very much.

[End of interview]

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Index

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