ROBERT J. DOLE
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Interview with

WALTER MONDALE

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Interviewer

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[Vice president Mondale 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: Mr. Vice President, first of all, you're unique in that you obviously served a considerable amount of time in the Senate, you presided over the Senate, you were willing to go back to the Senate later on, and yet the Senate, I gather, has changed significantly during those forty years or so. What was it like when you went there in the beginning, and what's your sense of how it's changed?

Mondale: Well, I think it has changed, and I underline the word *think*, because I know it's changed, in my own mind, but others might disagree with it. I think when I came to the Senate, when Dole came to the Senate, I think '68, four years later, while it was partisan, we had our debates and all that stuff, there was a kind of an underlying sense of civility, we're all members of this club and we got to know each other, and we would crack jokes, and wherever we could, we'd try to find ways of doing things together. As [Hubert] Humphrey used to say, the only way a majority can get done what it needs to do is with the minority's help. And we sort of went at it that way.

I think now, although I hope it's changing, I think now kind of the belligerence, the partisanship, the idea that don't just defeat the person in an argument, defeat the person, it's a different mood, and I hope I'm wrong on that, but some of it looks meaner than I remember being the case.

Smith: And sometimes not only defeat the person, but destroy the person.

Mondale: That's what I mean, yes. Like vengeance or something. It shouldn't be that way. It doesn't help anybody. The public doesn't like it. I often wonder why it continues.

Smith: Do you think one factor could be that when you and, for that matter, Bob Dole first arrived in the Senate, you had, first of all, a significant number of Southern conservative Democrats in your party and there were a significant number of moderate to

liberal Eastern and Midwestern Republicans in their party, that each party was much more diverse?

Mondale: Yes, yes.

Smith: And that they had to find some kind of consensus internally before they could operate externally.

Mondale: Yes, I think that's a very good point. You know, the sort of moderate Republicans and the moderate Democrats almost had to work together, because the Southerners in those days, although they were Democrats, many of them came out of that old Southern tradition. Back in those days we'd yet to pass the civil rights legislation, the party rules had not changed to prohibit segregated delegations, so at least on the great civil rights issues and a lot of other issues you couldn't make any headway down there, so you had to cut across party lines. Of course, at that point the Republican Party still had the Lincoln tradition of being solid on civil rights. Some of that, I think, has diminished, but at the time it was fairly easy to put together coalitions, enthusiastic coalitions, not just paste jobs, on the Civil Rights Act.

Smith: And yet I assume you established friendships with Southern Democrats.

Mondale: Oh yes. Absolutely. And even there you would find, like on agricultural things, you'd find ways to work together. I served on the Ag[riculture] Committee for some years, as did Bob Dole, and we all worked with Southerners. Yes, we would find ways to work together, and it doesn't seem to me that there was bitterness even there. Sometimes when the civil rights issues got really hot, you would see the hackles rise, but mostly we'd get along, on a personal level, quite well.

Smith: You know, it's fascinating. More than one person with whom we've spoken, I remember Bob Packwood, for example, and I think Alan Simpson said the same thing, they both said they were given advice that one of the first things they should do was to cultivate John Stennis.

Mondale: Yes.

Smith: Which on the surface would seem counterintuitive.

Mondale: No, that makes sense to me. John was not going to change on civil rights, but he was a courtly judicial—I think he had been a judge, and he had that. In his demeanor, he was always open, and I think he would try to be accommodating to the extent he could, measured against his politics.

Smith: Were staffs smaller in those days?

Mondale: Oh yes, and when I got there, they were just getting over this old situation where the senior whales in the Senate got all the staff, and the new senators who'd come in wouldn't get anything. I went on Banking with John Sparkman—with Willis Robertson, and I went on Housing with Sparkman, and their tradition was, they kept all the staff for themselves, and you could use their staff. So as they went along, later years they started giving freshmen a chance to pick one or two staff members.

Smith: Is it true, freshmen were supposed to be seen and not heard?

Mondale: Well, I'm told that was true before I arrived there, but that one good thing Lyndon [B.] Johnson did there, he tried to empower freshmen senators with strong committees, and he tried to encourage them to speak out, so long as they didn't criticize him. [laughs] So I think that tradition had broken up some by the time I was there.

Smith: It would be interesting to know, because of course, obviously Dole had been both Majority and Minority Leader, but working back from that, people like Mike Mansfield, who seemed to be universally respected—

Mondale: Absolutely.

Smith: Plus he had the numbers. As Dole would say, it's a lot easier to lead when you've got sixty-seven senators.

Mondale: In some ways it's easier to lead, and in some ways it's tougher.

Smith: How?

Mondale: You know, you try to keep sixty-seven people happy, where you have the internal jealousies and the kind of long-term stable and unchanging numbers, I think it took a remarkable, almost saintly person like Mike Mansfield, who was trusted in the South and the North, to kind of hold it together, a lot of people couldn't have done it.

Smith: The Johnson legend, is the legend for real? How much of that was Lyndon Johnson's personality, temperament, and how much were the instruments available to a Majority Leader in those days?

Mondale: Well, I think you have to give Lyndon a lot of credit. He was the master of the Senate. He knew the rules. He was absolutely tireless. He would set an agenda and he would work that Senate and work that Senate, and he got things done that no one else could do. The Senate had almost become comatose before he took over. It was so wedded to its rigidities, that hardly anyone could put enough of it together to do business. Lyndon came in as Majority Leader, and I think did remarkable things. I don't think we'd have had the civil rights laws, at least with the next ten or twenty years, without him, and we had to do that.

Smith: Was it, in fact, the world's greatest deliberative body, or was that oratorical tradition beginning to fade?

Mondale: I think it can be the world's greatest deliberative body, and I think most parliamentary institutions cannot be, because of their rules and numbers. But I don't think it is as much as it should be right now, and the nation in a desperate way needs these great issues debated fully, completely, in front of the American people, and only the

Senate can do that. So I've been around when the Senate has performed that function, and it's the most unique, special institution of parliamentary institutions in the world, by far. Almost every upper body in the parliamentary systems, like in the House of Counselors in Japan, they become somewhat atrophied, with less jurisdiction, and without the same power as the lower house. Only in America, in the United States Senate, has the upper house become stronger over the history of the country, and that gives them that special stature, but I think it should be taken only with a sense of responsibility about what the Senate has to do to stand up and debate these issues.

Smith: And presumably there's been a sea change in how the media covers the Senate and issues. I mean, clearly there was a very serious, profound national debate at the time of the civil rights bills in the sixties, and certainly the Voting Rights Act after Selma. There's almost a sense of the trivial about so much of what—I mean, it's as if we're not addressing issues at all. How much of that is the media?

Mondale: You know, I am not sure. I think if the Senate were really debating these great questions, if we had a really serious debate about Iraq, for example, I'd be very surprised if the press didn't cover that very carefully. If there were hearings, real hearings like the old Army [Joseph] McCarthy hearings, or the one about General [Douglas] MacArthur or the [J. William] Fulbright hearings on Vietnam, or the [Frank] Church hearings on the intelligence—the great moments when the Senate did for the country what it could not do for itself, the press and the cameras were there. I think some of this begins with whether there's news or not.

Smith: Why do you think we're not having those? There's certainly no shortage of issues that warrant those kinds of hearings.

Mondale: Oh yes, yes, yes. I think that there's two or three things at work here. One, I don't want to sound partisan here, but I think that we've never had a president who has consistently and completely rejected the balance of power, the checks and balances that I think the Constitution requires, as has this president [George W. Bush]. And through a whole range of strategies, they have blocked the production of documents, they have

refused to testify, they have claimed executive privilege, they have issued signing statements repudiating the laws the president just signed into law, and all across there's a kind of a breakdown in the process of the accountability, the oversight that the Constitution, I think, intends.

Smith: Let me ask you. You arrived at the Senate in '64, and Dole came four years later.

Mondale: 1968.

Smith: [Richard M.] Nixon's in the White House. First president since Zachary Taylor to have both houses controlled by the opposition.

Mondale: Right.

Smith: And Dole arrives as a newcomer and is quickly dubbed "the sheriff of the Senate."

Mondale: Yes.

Smith: Tell me about that. One senses that he, more than most, illustrates at least the capacity for growth over time.

Mondale: Yes.

Smith: But in order to demonstrate growth, you have to go back to the beginning. What was Bob Dole like when he arrived?

Mondale: Somebody said politicians either grow or they swell, and Bob grew. I was there when he arrived, and he had been in the House, and I think he brought a lot of that House idea of "our team versus your team" into the Senate chamber, and I remember a painful afternoon when he was on his feet, regaling his Senate colleagues for not voting as a unit on some political issue, and berating them in front of the press about who do

they think they are, aren't they Republicans, and so on. Boy, I heard a lot of negative comments about that, and I think he spent some time living that down.

Smith: Of course, he was also chairman of the RNC [Republican National Committee].

Mondale: Yes, at the same time. But I could see him change. He got over that stuff, and I think partly because of experience with Nixon, probably he found those years of the RNC, in the end, very dispiriting, and he found the Senate a better place for his life and what he believed in than some of that other politics that used to be so important to him.

Smith: Of course, he also had the near-death experience of '74, when he came very close to losing that seat.

Mondale: Yes. You know, we used to do a lot with Bob Dole, Humphrey did. Humphrey and Dole were very close.

Smith: Were they close from the beginning?

Mondale: I think maybe it took Dole a couple of years before he got off his first approach, the House approach, I might call it, and became what he really became, an excellent senator. I think he began working with all of us on farm issues. We were all from the farm bloc, we all had farmers, we had rural issues, we had things we could work on together, our voters expected us to work on it together. Each state has two senators and each of us are important. And then Bob Dole did more than that; he helped shape the Food Stamp Program, the school lunch and school breakfast programs, and he went beyond the traditional farm-state senator, adding a conservative voice to the use of food to help some real social problems in America, and he really helped give it legitimacy and gave us the "oomph" to pass it.

Smith: And it's, of course, ironic that one person with whom he worked very closely on that was George McGovern.

Mondale: Absolutely.

Smith: Who he had been beating up on as RNC chairman in '72.

Mondale: Yes. Bob Dole and Humphrey used to go down to Miami, Florida. They had a friend, Dwayne Andreas, and sometimes they'd get down there around Christmas and have a good time, their families would be there, so they were good friends. But you'd see them on the campaign trail, listen to their speeches, and you wouldn't believe it. [laughs]

Smith: But it was possible to compartmentalize.

Mondale: Yes, and that's what I remember about those days. I think it was Tip [Thomas P.] O'Neill said politics ends at six o'clock. People would go off that floor.

I remember one time I was at a hearing, Howard Baker came in. I got mad at him and I said some sharp things to him, and he got mad at me, and we walked out of the room together. I said, "Howard, I'm trying to think what I was mad about."

He said, "You know, I was having the same problem."

In those days, you'd try to diminish those disputes and keep a personal connection. That was part of the joy of the Senate.

Smith: It's as if, in a nutshell, you tried to narrow differences rather than exploit them.

Mondale: Right. Right. And there were such strengths to be found in finding that human connection, so many ways in which you could solve problems. Tommy Griffin [Should be Thomas Eagleton.—WM] , God bless him, once talked about the Senate as this remarkable institution that kept the Union together as we moved to the West, as we had to have a Civil War, as we started to get race behind us, as we started to deal with all the industrialization, all these different changes that had ruined so many other countries, somehow America kept it going. The great instrument for compromise and reconciliation was always, and continues to be, the U.S. Senate, and I believe to do that, the senators themselves have to believe that compromise can be, and must be, an essential part of public service.

Smith: Were there people in particular on the other side of the aisle that you found yourself working with?

Mondale: Oh yes. I worked with Bob Dole on the agriculture stuff, on the Food Stamp things, the Hunger Commission.

Smith: Do you think that was an eye-opening experience for him? Because I often thought people emphasize, understandably, his war experiences and all that.

Mondale: Yes, yes.

Smith: I've often thought they tend to overlook the defining experience of growing up in the Dust Bowl in the Depression, with no money and no prospects.

Mondale: Right. And poor. He came from a small rural county. I'm sure he didn't have much money. All of them went through the horrors of the great collapse of land prices. In the thirties, the Depression and so on hit farmers almost worse than anybody. I don't think any of them have ever gotten over it.

Smith: I've often wondered, I think there's a little bit of a populist in Dole.

Mondale: Oh yes. That's what helped build him as a leader, I think. You asked me a moment ago about the Food Stamp and school lunches and so on. If you'd asked me in '68 would Bob Dole do something like that, I'd say, "I doubt it." But as he developed, he not only did it, he was a leader, and he knew what he was doing. There are a lot of right-wingers that resented what he was doing, but he was able to shape these issues in a way that really made a big difference for every schoolchild.

Smith: I know he cherished the friendship with Humphrey.

Mondale: Oh yes. They were down there, as I mentioned, in Florida together. But they would work together. I think they were on the Agriculture Committee together for twenty-five years. When I was at Humphrey's funeral in the Rotunda, Bob Dole was one of the first people to come into the Rotunda. They were very close.

Smith: I think they talked not long before Senator Humphrey died.

Mondale: Yes, they were on the phone together, and I think Bob came over to see him.

Smith: Why do you think it's so difficult for senators to move directly from the Senate to the White House? I wonder—I'll break that down. Is it a kind of, for example, in Dole's case, almost a different senatorial lingo? You stay inside the Beltway and you begin to develop this shorthand and it doesn't translate outside the Beltway. Is that one factor?

Mondale: Well, I've got some theories about it. They're only theories. Senators, by and large, have not done well running for the presidency. There's something that the public is concerned about. I think part of it is that, take Bob Dole, who'd been around the Congress a long time, he knew these issues, he knew about appropriations in the budget, he knew about what was possible, what wasn't possible. He'd been around long enough to see many dreams turn into dust. You get a certain kind of, say, mature view about how politics works. And I think that when you go out and run for president, it helps to be naïve. [laughs] To really believe you could do all this stuff, so it sparkles in your eyes, and then find out later how—once you've been through it time and again, as Bob Dole, it doesn't sparkle the same way.

Smith: And when you have a mordant sense of humor to begin with, you know.

Mondale: [laughs] It's not really dawn in America there.

Smith: No. [laughs]

Mondale: The other thing, of course, is I think that in the Senate, if you're there for a while, you vote on everything. You vote over and over again on everything. So it's harder to run for president and say this is where you stand in a fresh way, when you've had seventeen votes on that issue in the Senate. So a candidate's range of movement, believable movement, is reduced, and I think that the appeal for change is easier for an outsider than for someone—the insider will argue experience. The outsider will say "fresh start." Americans usually go for the fresh start. The governor—that's usually what it is—can argue he's been an executive, and a senator is only a windbag.

Smith: Is it exaggerated, the tendency of senators, once they arrive in the Senate, to look in the mirror and see potential presidents?

Mondale: Well, my friend Bob Strauss said he had a secret list of ten senators who were not interested in running for president. So it has a kind of infectious disease there. I think once a senator starts doing well and people back home start feeling good about the person, that his friends start saying, "Say, you should be president." This has happened--somewhat autobiographical in this case.

Smith: When did you begin to think about that?

Mondale: Well, I was in, I think, the sixth grade. [laughs]

Smith: Really?

Mondale: Oh, I don't know. '72 or something like that.

Smith: You famously said—what was the line about staying at the Holiday Inn?

Mondale: I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in Holiday Inns. Then when I ended up running for vice president with Carter, I got confronted with that right away, and I said, "Well, they've all been redone, so it's all right."

Smith: In a curious sort of way, I wonder if that didn't recommend you to [Jimmy] Carter. I mean, let's face it, traditionally presidents pick a running mate and then look over his shoulder to see if he's got ambitions, you know. And from the beginning that never seemed to be an issue between you and President Carter.

Mondale: No, and I think it says something about Carter. I think a lot of times vice presidents have trouble with their president because they're reminding them of mortality. It's kind of a Shakespearian relationship there that can raise doubts. But I don't think Carter had any of those concerns at all. At least if he did I never sensed them. So it allowed us to work without that level of difficulty. I believe not only did we break institutional ground, no one had done what Carter did before, but I think we proved it could really work and help a president, and should it occur, help educate a vice president to become a better president.

Smith: You and Bob Dole would find yourselves running against each other in '76. How did you get to be on the Democratic ticket?

Mondale: I think that Carter, who was a putative nominee and had, I think, the choice of whoever he wanted, looked at a range of candidates, went up to Congress and checked all of us out, and I fit what he needed. I could help him in the North, where he was having some troubles, and in the Midwest. I had a lot of friends that I think would be stronger for the ticket. There are others who could have done the same thing, but I think that I could do it. I think he liked the sorts of things I was doing in the Senate and the things that I was interested [in]. In a strange, wonderful way, to me, I was a Northern civil rights advocate. I got that from Humphrey, I got it from my father, I thought that's what my faith told me to be for, and I was involved in almost every civil rights fight over all those years. Suddenly for the first time in 120 years, you have a Southern candidate for president with a strong civil rights record, and I was really thrilled by what that could mean in terms of putting that issue, that has so dogged our country, behind us, finally. That was a big attraction in both directions.

Smith: People forget—it's amazing how the electoral calendar reverses itself. Thirty years ago, of course, you swept the South and [Gerald R.] Ford took Michigan, New Jersey, Connecticut, California. Just extraordinary.

Mondale: Right. And we had a cliffhanger. We finally won at three in the morning, with Mississippi, in 1976.

Smith: I've always wanted to ask you, because needless to say, being around him it's a sensitive subject. When you were standing there in the middle of that debate and you heard him talk about "Democrat wars," did you think to yourself, "Oh, thank you, God, for giving me this"?

Mondale: Something like that. Well, you know, we had had a meeting—and I'm sure he had a meeting—trying to anticipate what would come up in the debate. This was kind of a trial run so we're ready. The last thing that was raised, just as we were closing the meeting, somebody said, "I'll bet that Bob Dole will say that the Democrat Party caused World War II."

I said, "You're crazy."

He said, "No. He says that on the campaign trail. I'll bet you'll hear it."

And he did it. And, you know, it was devastating. The public just did not want that. It was just a bad day for Bob Dole. It really wasn't what he meant at all, but it came out. I think it really was decisive.

Smith: Did you know instantly?

Mondale: Yes. I knew where he was going. You know, politicians are not very complex. We've all given these speeches. We've all got our best lines. I was aware of this one. I just didn't think he'd use it.

Smith: Did you have an actual kind of rehearsal? Did someone play Dole?

Mondale: No, we weren't that sophisticated in those days. We just sat down with eight or ten people who had studied the issues, and we discussed what the issues would be, what Dole had been saying, what he might say, what I would say, and that sort of thing. We didn't have this mock debate stuff that is now standard.

Smith: What did your running mate—did he talk to you that night after the debate?

Mondale: Yes. He was very pleased. He knew. The election was very close, campaign was very close, and I think we opened up a lead of two or three points the next day. You know, it was that and the remarkable thing that Ford did in his debate with Carter, where you remember he said, in response to Max Frankel, that "Poland is free." And Frankel figured he just didn't hear the question right and went over it again, and in effect, told Ford, "Better give a different answer." And Ford, no, he jumped right in there and said it again. So those two things, I think, really opened up issues that helped us win.

Smith: And, you know, the fascinating thing is, he knew. He knew: if he wasn't so stubborn, he wouldn't give in. But the thing was, he had visited—because if you listen to the rest of the question, he talks about Poland, he talks about Romania, he talks about Yugoslavia, three countries that he'd visited, and been very well received. If he'd just put it in that context.

Smith: There'd been no trouble. But the language he used, to believe that Poland was free, and it was not yet free. And three or four days later, he corrected it, but the damage had been done.

Smith: Years later when we redid the museum, the Polish gaffe plays over and over. It's in the exhibit. We were taking him through. I said, "See, you weren't wrong. You were just ahead of your time." [laughs]

Mondale: Right. [laughs]

Smith: It took a while, though, before he could laugh about it.

Mondale: It must have been painful.

Smith: How would you characterize, in your view, the main issues, the defining issues in the ’76 campaign, and particularly the things you were out there talking about?

Mondale: I think the pardon had more to do with the outcome of that election than the pundits have said. I say that because the few times I used the issue, the response from the audience almost scared me, that kind of anger. They wanted some kind of closure on that, that was different than the one they had, and there were suspicions about what went into it. I don’t think there’s anything to those suspicions, but I think that hung over the whole campaign. They always say that every new president is an antidote for the last president. I think Carter got a lot of mileage out of feeling that he was honest and direct and would not do this sort of thing, and Ford and Dole were unable to really erase that concern. So there were many other things. The debate gaffes had a lot to do with it. I think anybody who runs as a successor president, not one who’s been elected, is sort of half a president. There’s kind of a burden of proof that Ford had to carry because he wasn’t quite—people hadn’t put him there. They hadn’t even put him in as vice president. So there was a little bit of that. I don’t think Dole really proved to add much to the Ford formula. He might have added a lot to others, but the way Ford’s strength and Dole’s strength--I think they tended to complement each other.

Smith: It’s interesting, because the conversations I’ve had with both of them, Ford thought at the time that—I mean, they were so far down in the polls that they didn’t have the base. They didn’t have the agricultural Midwest. And I mean the Dakotas and Kansas and Nebraska. So whether it’s a rationalization after the fact or a factor at the time, I think they also thought that it would be acceptable to the Reagan wing of the party.

Mondale: That’s an important thing, don’t you think, that Reagan challenged Ford and came very close to upending him, and Ford was thinking very carefully about how he could restore that strength. I think that’s why he set aside [Nelson] Rockefeller and then

picked Dole, because with Rockefeller he'd never get the Reagan people back. So I think picking Dole, he may have calculated would help him restore support there.

Smith: Yes. In fact, it's a source of some contention, because he was told very explicitly at that time, "If you want to have a meeting with Governor Reagan after the nomination, okay, but under no circumstances are you to bring up the vice presidency." And of course, years later Reagan said, "Oh sure, I would have said yes." [laughs]

Mondale: Oh sure. Absolutely. No, you can't win. No, no. [laughs]

Smith: We all know—I mean, Dole talked about Ford staying in the Rose Garden, "He went out in the briar patch." I mean, that's traditionally the role of the vice presidential candidate.

Mondale: I want to say one thing, and I'm not sure how solid I am in this, but I have this recollection that Reagan never really went out and tried very hard to get Ford elected, and if he had, I think it might have elected him. We were that close.

Smith: In states like Mississippi and southern Ohio, places that Reagan—

Mondale: Yes.

Smith: In fact, I've often thought—and it's based on some factual basis—that one of the things that brought Presidents Ford and Carter together in later years was Ronald Reagan. [laughs] They'd both run against him, and I'm not sure they particularly relished the experience.

Mondale: They were still thinking about it. [laughs]

Smith: I think they were maybe still thinking about it. The vice presidential candidate does traditionally sort of carry the burden of being more partisan. We know about what

Dole was doing in '76. What kinds of things were you—where were you going? Where were they sending you?

Mondale: I had a map and it was all where you'd expect. I started on the East Coast, I went across the Midwest, and then I would get to about Nebraska and jump over to the West Coast and make one or two trips through the South, then I'd go back and forth. The last week I almost lived in Ohio. I was there more than the county commissioners there. And we carried it. [laughs]

Smith: You did. True story. Lyn Nofziger told me this story first, and Dole confirmed it. Talk about a seat of the pants, one day he was on the plane, looked at the map. He said, "Why don't we go there."

Mondale: [laughs] Just like that. Oh yes. Last week is no longer strategic. Minute to minute.

Smith: It's funny, there's a quality about Dole that I think would surprise people to hear it, because they think of him as sort of this driven, single-minded, ambitious person who wanted to be president more than anything else, but there's also this almost impish sense of the ridiculous about all of this.

Mondale: He has a very healthy sense of the ridiculous. He also is a very serious, substantial person who cares about his country; the wonderful stuff he's done on veterans of World War II. He's been involved in so many things in his post-public life. His leadership days as Majority Leader in the U.S. Senate go down as great years in that Senate. In his later years, he was almost the opposite of that first year; he was able to hold the whole Senate, he had the confidence of a lot of Democrats. He would stand up to his president or the president once in a while when he didn't agree with him. He was a man of the Senate. I think this has all built him into this extraordinary American that almost everybody respects.

Smith: I can't tell you how many times he told me, "In this place you can't keep a grudge, and around this place, the only thing you have in the end is your word."

Mondale: That's right.

Smith: And if it's no good, people will write you off.

Mondale: That's right. And he was that person. That's what makes the Senate click when it clicks.

Smith: Right after '76, he told me an amazing story. It may have been the day after '76, certainly within two or three days. He got a call from Hubert Humphrey. You know about that?

Mondale: No, I don't know. That doesn't surprise me.

Smith: Hubert Humphrey called him, and I think he said, "Let's have lunch," or something. And he said, "Look. Right now you're going to get a lot of criticism, but *you* know what you did and you know where you were when you came out of that convention." But I mean, just an amazing—and needless to say, he never forgot that.

Mondale: That's a sign of what we're talking about. Dole and Humphrey were very close. It was just a sign of how Dole was broadening and deepening as an American leader began to show in these ways.

Smith: Has he ever discussed the debates with you since?

Mondale: No, no. You know, I see him once in a while. I see him less than I used to. But we always have a good time. We start talking about things. We're good friends. We were good friends in that debate. That was one of the funny things. I knew he was having a bad night. [laughs]

Smith: Were you having a good night?

Mondale: Well, I've had worse nights. [laughs]

Smith: With a little help from—

Mondale: That one night with Reagan wasn't much fun.

Smith: The first one you did.

Mondale: Yes. But, you know, again he performed poorly the first night, and that's often the case. Sort of suicide.

Smith: Do you think we put too much emphasis on the debates? Because they're not really debates.

Mondale: They're not really debates in a college scholarly standard book, but they're the closest thing that the American people have in a campaign to look at their choices for president, the most important job in the world, in a way where they might learn something real and non-contrived. The camera's right on them. They get questions. Most of the answers are rote and boring. But it seems like in every debate, or in most debates, something happens, usually unanticipated, that gives you a glimpse of character or a glimpse of a weakness or something else, or a strength, and the public catches it. I don't know whether it's true with all these primary debates, but in the final election where you have two or three debates, usually there are massive audiences, and nothing moves America quite like one of those decisive moments in a debate. So I would say they are very important to our country, and one of the few things that's truly democratic. Everybody's there, watching.

Smith: I think the one-debate in '80, which was, I think most people agree, pivotal in determining at least the dimensions of the outcome, if not the outcome itself.

Mondale: No question about it.

Smith: And when you stop to think about such extraordinary consequences growing out of a tossed-off "There you go again," I mean presumably that debate was all about Reagan demonstrating that he wasn't what he'd been—

Mondale: I think there was a big national concern that he wasn't ready or was overripe for the presidency, and he went in there and stood and was assured and carried his own, and the public went out of that debate feeling that he could be president. Similarly, when I debated with Reagan, the first night he really, I think, shook public confidence. And people, when he came on the stage the second time, "Could this guy still be president?" He looked good and confident. The public was reassured, and I always thought that was the end of the campaign there.

Smith: When you were vice president, what kind of contact—of course, because you're presiding over the Senate, but you're presumably up there quite a bit of the time—

Mondale: I was up there a lot.

Smith: And of course, by the time, Dole obviously is thinking about running in 1980, which is going to lend him an even more partisan dig.

Mondale: Well, he was always running, you know. He like Humphrey, something out there to eat.

Smith: I remember at some point didn't President Carter try, I guess, to get his vote on the Panama Canal Treaty?

Mondale: Did he vote no on the Panama—

Smith: I think he voted no.

Mondale: We tried to get everybody. I think I talked to him. I think he'd spoken out on it so often for so many years, he didn't feel he could seriously study it. We did get quite a few Republican votes, because, as you know, Ford and, I think, Nixon, [Henry] Kissinger, a lot of Republicans had urged the adoption of that Canal Treaty for years, but I guess in that case still didn't come around. I don't remember talking to him, but I bet I did.

Smith: I think I remember somewhere seeing, I think in the course of this series, President Carter saying that was the toughest thing he had to do, and, frankly, for which he got no credit.

Mondale: It was the most joyless victory I've ever had in politics. When we finally got the votes, which nobody thought we could do, the polls showed that something like 60 percent of the American people were opposed to it. We never did persuade Americans that that was the right thing to do, even though now the Panama Canal has been a tremendous success. It's prosperous, it's stable, it's all the things we couldn't quite get done when we controlled it as a colony. But right then you weren't going to sell it, and maybe each senator lost the next election because they voted for it.

Smith: That's right. Adam Clymer has a new book coming out.

Mondale: On this?

Smith: On this. And he argues that it really is the birth of the modern conservative—I mean, it kept Reagan's career going in '76.

Mondale: I know this is not about [S.I.] Hayakawa, but we had this wonderful true story. We were trying to get Hayakawa to vote for the treaty, and he had campaigned against it in California, on the grounds that it was ours, we stole it fair and square. [laughs] So I heard a rumor that he might—because I went to see him. I said, "Senator, we really need you. You can really help us here."

And he said, "Well, President Carter is shaky on foreign policy, he's not getting good advice. If we could set up some way that he would listen to me and I could come down and tell him some things that he needs, I would consider voting for this treaty."

So I called the president. I said, "In about ten minutes I'm going to have Hayakawa. Here's what you're going to propose."

So we placed the call. I go through it. The president said, "Yes, I agree with you, Senator. I'm sitting down here all alone, working in this big White House. Everybody who comes here wants something. I never get to hear the kind of independent voice you'd bring to this thing. Yes, let's do that." [laughs]

And Hayakawa said, "Well, maybe we ought to agree to do it every two weeks or so."

And Carter said, "No, let's not do that. We may need to do it more often." [laughs]

So Hayakawa votes for the treaty. Our great victory.

Smith: And presumably the biweekly meetings did not materialize.

Mondale: I doubt it.

Smith: Among other things, that's fascinating, because it belies the popular notion of Jimmy Carter as one who is not politically agile.

Mondale: He's fast, too. His mind's very quick.

Smith: You know, it's interesting, I'll never forget, when we dedicated the Dole Institute, of all the things that happened that week, I think the thing that Dole most appreciated was President Carter's presence.

Mondale: Yes.

Smith: And it was fascinating. I'll never forget, the morning of the dedication, he was taking President Carter around on a tour, and that day, or the next day, he sent Mrs.

[Rosalynn] Carter a dozen red roses, with a note. And he'll remember that till the day he dies.

Mondale: Yes, I'm sure of it. I'm sure of it. You know, we all need this. I remember when Clinton and Bush One went down in the South Pacific after that huge tsunami and traveled through there. All the polls show that America's appeal in that region jumped double or triple. I mean, we need more of this. The public wants it, not just as a show; they want to feel it.

Smith: Why is it, though? What is it about the political process that you have to be an elder statesman before you can be a statesman?

Mondale: Well, most of these people we're talking about showed those symptoms while they were in public life. I don't think it works at midnight in your life. I think it's something that you earn over the years, and Dole did that.

Smith: And you think in some cases they would have liked to have done more, but the political process, as it's evolved, makes it difficult?

Mondale: Yes. I think the pressure is always on to cut this thing politically, when maybe personally you'd like to compromise some way.

Smith: A couple of other quick things. One is, I realize you were out of office at the time, but you must have been following all this. People all talked about, well, the public began to think that he'd changed, and he'd changed, but I wonder if the change hadn't occurred long before 1981, and partly, for example, once he became chairman of the Finance Committee, all of a sudden for the first time in his career he's responsible for something. As he said, you can go on putting out press releases or you can try to pass laws. He hadn't had that responsibility.

Mondale: You got it. Because I think if you want to be a really good chairman of the Finance Committee, you have to understand those issues. Very complex. There's a lot of

professors in the best law schools that aren't as good on these issues as a good chairman of the Finance Committee. Very complex. You knew Russell Long. Whatever you thought of him, boy, he had a mind on him, and so did Bob Dole. And secondly, you get into the middle of these issues and you realize how complex it is. The tradeoffs, the effect on the economy, the fairness of the revenue burdens, all of those things come in on top of you, and I think partly you get a sobered sense on available room for maneuver that changes the way you look at things a little bit. Then secondly, I think you're sobered about the complexity of it and you're less breezy than you've been about things before.

Smith: What kind of chairman was Russell Long?

Mondale: I loved the guy. Brilliant. Knew the Senate, the laws. Clever. He knew how to handle tax laws. He only called them up the day before Christmas or something like that. [laughs] He would never give you an extended period to work on his bill. Funny man, so funny, you know.

Smith: Did he talk about his dad [Huey Long]?

Mondale: Yes. He talked about his dad. Talked about Uncle Earl [K. Long], mostly, and he'd say, "You don't tax me. Tax that fellow behind the tree." He was always cracking lines.

Smith: Being chairman of the Finance Committee, what kind of preparation was that for—

Mondale: Well, I was never chairman. But I was on the Finance Committee until I went to the White House, and I was involved as a younger member of that committee, so that's why I'm kind of—because it had an effect on me, I think.

Smith: What was that?

Mondale: Well, when I ran for president, I think I had a much more sober view about what was possible, because once you get into that committee and you get into numbers and all the complexity of it and so on, you start thinking that way, and it affects you some way, I think. I think it's responsible, but I don't know if it's that effective in terms of national politics.

Smith: One also senses—it's curious—that Dole's national career sort of unfolded at a time when the party and the culture of conservatism was in many ways moving in a different direction.

Mondale: Yes.

Smith: And that he almost found himself running after the—and not terribly gracefully. I mean not very convincingly. The whole Religious Right especially.

Mondale: I wonder how much he believed in that Religious Right stuff. I think that when that thing got red hot, almost all their national leaders had to mouth it. This is not fair to Bob, because I never talked about it, but I really wonder how much he really saw that as good politics or good for the country. The same thing about this Reaganomics, massive tax cuts, and this voodoo idea that the more you cut taxes, the more revenue you're going to get. It's never worked, but for a while that was party doctrine. I don't think he ever believed that. As a matter of fact, he told me once he didn't think it worked. And I think it's partly because he'd been on the Finance Committee and knew how things worked.

Smith: In the fall of '95, at the outside, I wrote him a memo and I said, "Basically you were a better candidate in '88 because you were yourself."

Mondale: Yes, I think so.

Smith: "The one thing you have going for you is—I mean, you're not Reagan, you're not JFK, you're not a lot of things. You're more Trumanesque. You've got this plainspoken

authenticity. Once you sacrifice that, and what you're doing right now is feeding the crocodiles. They don't believe it. They don't believe what they're hearing." [laughs] He leaked that memo to *Time* magazine, which tracked me down, got me denounced by George Will on the Brinkley show, because, of course, Will's wife was running all that stuff, and he said he told *Time*, "I keep that memo on my desk. I look at it every day." Well, he was sending signals out to the governors and the moderates and saying, "I don't really believe this stuff."

Mondale: I don't think he did. I don't think he did.

Smith: Did you ever have a situation like that in your party or your own career where you felt you had to kind of sign on to something that you weren't—

Mondale: I had an understanding with Carter. When we talked first about running together, I said, "You know, I love the Senate. I don't have to do this. I think I can help you as much or more as a senator as I can as a vice president, but if you want this to go ahead, the one thing you have to let me do is keep my dignity. I cannot demean myself out there, making arguments I don't believe in. So if we get into a situation where you're for something that I can't support, just allow me to shut up. I know I can't go out and attack the head of the ticket." The issue never came up. Some minor things came up, but we'd actually talked about how to handle that.

Smith: Was that influenced at all by the example of Hubert Humphrey?

Mondale: Yes. Yes, and I think Humphrey—if you read Humphrey's autobiography, that chapter in there where he talks about how he got into this cheerleading on the war, which he actually didn't like at all and had written a letter to the president saying, "We've got to be worried about where we're going," he said that really hurt him and people looked at him differently and he knew it.

Smith: How do you think Bob Dole should be remembered?

Mondale: I think he should be remembered as a very fine American who served us in war and came up from an impoverished background and developed into one of the most impressive leaders in his time, and that he serves as a model of how grown men and women ought to work together when they get in power in America, and he was an example, in his later years in the Senate, of what a senator should be.

Smith: He's also, I think, like you—I think of Jimmy Carter and a number of people, he never forgot where he came from.

Mondale: No, no, no, and I like that about him. When you're with him alone, you don't have any of this "You're with a great man here" at all. You just talk like kids I talked to when I was in small farm towns. That's very important to him. That experience he had in the military in Italy nearly took his life. I had a couple of friends who were up there with him at the time. One of them ran the Vail Mountain for some years. They told me what they went through there. Amazing stuff.

Smith: Do you think it defined him?

Mondale: I don't think it defined him. But I think it sort of—my guess, that it was a central part of his life, that it matured him, that he was struggling between whether he would be angry about carrying this terrible burden or whether he'd be a bigger person because he could handle it and move on, and that's what he did. So I think it had a lot to do with it.

Smith: There's a theory that he became sort of obsessed with demonstrating his independence, I mean just because if you can't move, you know, and over time—that really carried over, really made him impossible to manage. I mean, it's hard to imagine anyone—

Mondale: You mean when he was running?

Smith: Yes.

Mondale: I'm sure.

Smith: Anyone less amenable to having handlers handle him.

Mondale: He's a handler's nightmare, I'm sure. He was not a modern manipulatable public relations figure at all. I think he was Bob Dole from Russell, Kansas.

Smith: In an odd way, television both worked against him and in some ways since '96 it's worked for him. I mean, it's shown him to advantage.

Mondale: Yes. Well, he lost, but I don't think the people lost respect in him. That's an important distinction, I think. It's possible to lose both the election and self-respect. That's bad. But if you conducted yourself in a responsible way, if you tried to use that period to debate real issues and you've treated the public with respect and done what a candidate should do for them, then when it's over, people say, "Well, we don't want you as president, but we like you," that's not bad.

Smith: That answered the last thing because you both belong to this club of people who've run. How does that affect the rest of your life? Have you ever compared notes about the process?

Mondale: Well, you know, it's just kind of subliminal. When we're together we both know.

Smith: For example, would you agree with campaigns have become, say, over the last generation less substantive, or at the presidential level they tend to be more driven by, in some ways, extraneous—

Mondale: I think it's somewhat up to the candidate. You've got more opportunities for substance now than before, because with the Internet and with the modern ways of communication, you can get the record out, you can get the issues out. These debates,

although they're truncated and almost ludicrous sometimes, at least the public has a chance to see them performing.

The thing that bothers me about politics is that it's becoming so incredibly, almost immorally expensive. When I was nominated in '84, I raised about $45 million over two years, a lot of money, but then when I got nominated, I got a check for $45 million under the federal law, and I never had to make another phone call. That was it. Now these candidates, look at them. They have to raise $100 million before the first primary and they have to figure on another 200 or 300 million dollars, and both the process of raising that money and the kind of negative, twisted attacks, just constantly raining down on everybody, I think it's cheapened the process. It's made the election of a president less dignified, and I think you can't throw all that mud all that time without leaving residue of cynicism and anger.

Smith: And finally, what happens in the current context where the campaign has been going on for a year and we have another year to go?

Mondale: Right.

Smith: What does that do to the mandate?

Mondale: Yes, and it's so tiresome. You can see it in the candidates' eyes. You just look at them. They're already getting tired. I remember I had been on the campaign trail, I think for a year, and I had a year to go. The Prime Minister of England called an election and fifteen days later she was reelected. I said, "This is not—I've got a year to go here." But that's the American system.

[End of interview]

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