EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE MITCHELL

September 6, 2011
New York, New York

Interviewer
James Sterling Young

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TRANSCRIPT

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Young: I'd like first to ask you to talk about your connection with Ted [Kennedy] or with the Kennedys, before you entered the Senate. I know you were with the Department of Justice for a brief while, and then you went with Senator [Edmund] Muskie.

Mitchell: That's right.

Young: Ted came in as a very junior Senator, in '62, and I'm wondering if you had any contact with them or how you came to connect with the Kennedys.

Mitchell: The first Kennedy I met was Robert Kennedy. I joined the Justice Department in 1960, just prior to the election of that year, and following the election, he became the Attorney General, in 1961. I met him on a couple of occasions then, although very briefly, in meetings in which I was one of several people. I was a young, just-out-of-law-school graduate who would have been at the lowest rung in the ladder at the Justice Department, so there was no possibility that he would ever have recognized me. I was part of a group on two occasions, where we met with the Attorney General and he gave us pep talks.

Young: You were in Antitrust.

Mitchell: I was in the Antitrust Division, yes. In April of 1962, I left the Justice Department and joined the staff of then Senator Ed Muskie of Maine, where I remained until 1965, when I returned to Maine to practice law. During that time, I had occasion to observe Senator Ted Kennedy in the Senate, although I did not meet him personally at that time. Again, I was a junior staff aide to another Senator, and so I got to see him, knew who he was. I was quite close to Senator Muskie, who in turn was very friendly with President John Kennedy and the entire Kennedy family.

I can't recall which year, but one of those summers, President Kennedy came to Maine on a sailing vacation and Senator Muskie joined him. I was not on the boat at the time, but I remember hearing the stories about it from Senator Muskie and seeing a lot of photographs that were taken of it. So my direct personal contacts with members of the Kennedy family were very limited prior to the time that I entered the Senate. Then I met Senator Kennedy, Ted Kennedy, in that context.

Young: When you were with Senator Muskie as his Executive Assistant, I believe was the title, did you have any contact with Kennedy's staff, such as it was at that time?

Mitchell: I can't recall. Back then, life was different in many respects, not least of which was the size of the Senate staff.

Young: Yes.

Mitchell: Senator Muskie had about a dozen people on his staff and I performed a whole variety of different tasks, including traveling with him to Maine and traveling around Maine with him. I did a lot of what you would think of now as the political stuff, also some legislative work in Washington, but I can't recall any contact with Senator Kennedy's office, although it is likely that there was some, but I don't remember any legislation that we would have worked on together.

Young: In the later days, I guess it was impossible not to encounter his staff.

Mitchell: When I was a Senator, I remember specifically many dealings with Senator Kennedy and his staff.

Young: You were appointed to the Senate. You came into the Senate as a Senator, I think it was in May of 1980.

Mitchell: That's right.

Young: At the time that Senator Kennedy was trying to unseat President [Jimmy] Carter for the nomination. How did you get introduced to him at that time? How did you come to have an acquaintance when you first came back as a Senator? Did he make any overtures to you?

Mitchell: I entered the Senate in May of 1980, so the election campaign was in full bloom. Each Tuesday noon, as you know, the Senators from each party meet in what's called a caucus luncheon, and so my first contact with many of the Democratic Senators was in that luncheon, where I was introduced to them. And then on the floor of the Senate during votes, I would have met all of the rest, over a period of several weeks. I do recall Senator Kennedy being very friendly, engaging with me, encouraging me, things of that type.

I recall specifically an incident that occurred later. I entered the Senate in May of 1980, to complete Senator Muskie's term, which expired in 1982. So I had about two years as an appointed Senator. In the spring of '81, a year before the election, a public opinion poll appeared in the Maine newspapers, which reported, in what are to me unforgettable headlines, that I was 36 percentage points behind in the campaign, and according to the pollster, had no chance to win. That made a lot of headlines and it caused me a lot of embarrassment. It led to a barrage of polls. Another one showed me 33 points behind and a third one showed me 22 points behind in a possible primary race against a former Governor who was thinking about running—formed an exploratory committee—against me in the primary. Gradually, over a few months, I worked hard and was able to cut the lead down a little bit.

I recall this as though it were yesterday. At one of the Democratic caucus luncheons, a discussion occurred, as frequently does occur, on the election prospects for that year. By now it would have been the early part of 1982. I think it would have been January, February, something like that. Senator [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan, who was very friendly, got up and cited a list of favorable

signs, and he concluded by saying, "Even George Mitchell is only 24 points behind." And of course everybody laughed. Senator Moynihan did not mean it in any malicious way, he was a very good friend, but I think many Senators thought that I would be offended by it and hurt by it. So on the way out of the luncheon, Ted came up to me, put his arm around my shoulder and said, "We believe in you, we've got confidence in you. We think you can win, don't get down as a result of this." And about six or seven Senators said and did the same thing, but Ted was the first one and I remember that very much.

I emphasize that Pat Moynihan was a dear friend, that he did not say it in any malicious sense. He meant it as a positive sign, and as it turned out, I did win the election by a wide margin, so I was able to close this gap. I always felt that Ted had a warm spot in his heart for me after that.

Young: Were you and Ted then—how did you discover what interests you had in common in legislation and in the Democratic Party?

Mitchell: Well, we never served on a committee, which is a principal mechanism of working—we never served on a committee together.

Young: Together, right.

Mitchell: I inherited Senator Muskie's committee assignments for a year, and then the following year, I was able to get appointed to the Senate Finance Committee. So I served on the Senate Finance Committee, the Environment and Public Works Committee and the Veterans Affairs Committee. Those were my principal assignments, after initially serving briefly on the Banking Committee in the place of Senator Muskie, and Ted was on different committees. We never served on the same committee together at any time.

Young: Yes. He was never on the Finance Committee.

Mitchell: No. At any time during my time in the Senate. That's a principal mechanism. The one area that we did have a common interest in, beyond the common interests of the Democratic Party, was healthcare, in which Ted was, for his entire life, political and otherwise, a leader in the effort in healthcare. By the time President [William J.] Clinton took office and I was Senate Majority Leader, that became a major focus of mine.

Young: Sure, sure.

Mitchell: So we worked very closely on that. We also had interests in matters that related to geography, that is, our common New England heritage. I worked closely with Ted, with Pat Leahy from Vermont, with Claiborne Pell and John Chafee from Rhode Island. Chafee was a Republican, but he was a very moderate Republican and a great guy and a very good friend of mine. So we all sort of worked together on matters of New England interest.

One story that I tell humorously, which is partially true, embellished a little bit, was when Chafee and I were on the Environment and Public Works Committee. Part of its jurisdiction had to do with the highway program, and so the "Big Dig" came under our jurisdiction. There was a period of time in the 1980s when the administration in Massachusetts changed, the administration in Washington changed, and there was an effort to eliminate funding for the Big

Dig. Of course Ted and by then John Kerry were very interested and concerned about that, and Chafee and I were on the subcommittee that handled it. So we worked very hard to prevent the elimination of funding for the Big Dig, with the encouragement of Ted and John of course, because they were concerned to keep it in.

Young: Sure.

Mitchell: I've never told this story outside of Massachusetts. I have told it a few times, but I jokingly describe how when it came before the subcommittee, Ted and John would call me up every morning about 7:30 to say, "Well, what's going to happen today, what are you guys going to do on the Big Dig?" And when I finished telling them, they would then put out a press release, announcing what's going to happen on the Big Dig that day.

And after we did finally save it, I jokingly went to Ted and I said, "Ted, I think that the new tunnel that's going to be built should be named after me." He said, "Well, that's ridiculous, you're from Maine. This is a tunnel in Boston, it can't possibly be named after you." I said, "But listen, Ted, everywhere you turn in Massachusetts, there's a Kennedy something or other. There's a library, there's a hospital, there's a school, there's innumerable boulevards. There's nothing for John Kerry, and Kerry's going to insist that the get this tunnel after him. So you're going to be faced with the choice of having the tunnel either named the Mitchell tunnel or the Kerry tunnel." And after thinking about a while and looking out the window Ted said, "Well, I think the Mitchell tunnel sounds okay."

So then I went to see John Kerry and I told John Kerry the same thing, that it should be named after me. He said, "Well, that can't be." He said the same thing, "You're from Maine, this is Massachusetts." I said, "John, there's a Kennedy memorial everywhere in this state, and I've scoured Massachusetts, from one end to the other, and the only thing I can find named after you is a car wash in Chicopee. That's it, and Ted is never going to let a big prize like this, a big tunnel that thousands of people drive through be named after you." I said, "So really, the only choice you're going to have is a Kennedy tunnel or a Mitchell tunnel." So Kerry thought about that, looked out the window, and he said, "Well, okay, the Mitchell tunnel sounds okay."

But when it came down to it, of course, it was named after Ted Williams, who was nonpolitical. Well, as I said, that story is embellished, but Ted used to love it when I told that story. He would laugh uproariously. In fact, a few times when I spoke in Boston, he came up to me and he said, "Are you going to tell the tunnel story tonight?" He had a great sense of humor. He really enjoyed a good laugh. He was not sensitive about these things at all.

We actually did work very closely on this. He, John Kerry and I and John Chafee worked very hard to preserve the funding for the Big Dig.

Young: You were very strong on some environmental issues—wetlands, clean air, clean water. This was all under the [George H.W.] Bush Administration, which was quite a feat. Was he of any help to you in particular on those?

Mitchell: Yes, he was.

Young: In what respects?

Mitchell: Well, it was a very difficult undertaking. We had a long negotiation between the Senate Committee and the Bush Administration. Let me back up and say that President George H. W. Bush deserves much more credit than he's gotten for the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990. Prior to that, we recognized the need to make modifications in the basic Clean Air Act, which was written and enacted principally by Senator Muskie, or the Clean Water Act, but the [Ronald] Reagan Administration was adamantly opposed and we couldn't get it going. When President Bush took office, he said, early in his tenure, in a speech—I don't remember, but it was in a national park somewhere—that he favored clean air legislation, which dramatically shifted the focus from will there be a clean air bill to what will be in the bill.

So we had a long negotiation, which was conducted in the Senate Majority Leader's office, and the principal participants were four Senators who were members of the subcommittee; two Democrats, Max Baucus and myself, and two Republicans, John Chafee and Dave Durenberger of Minnesota. We were able to work out a deal with the administration that culminated in the passage of a very strong bill. But at the time, we had to make some compromises to get the Bush Administration onboard, and one of them was accepting President Bush's proposal of a cap and trade system.

Many of the environmental groups were very upset at us. They criticized us harshly. Some of the Democrats introduced bills to strengthen it, which I ordinarily would have voted for, but I had to oppose because of our agreement with the administration to try to get it through without amendments. Ted understood, from his own experience as really one of the greatest legislators in all of American history, not just in the period we're talking about, not just in the area that we're discussing, that there were times when you had to have compromises. You had to accept some things you might not want to get other things that you did want, and although he did not play a central role in the committee's deliberations, he was active, he was helpful and he was supportive, as he was really on almost all of the major issues with which I was involved. And in healthcare, of course, he played a dominant role.

Young: Yes.

Mitchell: But both internally in the Senate, where Ted was always very well liked by other Senators, Democrats and Republicans.

Young: Was that true when you first came there or was it a reputation that developed, or did it go downhill?

Mitchell: No, it was true during my entire tenure in the Senate. Remember, Ted was there long before I came and was there long after I left. My Senate tenure of 15 years was very brief compared to his. During the time I served in the Senate, in my experience, Ted was very well liked personally by Senators on both sides, and respected for his ability to craft legislation that meant inevitably some degree of compromise, because you had different points of view represented by the two parties and by other divergent interests. He was very good at bringing people together, at maintaining a positive tone. His personality, his sense of humor, all of that helped in that regard. He did not take the lead, to the best of my recollection, in environmental matters, but he was always very helpful and supportive. In healthcare, by contrast, he was of course the leader and played a very major role in that.

Young: Sure. Maybe we ought to talk about that a bit. This is very complicated.

Mitchell: It is.

Young: And a sad story in many ways. I have some questions about the lessons you would take from the result, but it seems to me that the ball started to get rolling on serious healthcare reform in about 1988 or '89. This was after you became the Majority Leader. It was clear, at least it seems in retrospect, that to the Bush Administration, this was not going to be anything that it was going to support. So I'm assuming that you were looking at the prospect in '88, of a Democratic President, and getting ready for that. It started out, it seems to me, as sort of a bipartisan effort. Is that correct? It was a bipartisan working group. I don't know whether that was tactical or serious or what.

Mitchell: It was serious.

Young: It was?

Mitchell: Yes. First, in historical context, Ted Kennedy had led the effort for healthcare reforms for many years, over a long period of time, before I got to the Senate, and he was well-known in that area, well versed in the subject. His committee served as a focal point for such legislation. It shared jurisdiction, in some respects, with the Finance Committee. After President Clinton took office, there was some discussion, debate, even disagreement, over what subjects should come first and second.

Young: Sure.

Mitchell: Senator Moynihan and some others wanted welfare reform to come first and then healthcare second. Senator Kennedy and others wanted healthcare reform to go first, and the President ultimately chose that course, to try to proceed with healthcare, after we passed his economic program. The economic program consumed the first eight months of the administration.

Young: And that was done strictly on a party line vote.

Mitchell: That was a strict party line vote. Every single Republican in the House and Senate voted against it, and a few Democrats voted against it. In the Senate, it was a 51 to 50 vote, a tie broken by the Vice President, and it was a very tough effort. Ted played a significant role in helping and supporting and making the case publicly for that, along with several of the Democratic Senators. So the healthcare thing didn't get started until the end of 1993, basically a year after the President took office.

Young: Yes, right.

Mitchell: A year after the President took office.

Young: That's right. Can I dial back just a little bit, and ask you to talk about the state of affairs, the political state of play before Clinton came into office. The bipartisan effort had fallen apart, it seems that had already happened.

Mitchell: Yes.

Young: So that seemed not to be the wave of the future, to get anything done. I'm reading this into it.

Mitchell: Yes. What happened was what we discussed a moment ago, the Clean Air Bill. That was in the first two years of President Bush's administration, where we had a reasonably good period of cooperation. The last two years were not so for a variety of reasons, and I won't try to get into all of that history now; there are arguments on both sides, but we didn't have the degree of bipartisan cooperation in the third and fourth years of the Bush Administration that we had in the first two.

Young: Right.

Mitchell: And so there wasn't a great deal of progress. That's when the recession occurred, we had disagreements over extending unemployment insurance and things of that type. So when President Clinton took office, the decision was made to go forward with the economic program and then with healthcare. We got to healthcare at the very end of 1993. The President had named his wife as the person heading up the effort. She worked very closely with Senator Kennedy, as chairman of the committee with primary, although not exclusive, jurisdiction over healthcare.

In, I think it would have been late November of 1993, I introduced the administration's bill in the Senate. Dick Gephardt, who was the House Majority Leader, introduced it in the House. In December of that year, and I think it was just prior to Christmas, Senator Chafee introduced a Republican bill, which had, if my memory serves me, 22 Republican Senators as cosponsors, including Senator [Robert] Dole, who was the then Republican Leader, who was a member of the Finance Committee, and had been chairman of the Finance Committee.

So over that winter, there was a good deal of discussion, much of it bipartisan. The Finance Committee met separately, Ted's committee met. I had a lot of discussions with Senator Chafee, and I'm certain that Senator Kennedy had meetings with him as well, that I was not involved in or aware of. So in the period between the introduction of the legislation in late 1993 and the summer of 1994, August of 1994, when the effort failed, there was a good deal of discussion, much of it bipartisan in the early months, and then gradually that dissipated. And what happened was, the bill that Chafee introduced was a reasonable bill, and he and I, and I believe Ted shared this view, as did a number of other Senators, felt that we could fashion a compromise out of this effort.

But over the course of the spring and summer, there was a massive effort made by the insurance industry—you remember the famous Harry and Louise ads—and public opinion swung, I would say, to the right. So the whole focus shifted to the right and the Republicans moved to the right. The more we kept chasing after them, the more they kept running away from us, is a colloquial way to put it, and we couldn't reach common ground. So by the time the Finance Committee reached its markup, which would have been some time in July of 1994, all of the Republicans had abandoned their own bill, the bill that Senator Chafee had introduced in the previous December, and we simply couldn't ever close the gap with them. After a month of effort on our

part and opposition on their part, on the Senate floor, the effort finally ended in failure. I think it was late August of '94.

Young: Late August. Was there a time—did you and Gephardt have conversations with Clinton after he won the election but before inauguration, about healthcare?

Mitchell: Yes.

Young: I don't recall the source, but somebody who has written on this subject wrote that you and Gephardt gave Clinton the view that the Democrats alone, without a bipartisan thing, could probably accomplish healthcare reform.

Mitchell: No, that's not true.

Young: That's not true.

Mitchell: That is not true, no. What happened was after the election but before the inauguration, President-elect Clinton invited Tom Foley, the Speaker of the House, Dick Gephardt, the House Majority Leader, and myself, as Senate Majority Leader, to Little Rock, to have dinner with him and Mrs. [Hilary] Clinton. We spent a long evening, prior to, during, and after dinner, discussing a whole range of issues, one of which was healthcare. We discussed healthcare, economic program, welfare reform, all of the rest. I don't think the President made any final decisions at that meeting. This was a background to inform him of what was coming up, we gave him our individual thoughts, but at no time did either Foley or Gephardt or I tell the President we could do this without Republicans. My whole effort was to the contrary.

Young: Well, that's very important to clear that up, because that is in some writings.

Mitchell: I spent a lot of time with Chafee a year later. The meeting in Little Rock that I have described occurred in, I think it was in December of 1992. The bills were introduced 12 months later and from November, when we put our bill in, until the following August of '94, we had many, many bipartisan discussions, and there were many, many bipartisan efforts. The problem simply was that the subject was complex. We didn't do as good a job as possible in trying not to simplify, but reduce it to understandable and explainable context. What happened was that Mrs. Clinton, with the help of a large staff, produced a bill of 1,300 pages and sent the bill up. We introduced a bill that had already been drafted.

When it came time for [Barack] Obama to do it, he did the opposite. He of course had been warned by many people, don't do what Clinton did, send up a bill. So he let the House and Senate write the bill, for which he was later criticized. It's one of those things where you're darned if you do and you're darned if you don't. But it clearly was a mistake initially to put everything into a 1,300 page bill and send that up. I tried hard to reduce it in the succeeding months, because of the tremendous opposition that developed to it, in part because of its complexity, but we never got it to the point where we got a great deal of traction, and we didn't even have all of the Democrats committed to voting for it.

Young: Well, that's another—Senator [Paul] Wellstone would, at crucial moments come in. He was single payer.

Mitchell: Yes.

Young: And there seems to have been a hard bloc of the sentiment for that, that wasn't really to compromise within the Democratic Party. I'm just saying that.

Mitchell: Well, we had Democrats of all points of view.

Young: You had hard right too, in the Democratic Party.

Mitchell: That's right. And we had many, many discussions among the Democratic Senators, both in caucuses and in separate meetings and retreats. We even had a retreat set up exclusively for that purpose. Ted was a passionate and strong advocate of reform. He wanted to get it done, he spoke very movingly of it, in private as he did in public, and he was recognized as the leader on the subject. There were some heated discussions in some of the caucus meetings that I can recall very clearly. But we never did get enough people to pass the bill, because there weren't enough Democrats to offset the unified Republican opposition.

Young: And the Republican opposition became unified.

Mitchell: It did.

Young: Before or after Harry and Louise, or during.

Mitchell: Yes, after that period it moved rightward, as I said. The whole spectrum moved rightward and we kept chasing after them, and the more we'd do what they wanted, the more other things they would want, and so the gap got wider, if anything.

Young: So would it be reasonable to conclude the Republicans decided they did not want any healthcare bill?

Mitchell: They never said that and I don't think they ever believed that. I think that they liked some of the ideas. Some of them clearly didn't want any reform, but there were others. I think John Chafee was a sincere person. I think Nancy Kassebaum then, now Nancy Kassebaum Baker, favored some incremental steps. And so for a long time after that effort in 1994, the view developed that this is just too big, it comprises too large a part of the national economy, it's too complex to enact it in a single bill, so we've got to do it incrementally.

Ted thereafter—this is after I left the Senate—led the effort with Nancy Kassebaum and others, to get incremental changes made in legislation, many of which were very valuable, but they didn't address the underlying problems that only comprehensive reform could do and that finally was done, although again, in a compromised fashion, once Obama took up the effort.

Young: Right. Senator Kennedy could summon a great deal of passion on this issue. The last interview I was going to have with him was to have occurred two days after his cancer diagnosis, and it was going to be up on the Cape. It never happened and it was going to be the past and future of healthcare reform. He wanted to talk about that. And then I didn't have any more interviews with him after that. But on this issue, going back to the Clinton years, was he a thorn in the flesh when it came to incrementalism, before that was the only thing?

Mitchell: I don't think you could describe it—

Young: I'm trying to look at his determination, going way back to 1965, to get healthcare for all, and he yielded, it seems to me, in the course of these, an awful lot, and earned a lot of opposition on that issue from some labor groups and others. I'm wondering, was there a point at which he dug in his heels and said, "No more, we've given enough, vote it up or down"?

Mitchell: Well, we all wanted to vote it up or down. The problem was that the Republicans prevented that from occurring. The Republicans went to the extraordinary level of filibustering the motion to bring up the bill. We didn't have a debate on the bill. We had a debate on the motion to bring up the bill. We needed 60 votes, which we couldn't get, to bring the bill up, so the debate, incredibly enough, from a parliamentary standpoint, wasn't even on the bill itself, it was just whether or not to bring it up.

Ted was a very strong, passionate advocate for moving forward. He wanted the broadest bill possible, but he always had a good sense of legislative compromise and legislative obstacles, and some of the debates that I mentioned earlier, that we had internally among Democrats, which were heated, were about getting Democrats to support this bill, support this effort going forward and not hang back because of one issue or this issue or that issue.

What happens is the subject matter is so comprehensive, the interests in our society are so large, that there are scores, hundreds of single specific issues. Do you get complete parity in mental health issues as you do in non-mental health issues? There were a few advocates for mental health, who were very deeply committed, profoundly sincere, who wanted the problem solved of parity, a hundred percent, and so they wouldn't support the bill because it only gave them 80 percent of what they wanted.

There were some who supported some of the major teaching hospitals and major urban centers in the country, and they wanted a hundred percent of what they got, and their advocates within the Democratic caucuses were reluctant to—some didn't support the bill because it didn't provide them with a hundred percent of what they wanted.

In other words, it was not possible, in the circumstances, to get interest groups and some Senators to subordinate particular interests in reform to the broader need to get it done. And so you combine those elements with unified, solid Republican opposition, and we couldn't get 60 votes to stop the debate, and we never had the occasion to have a vote to demonstrate whether we would even have 50, which I think was doubtful. We probably could not have gotten 50 on any of the bills that were pending at the time. That was a source of great controversy, great anxiety, great regret on my part, and I'm certain also on Ted's part, and perhaps more so in his case, because when all this occurred, I had been in the Senate for ten years. He had been there for 30 years, and he had worked on this for his entire life and seeing this effort fail was just a truly profound disappointment for all of us.

Young: Did you feel or did he feel that the prospects were more or less favorable when Clinton got elected, for it, so there was some optimism that it could be done? And then a series of circumstances occurred where it just fell apart.

Mitchell: I would phrase it slightly differently, the same thought. The way I would phrase it is, in our democracy, on truly major issues, there is a sequence that has to occur before you can get major legislation enacted. This is a very big country, this is a very diverse country, there are a lot of different points of view: ideological, regional, a whole range of other bases of differences. The first phase is that a majority of the people recognize that a problem exists and something must be done about it. The second phase is an agreement on what it is that should be done about it. Now, hard as it is to achieve, the first phase is, relatively speaking, the easier phase, and the second phase is the tougher one, getting agreement on what should be done.

I think what happened is that by 1992, the first phase had been reached. There was a public recognition that there's something wrong with this system and it has to change and be approved. The effort we made was to try, based upon that public recognition, to forge a comprehensive agreement on what it is that should be done, and that's where we did not succeed.

I think the same circumstance existed at the time that Obama took office, and the difference is that they succeeded in the second phase, albeit with a lot of compromises and a lot of difficulty and opposition that continues to this day. It's inevitable, given a subject as difficult as that. So I wouldn't quite phrase it the way you did, that there was optimism that we could get it done. I think it was a sense of duty, that this is a very serious problem in our country. I held hearings all over the United States and "shocking" is the only way I can describe what I heard in various places, about the disparities in healthcare, the inability of people to get adequate healthcare, and the whole range of issues with which we're all—I think most Americans are now familiar. But we floundered over the issue of getting it done. So we felt—and I'll speak for myself, but I believe Ted felt this way for a long time—this is very important for Americans, particularly for Americans who don't have access to care, and there are many of them who are uninsured. We have a chance now and we have a duty to try to seize that chance, seize that opportunity and get it done.

Young: That's what he called leadership.

Mitchell: Exactly.

Young: To see the problem and get something done.

Mitchell: That's right.

Young: Not necessarily my thing, but something.

Mitchell: That's right. And Ted, I think, was the recognized leader on that issue and that subject, because of his long experience with the subject, his passion and knowledge of it.

Young: Orrin Hatch was quoted as saying, at one of the very problematic points in the protracted process of healthcare reform under Obama, he said about a battle or something or other, "Well, this wouldn't have happened if Ted Kennedy were here," which kind of brings up the question that you are a leader and a negotiator, you know how to get sides together obviously. And I think Ted was pretty good at that too. How much difference does the presence of such people, individuals, who have the position to move the wheels a little bit, how much importance do you think is that, or is it all just the forces that be determining the outcome?

Mitchell: I think both are necessary. You need public attitudes to be supportive, but you need people who can translate general, sometimes contradictory public attitudes into specific legislation to solve particular problems. And that, I think, is where the greatness of Ted Kennedy existed. He had a very good sense of how to get legislation passed. It wasn't so much this particular sentence in the bill or this technical language. It was in knowing his colleagues, understanding their views, what it was that moved them to take and hold positions. It was, as I said earlier, his personality, his sense of humor, that he knew how to get people together. Of course he didn't always succeed, but I think that was critical in bringing legislation together.

Now, I also must tell you, what Senator Hatch said probably had a little bit of hyperbole in it, because I think as great as Ted was, the notion that there wouldn't have been partisanship in healthcare if he were around is contradicted by history, by what happened every time it came up before. I think it was nice of Orrin to say that, because he and Ted were good friends, and it's possible that more might have been done had he been here. I don't think it's possible that there would not have been partisanship and hard feelings. It would have been difficult, but for sure it would have been helpful to have him.

Young: One can't help but think, at least I can't, about the negotiations that you were involved in, in healthcare reform, and the later effort that did produce a major piece of legislation, however compromised it was, and the protracted negotiations. What are the circumstances from your point of view, and what are the qualities of the situation that make it possible to do what would ordinarily seem like the impossible? That was what was behind my question, because it's interesting historically, there are people who say it's the person who makes all the difference. There are others who say it's the forces at play that make all the difference. I think you've spoken about where most reasonable people would come down.

Mitchell: Harry Truman was once asked—I don't remember where I read this—about what was described as a principle of communism, that has support by Karl Marx, that there were large, impersonal, historical forces that dictated the direction societies took and the consequences of those decisions. Truman said, in a very pungent manner, "Men make history, not the other way around." In modern times he would say men and women make history, but that was his point. My own view is as you say, what reasonable people would conclude, that it's really both factors. All of these circumstances are so rooted in the particular facts that exist at the time that it's hard to draw universal principles from them.

Young: Right.

Mitchell: I found, frankly, that my work in the Senate, although unwittingly, was very good preparation for the work I did in Northern Ireland and in the Middle East and in other conflict situations, primarily because I remember listening to a lecture by a historian, about the Senate. He said that the founders wanted to prevent bad things from happening, and they figured out that the best way to prevent bad things from happening was to prevent anything from happening, so they erected this complex system of checks and balances, in which it was much easier to block something than it was to get something done. The Senate is the quintessential illustration of that, where it's in relative terms much easier to say no to something than it is to enact something. That has had an effect on American history, and particularly on modern history, since as we see in the debate now, it's the Democrats who generally want to get things done through the legislative

process and the Republicans who want to prevent things from happening through the legislative process.

And so for someone like Ted, who is the subject of our discussion, this could be and was often very frustrating. But he became a master of the ability to move things through the process as it existed, not as we might wish it to exist and not as it might be described in some textbook, but by real, live, breathing human beings, each one different, each one with strengths and weaknesses, understanding how to deal with people, how to get along with them, how to create a sense of trust and confidence in him and his knowledge of the subject and his ability. And I think the view I've just expressed, I have no idea who you've talked to in this, but I think it was pretty widespread on all sides. Ted was good at that, very good at it, one of the best, at figuring it out, how to work it out, how to satisfy someone without compromising in a way that crippled the whole effort—in legislative terms, you didn't give away the store to get something, you gave away something that was in the store. And so that I think will be his legacy, as one of the great American legislators in all of history, in sharp contrast to both of his brothers.

Young: His brothers were not into the legislative, the getting things done, the legislating.

Mitchell: That's right. And believe me, it's hard to get major legislation enacted. It takes time, effort, patience, perseverance and it's one of the reasons why legislators like Ted Kennedy are so few and far between in our history.

Young: My impression was that when I ask what kind of a President would he have made, and I'm not going to address that issue, but he obviously thought he could be a good one. But his introduction into politics, how did you become a politician, when I was talking with him, what did you like about it and so forth. It really went back—he's reflecting now after many years. It really went back to his walks around Boston with his grandfather, Honey Fitz [John Fitzgerald], who was introducing him to people and teaching him the history of the Boston Irish and the neighborhoods and how things changed.

He knew everybody, Honey Fitz did, and Ted just came to like that. His family was a society unto itself, and this was getting outside the society. He said at one point, when he was very young in politics, he wanted to be in elective office, he's decided he's going to be in elective office. And how do you get elected? How do you get the people interested and what do you stand for, all of these things. And he said, "You know, it's the person not the message." It's first the person and then the message. He loved the politics in the street, he did, and the issues were rough for him. He had to get briefed on them. And in the Senate, somehow that street politics, in the very rarified atmosphere of the Senate, it's a very special kind of institutional politics, and then getting steeped in the substance of the issues as well, doing his homework. Those things came together I think, and he was always one of the best prepared people when he took up an issue.

Mitchell: That's right.

Young: And he went to great lengths to get himself educated.

Mitchell: He did. He always had a very good staff, excellent staff, very well informed on the issues, and he himself was very well prepared on a subject in which he was really interested and took a leadership role.

Young: Well, you were too, that's part of what he requires.

Mitchell: It isn't easy and it wasn't easy, but Ted helped to make my job as Senate Majority Leader a lot easier. He was a very good, strong force for getting things done, doing it the right way. He had, as I said, very good contacts on the Republican side. He was well liked on all sides.

Young: Well, I think you and he shared a common talent.

Mitchell: We did.

Young: And a common understanding of this.

Mitchell: Yes.

Young: I think that doesn't always happen between majority leaders and members of their party.

Mitchell: That's true. Although I have to say, Ted got along extremely well with Senator [Robert] Byrd as well. Senator Byrd was very fond of him.

Young: That took a lot of time.

Mitchell: I was about to say, there was a long history there.

Young: Yes, there was.

Mitchell: I was only in the Senate for 15 years, which was a blink of an eye compared to the careers of Senators Kennedy and Byrd, and so they did have a long history. But I do know that the outcome of it was, at the end, that Senator Byrd was extremely fond of Senator Kennedy and spoke very highly of him, and likewise.

Young: Ireland. Do you have a few minutes?

Mitchell: Go ahead, yes.

Young: Sort of putting the cart before the horse, but referring back to your observation that in the rhythm of human events, there is a time when people feel the need to have something done, what is now—we're referring to healthcare. People saying something is wrong, something has got to be done. And then you look at the bloody and long history of conflict in Ireland. Did you have a sense, when you got first involved in this, that that was happening, or not? When you started out into this. It doesn't look from the outside as if that were the case when you started out, so it's kind of interesting. And then after the Good Friday Agreement gets put to a vote, with 71 percent and 94 percent.

Mitchell: That's right. It was amazing. Well, let me go back a little bit. My father's parents were born in Ireland. They emigrated to the United States some time before the turn of the twentieth century. My father was born in Boston, his family name was Kilroy, but he never knew his parents, because he and all his siblings were raised in orphanages. So my father was raised in an orphanage that existed at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Huntington Avenue, where the

Boston Symphony now stands. He was ultimately, after several years, adopted by an elderly couple from Maine who were not Irish. I never heard my father say the word Ireland in his life. He had no education, he left school after fourth grade. My mother was an illiterate immigrant who couldn't read or write, and they never traveled anywhere. So I had no sense of Irish heritage as an adult or when I entered the Senate. I knew about my father's background. I had never been to Ireland and my father had never been there and to the best of my knowledge, no member of my family had ever been there.

One of the areas in which I got to know Ted some was with respect to Irish issues. Ted and Chris Dodd and Pat Moynihan were very active and interested in them, and began increasingly to discuss them with me. They were not the only ones, there were others as well, but they were among those who I probably discussed this with more.

Young: This is while you were still in the Senate.

Mitchell: While I was in the Senate. After I became Majority Leader and after I began in Ireland, completely unrelated to me, to try to get a process going, there was a dispute over a visa for Gerry Adams. I recall Ted and Pat Moynihan and Chris Dodd speaking to me about joining on a letter, to try to get the President to grant a visa, which was very controversial at the time. The U.S. Ambassador in London was adamantly opposed to it, some in the State Department were. It was granted and it helped move the process forward, and so I gradually began to become acquainted with it on a Congressional visit. I think we visited Russia at the time and stopped on the way back. I got off the plane and spent two days in Ireland, the only time I had ever spent there before now, just to become acquainted with it, and I began to develop an interest in it.

By the time I got to Northern Ireland, as the advisor to the President and the Secretary of State, after I left the Senate, in 1995, a nascent effort was underway. A ceasefire had been declared a few months earlier, a common nationalist position was developing, and so it was like a little seedling was developing, but it needed a lot more effort, and that's what led into the effort that I had. During the time I was there—although during the negotiations, I was not an employee of the U.S. government, I was an independent person—I stayed in close contact with President Clinton and with Senator Kennedy, Senator Moynihan, and Senator Dodd, and a few House members who were very active and interested in the subject. In fact, when I first went, my participation was bitterly opposed by some on the unionist side.

Young: He's from the Kennedy stable.

Mitchell: Exactly.

Young: That's what they said.

Mitchell: I had, in their minds three strikes against me. I was an American, I was Catholic, and I was a Democrat and a friend of Ted Kennedy's. Those were seen as nationalist credentials. But over time, it worked out pretty well. Ted was very active, very well informed and very much involved in Northern Ireland issues all the time that I was there. Of course for a period of time, his sister Jean [Kennedy Smith] was the Ambassador in Ireland, and he visited. She was very active. And so I used to see him, not often, but a fair number of times, to brief him and other interested members of Congress on what was going on, and get their views and so forth.

Young: During the negotiations that ended with the Good Friday 1998, what was the network besides President Clinton, who were working on this with you?

Mitchell: In the U.S.?

Young: In the U.S.

Mitchell: It was fairly limited. When I first went, I went as the President's representative, but when the British and Irish governments asked me to chair the negotiations, they were very explicit in requiring that I not have any direct relationship with the U.S. government, to the extreme that I had three members—I had a very small staff. Three members of my staff, two who had worked with me in the Senate, one who had been a State Department employee. The British and Irish governments insisted on assuming responsibility for paying their salaries. They offered to pay me, I declined. I really did want to be independent, but they paid all my expenses. The U.S. government stopped paying my expenses and the British and Irish did.

So they wanted to be able to say, fully accurately, that I was completely independent and I was not a U.S. government representative there. At the same time, one of the reasons they wanted me to do it is they knew of my prior relationship with the U.S. government, and the fact that I had been Senate Majority Leader, had been involved with President Clinton and all the others. So what I did was I maintained a regular briefing schedule.

For example, many Congressional delegations go to Ireland, and I would meet with them there and brief them. I would come to Washington regularly and would meet and brief them, and invariably, Ted Kennedy and Chris Dodd and Pat Moynihan would be part of the group that I met with. There were many others, particularly in the House, who were interested as well. Now, in terms of support, they were always fully supportive of the effort.

Young: Yes.

Mitchell: In fact, it was a common refrain, "What can we do to help?" That's what I'd be asked all the time, "What can we do to help?" Sometimes it would call for action, statements, calls. Many times I asked Ted or President Clinton or some other prominent American to call someone in Northern Ireland, to make a point, make an argument and so forth. I think in general, the American effort was, "We want peace, you're there, you work it out and we'll support what you're doing," and that's basically what happened.

Young: Ted started out, in his first public statement, quite a way back, and it really got the British government going. It was "Brits out," sort of.

Mitchell: Yes. But over time, attitudes changed.

Young: But he came around. Did you know John Hume?

Mitchell: Oh, very well. Yes, extremely well, spent a lot of time with John Hume, a truly great man. A truly great man who contributed a lot, and John of course idolized Ted and all of the Kennedys, and they in turn felt the same about him. So there's no doubt that American attitudes evolved. There's no doubt that attitudes evolved on the island of Ireland and to some extent in

the United Kingdom, but that was because there began to be a recognition that the course that they were on held no promise for the future.

The notion that the nationalists in Northern Ireland could forcibly expel the British from Northern Ireland was a fantasy; it could never be realized. The notion, on the other hand, that citizens of the UK unreservedly supported the policies of the local governance of Northern Ireland, which was for a prior period in history discriminatory, could be sustained, was also a fantasy. Both sides recognized that as difficult as the alternative of getting to peace was, it was better than what was going on.

In fact, during the negotiations in the last stages, when we came down to the end, the most effective argument I used, I felt, was saying to the participants on both sides that "If this fails, there will a return to conflict. The one certainty about the return to conflicts is each resumption is more violent and destructive than the preceding one, if for no reason other than weaponry improves and it has enhanced the ability of humans to kill humans increasingly over time, and that's what you will be remembered for in history."

Young: Sure.

Mitchell: It was a powerful disincentive to fail. It was an incentive not to fail, and so it couldn't have occurred ten or twenty years earlier, because attitudes were just different then. They had to go through the experience that they had gone through to get to where they were, and I think Ted really was the same way, along with almost all Americans who were actively involved in the process. Well, thank you very much.

Young: Thank you.

Mitchell: It was a pleasure.