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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Frederic C. “Fred” Hof
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

GMOH# 074
March 24, 2009

Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview with Frederic C. Hof for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College in Maine. We’re in the offices of AALC, Ltd., a company in Arlington, Virginia, where he is president and CEO. Today is Tuesday, March 24, 2009, and I am Brien Williams. So, give me your full name and spelling, please.

Frederic Hof: Full name is Frederic, the Frederic without a K, F-R-E-D-E-R-I-C, middle name Charles, family name Hof, three letters, H-O-F.

BW: And where were you born and when were you born?

FH: Born in Brooklyn, New York on Bastille Day, July 14, 1947.

BW: And your parents’ names?

FH: Frederick and Alice Hof.

BW: Great. Let’s start with a little bit of your background, where you grew up and your education.

FH: Sure. I was originally a Brooklynite, but before going to public school my family left what had been our family’s neighborhood of Bushwick for several generations, moved out onto Long Island, raised in Port Washington, New York, went to public school for the full thirteen years in Port Washington, K through 12, and from there went on to the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service.

BW: So you didn’t do an undergraduate degree, as such.

FH: I did my, my undergraduate was at Georgetown, the School of Foreign Service, Bachelor of Science in Foreign Service I think is the official name of the degree, as I recall.

BW: I see, I see. Hmm-hmm. And where did you get the inspiration to become involved in foreign service?

FH: When I was a junior in high school I – on a whim – I applied to participate in American Field Service exchange program for the summer of 1964. And what that involved was signing

up as a candidate exchange student, going through a series of interviews by my high school teachers and peers, interviews mainly aimed at determining whether or not I had the personality requisite for surviving an overseas experience. When that process was finished, my name was sent to AFS headquarters in New York, I was selected as an exchange student, and I was told I'd be living with a family in Damascus, Syria, a place I had absolutely no knowledge about – my first stop was to find a map and locate it. So I went off to Damascus for the summer of 1964, lived with a family there, and that sort of planted the idea of going to a university that offered a strong program in international affairs.

BW: And at that time Syria was, Syria in '64 was a pretty quiet place?

FH: No, it was a rather unstable place. In the summer of 1964 it was relatively quiet. The exchange students who were in Damascus the year before had experienced a coup d'état, and had to stay indoors for a few days until that worked itself out. In '64 there were constant rumors of coups, this was the routine discussion at the breakfast table, and I must say, for an American from Long Island, this was a bit of a culture shock.

BW: And what was the standing of Americans at that time in Damascus?

FH: The standing of Americans as individuals was then, as it is today, extraordinary excellent. Americans and Syrians have no problem at all getting together on a people-to-people basis. It's the governments at the policy level that are sharply at odds. And this was the case I think in 1964 as well, although not as pronounced as it is today.

BW: So you graduate from Georgetown, and your next steps?

FH: Well, I was an ROTC cadet at Georgetown, so I was commissioned as second lieutenant in the United States Army the day before graduation, and almost immediately thereafter went into officer basic training, and then spent the, basically the full calendar year of 1970 in Vietnam.

BW: Briefly, some of your experiences there?

FH: Well, I was a civil affairs-civic action officer, working with U.S. forces and Vietnamese local officials on a series of projects in Northern I Corps. I was stationed in the Hue-Phu Bai area, supporting what was then called the 101st Air Mobile Division, now the 101st Airborne, which is what its original designation was in World War II.

BW: So I think somewhere I saw that you were awarded the Purple Heart, so this mustn't have been a desk job entirely.

FH: Well, oddly enough, the Purple Heart was not from service in Vietnam, it was for service a dozen years later in Lebanon –

BW: Oh.

FH: - where I was wounded. After Vietnam, though, I came back to the States, I taught in the Civil Affairs School for a while, and was eventually given the opportunity to apply for what they call the Foreign Area Officer Program in the Army, and this is essentially a program where you spend the bulk of your career focusing on a particular part of the world. And this was basically my return to the Middle East, I was given the opportunity to study Arabic, get a master's degree, and essentially spend the last two-thirds of my career focusing on the Middle East.

BW: Had you considered other regions of the world to, since you'd been exposed to Southeast Asia?

FH: I did, I was fascinated by Asia, and there's a family connection; my grandmother's cousin was the overall U.S. commander of the China-Burma-India theater in WWII, Joseph Stillwell, so there was a strong temptation to go in the direction of China, Japan, one of the Asian specialties. But at the time I was applying for this in the, oh, 1975 time frame I guess, there was a very, very strong demand in the Army for Middle East specialists and I thought, "Why not, given my previous experience in Syria, this might make some sense," so I went along with it.

BW: So you went to the language school in Monterey.

FH: I did, Defense Language Institute in Monterey, followed by a year-and-a-half at the Foreign Service Institute in Tunis, which is a Department of State facility where military officers are also invited to study Arabic.

BW: And that raises a question that maybe is more complicated than we should be doing now, but just, what's the relationship between the military and the State Department in a situation like that? What kind of collaborations and so forth are there?

FH: Well, it's a, overall I would say it's a very collaborative situation. At the time I was studying there, and this may well still be the case, the Department of Defense is permitted to assign approximately a half dozen officers for every training cycle at the Foreign Service Institute, and while the military officers are there, they're assigned administratively to the Office of the Defense Attaché, in the embassy. But in every other respect, they're going through the same language training process as their State Department colleagues, in the same classes. And it's actually a very good opportunity to make lifelong friends and acquaintances of people from different agencies of the United States government, and that in fact has been the case.

BW: So it promotes and encourages a very collegial relationship.

FH: It really does, and it pays professional dividends, because it's almost inevitable that ten, fifteen, twenty years down the road, you'll be in a situation where you will literally bump into a classmate, and when that happens you generally find that overcoming obstacles, solving problems is a lot easier than it might have been otherwise.

BW: So your next step?

FH: After language school I went off to Beirut where I served as United States Army attaché for the better part of a year, it was a short tour; they cycled people in and out of there pretty quickly. I came out of Lebanon just prior to the big Israeli invasion of June 1982, came back to the States, taught the Defense attaché course for a couple of years, went to staff college in Norfolk, and then basically came back to Washington and, in 1985, to the office of the secretary of defense, and that's where I served out the balance of my twenty years in the Army.

BW: So you were not in Beirut when the bombing of the barracks occurs.

FH: No. The bombing of the barracks was in October 1983, and a couple weeks after that bombing I was recruited to serve on the staff of Admiral Long, who was given the job by Secretary Weinberger of investigating the circumstances of the bombing and making recommendations to the secretary of defense. I was recruited after the commission had already been in session for about three weeks, when it occurred to Admiral Long and some members of their staff that they really didn't have on the staff somebody with direct, hands-on experience in Lebanon, so that's why I was brought onto that staff.

BW: So how did you get the Purple Heart?

FH: Ah, well, in, it was, this was in April of '82, I was on my way from East Beirut, where the embassy was, to West – sorry, from West Beirut, where the embassy was located, to East Beirut for a meeting with a Lebanese army contact when, in the process of crossing the Green Line, which was basically the line dividing the two opposing halves of the city, I encountered some rifle fire and was hit, fortunately not very seriously. I was able to maneuver my automobile out of danger, was taken to a hospital, operated on very quickly and recovered very, very quickly.

BW: So then from Defense, where did your next step go?

FH: Well, from Defense I went over to the Department of State for about three-and-a-half years, and there was a member of a team headed by the eventual-deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage. We were involved in three distinct trouble-shooting assignments for Secretary of State Baker at the time: the first had to do with mediating, or attempting to mediate a water dispute centering on a dam, this was a dispute between Israel and Jordan; the second project was negotiating a military bases agreement with the Republic of Philippines; and the third project was setting up technical and humanitarian assistance projects for the former states of the Soviet Union. Three entirely different sorts of activities.

We did this from approximately October 1989 until May 1993. We went, we went basically four or five months into the Clinton administration, and were finally replaced at that point, came out, and Mr. Armitage and myself and two other people established a consulting firm after leaving State.

BW: The background to your association with Richard Armitage, had that developed at DOD, or where?

FH: It did, it started in DOD. My initial assignment there was as a member of his organization, he was the assistant secretary for international security affairs, and I was in the Near East-South Asia directorate of that organization, and initially I was the director for Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestinian affairs. After doing that for a year, he invited me to work with him as his military assistant, so that's what I wound up doing there, and that's how I got to know him quite well.

BW: Characterize that relationship.

FH: Well, it's a relationship that started out very, in a very formal manner. I had never before served as a military assistant or an aide or any of that sort of thing. In fact, it's the kind of function I had never really developed much respect for in my military career. In this case, though, it turned out to be an extraordinarily interesting experience. The International Security Affairs office has been called "the Defense Department's State Department," and that's really what it was. Working for Rich Armitage was a fascinating experience; he was a very strong player in the U.S. interagency, I learned a lot. And over time the relationship gradually evolved into one of friendship and trust, so overall it was very positive, and it really led to my post-government career, in a sense.

BW: I didn't realize that he had stayed on at State –

FH: Hmm-hmm.

BW: - after the change of, the presidential change. Was there anything memorable about that shift?

FH: I guess the most memorable thing, the initial intention of the incoming Bush administration was to offer Rich Armitage the post of secretary of the army, an unusual assignment for an Annapolis graduate. Over time, and after a great deal of thought, he decided not to accept that assignment and simply, simply left the Pentagon. But it was only a matter of months before Secretary Baker was in touch with him and said, in essence, "Look, we need someone to lead this mediation between the Israelis and Jordanians, would you be willing to do it?" And he said, "Yes."

And at the same time, I was considering, strongly considering retiring from the army. So he called me and said, "Well, if you're going to retire, how about coming over and working with me at State?" And I agreed to do that. And as it happened, we were there for three-and-a-half years.

BW: And what about the shift from George Bush to Bill Clinton, did that have ramifications for you in your operation?

FH: It had, well, it had ramifications specifically for Rich Armitage, who is after all a Republican, who got his start in politics as an administrative assistant to Senator Robert Dole, and it was clear that as a Republican he was not going to be offered any kind of a position in the Clinton administration. Nevertheless, he agreed to continue serving into the first several months of that administration, because of the, because of the difficulties the incoming administration was having in getting people cleared to move into various positions where, I mean, we're seeing the same thing again now with the Obama administration.

BW: So were you with him and creating this new firm from the time you left that administration to the time we pick up the story with the Mitchell negotiations?

FH: Yes, yes, absolutely. If I recall the timing correctly, we left the Department of State on the 7th of May, 1993, and on the 10th of May we opened up Armitage Associates, L.C., and we really didn't have a very specific idea of what we were going to do. It's just that we felt that we had the sort of customer service ethic that would enable us to carve out some kind of a niche where we could advise American companies in their overseas operations, primarily in Asia, which was Rich Armitage's first love and the area he knows the most about, and the Middle East, where I'd spent much of my career.

BW: So business picked up and-?

FH: Yeah, no, business was fine, we decided right from the beginning we would not be lobbyists; we would avoid that sort of activity like the plague. Mainly because Rich Armitage anticipated that some day the Republican Party might come back to power and he might be asked to serve a senior position. He didn't want the inevitable complications that could flow from having been lobbyists, a lobbyist, so we avoided that activity.

But we built a respectable business, and as to the, when it came to the time of the 2000 presidential election, it became pretty clear that Rich would be considered for a senior position, along with his closest personal friend, General Colin Powell, and it was, at the time, that election was finally being decided by the Supreme Court in December of 2000 that all of this sort of came together; Rich going back into government and me going in the direction of supporting Senator Mitchell with the fact-finding committee.

BW: Just to finish up with the Armitage trail here –

FH: Yeah.

BW: Remind me of what role he played in the Bush administration?

FH: In the second Bush administration.

BW: Right.

FH: He became deputy secretary of state under Colin Powell.

BW: So what were the circumstances of your appointment to the Mitchell Group?

FH: The Mitchell Group – and there's sort of a parallel here with the 1983 Long Commission – the Sharm el-Sheik Fact-Finding Committee headed by Senator George Mitchell was already in operation, had already been in operation for six weeks, two months or so, when I got a call shortly before Christmas in 2000. I was called by an old acquaintance, a retired State Department officer named Laurence Pope – Larry had been asked by Senator Mitchell to serve essentially as his chief of staff and to lead the field operations of the fact-finding committee in Jerusalem.

Larry called me and asked if I would be interested in serving on the fact-finding committee. He specifically mentioned that at the end of the process there would be a report that would have to be written, and that he would want me to take the lead in composing the report. My initial reaction was one of skepticism; I hadn't heard too much about the fact-finding committee. I think initially I was inclined to think it would be difficult to see much good coming of this effort. It just seemed to me that there was almost limitless potential of things being stirred up, of the situation perhaps being made worse by a group of independent fact finders roaming around the region.

Nevertheless, I discussed it with my business partners, with Rich Armitage and my other two partners, and eventually came to the conclusion that, yes, this might be a very interesting activity. I had not known George Mitchell previously, had never met him, had absolutely no knowledge of his modus operandi, so I essentially went into this as a matter of faith and strictly on the basis of my respect for Larry Pope. So in the end I agreed to do it and traveled off to the region and arrived in Jerusalem on the 1st of January, 2001.

BW: What arrangement did you make with the firm?

FH: My partners agreed that there would be limited leave of absence. And the way the committee staff was set up, the Department of State allocated funds to the Meridian International Institute, I think it's called, and Meridian actually served as a contracting agency for the various people brought onto the staff, at least for the Americans on the staff. So Meridian International basically made a contract with our firm whereby I would serve as a consultant to Meridian for the length of the project.

BW: And was there a drop-dead date for this, or did you not know when the report would finally be issued?

FH: We had a general sense, as I recall, that the committee's activities would be completed and a report would be issued within the first half of 2001. Beyond that, I don't, as time went on we refined the drop-dead date on it, so that in fact it ended in May, 2001.

BW: Larry Pope, Ambassador Pope, he left the project at some point, is that correct?

FH: Yes, yes he did. And as I recall, it would have been around the middle of January, perhaps the latter part of the month, he decided to drop out.

BW: Was – what was his motivation for that?

FH: I think what Larry experienced from the beginning was a degree of skepticism bordering on outright hostility by the Israeli side. I am not sure to this day exactly why that was. Perhaps it was Larry's background as a, quote, 'State Department Arabist,' unquote. I don't know what it was, but Larry was very uneasy with his relationships on the Israeli side.

I think it's important to remember that the Israelis agreed to this fact-finding committee with a great deal of reluctance. The idea for the committee had been suggested by PLO Chairman, Yasser Arafat, at the Sharm el-Sheikh Summit in 2000. The Israeli prime minister at the time, Ehud Barak, had resisted it strongly, but President Clinton, President Mubarak, King Abdullah, others at the summit thought, "Well, this is something we could probably give Mr. Arafat, and it might not be a bad idea to recruit somebody to try to find out: why did this happen? Why did the intifada explode? Why all the violence? What needs to be done to prevent this from happening in the future?"

As we went into this, Larry was faced with a great deal of resistance from the Israelis, and some of it for some reason seemed to be personal. And I think he eventually, he came to the conclusion, as a professional, that it would probably be better for the overall mission if he were to step aside.

BW: Would it be truthful to say that your being brought on had something to do with the fact that by the time you were asked to come on I guess, George W. Bush had been declared the president, and that you would be a, quote/unquote, 'Republican presence' on the team, is that -?

FH: Yeah, that was, now that you mentioned it, that was the, in addition to being potentially the principal drafter of the report, this was the other thing that Larry mentioned to me, was that the election having been decided a few days before, there would be a need for presumably somebody on the staff who could take charge of relations with the incoming administration. To some extent it made sense, given my close relationship with Armitage, given the fact that at the time he was being considered as potential deputy secretary of defense – he wound up going to State instead – so that part made sense. The other part that I found ironic was that I would be offered this role as a career Democrat, but I don't think, I think people were inclined to assume that because of my relationship with Armitage, I was in fact a Republican, which is not the case.

It didn't make much difference one way or the other because I've never stood for public office, and I've never sought any sort of appointment on the basis of party affiliation, but I just remember chuckling about it at the time, that my dad would be rolling in his grave if he thought I

was being recruited to something on the basis of being a liaison to the Republican Party.

BW: Interesting. Tell me a little bit about the other members of the American team that you ended up working with.

FH: It was a very fine team. There was only one person who actually had an official relationship to the United States government, and this was the fellow by the name of Brendan Melley, who was working with Senator Warren Rudman at the time – Senator Rudman had an Intelligence community affiliation for the federal government. Brendan was officially on the rolls, as I recall, as an employee of the Defense Intelligence Agency, but he had been detailed to support Senator Rudman and wound up being on the committee because Senator Rudman was one of the members of the committee.

There were a couple of people, Jim Pickup of, what is now called DLA Piper law firm, at the time a junior associate of the law firm but somebody who had been very close professionally to Senator Mitchell. Another key person who had worked with the Senator politically, I think he had worked in the Senator's office when Senator Mitchell had been majority leader, a fellow by the name of Kelly Currie, an attorney who was working I believe in the U.S. Attorney's Office in New York at the time. Those were the key American members.

BW: Give me a sense of the structure here, because it's a little confusing in my mind. You then had the Norwegian –

FH: Turk, yeah.

BW: A Turk, and the E.U. -

FH: Yeah, Javier Solana was part, from the E.U., and Warren Rudman, along with Senator Mitchell, those were the five committee members, the sort of body of elders guiding this thing, who in the end would come to Jerusalem, visit West Bank, Israel, Gaza, and would eventually guide the writing of the final report.

In the meantime, however, we had a staff operating in Jerusalem. When Ambassador Pope told me that he just thought it was best overall to step aside, he asked that I consider taking his job. And I said, "Well, first of all, I think you're making a mistake by leaving, I think you ought to give this forty-eight or seventy-two hours and think about it again." He said, "No," he said, "I've made the decision." And I said, "Fine, I mean I've never met Senator Mitchell, he doesn't know me, so I think you ought to run it by him first." And he said, "I already have." So I, under the circumstances, I agreed to take over as a sort of staff director at that point.

BW: And the decision had already been made that that staff would be doing the investigative work.

FH: Yes, yes, the staff would be located in Jerusalem, we would be receiving statements from

the parties, and other than that we would try to devise our own program of speaking to people and trying to get answers to the basic questions that the fact-finding committee had been assigned to get.

BW: So you were doing your work on site.

FH: Right.

BW: The elders were being consulted, I suppose, from time to time by telephone, or fax or whatever.

FH: Yes, yes. Our central line of communication was back to Senator Mitchell. Now, there were others on the committee, representatives of Norway, Turkey, European Union, who I presume reported independently back to their own masters. As far as we were concerned, the American members of the committee, our principal channel was back to Senator Mitchell, making sure he understood what we were doing, what was going on, alerting him to any political sensitivities or problems.

By the same token, consistent with why I was recruited in the first place, one of the reasons why I was recruited; I kept the incoming deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, informed of what we were doing. And we also had a more formal link into the working level at the State Department.

The Armitage channel I think proved to be of some value, in a practical sense, because several days after the inauguration of President Bush, Senator Mitchell went in to see the new secretary of state, Colin Powell. Basically, I was not present, but my understanding is he briefed Secretary Powell as to the mission and the activities of the fact-finding committee, and then said in essence, "Mr. Secretary, this committee was set up under the auspices of the former president, as a result of a decision taken at a Middle East summit. We're at your disposal if you, if you wish for us to cease operation and disband we'll certainly do that, it's basically up to you." And as I understand it, Secretary Powell's response was instant, he said, "No, I want you to continue, fulfill your mission, and in the end produce a report."

So I think to some degree, I mean it was, well, it was, I think it was very clear to Senator Mitchell that Secretary Powell was quite familiar with the fact-finding committee and what it was attempting to do.

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BW: The working group in Jerusalem, that included representatives of the Norwegians, the Turks and whatnot.

FH: It did, it did.

BW: And they were co-equals, I mean you were all hashing things together?

FH: Absolutely. You know, from my point of view as the staff director, or director of field operations – we never even settled on a formal title.

BW: You didn't have a business card?

FH: Didn't have a card, had no protocol status, nothing. From my point of view, complete transparency within the team was very, very, very important. This was, after all, an international team. The Americans, with the exception of Brendan Melley, had no official status at all in terms of their, of our government. The other members of the team representing the other members of the committee were all serving officials, so they had no choice but to report back through their official channels. But I, I made it clear from the beginning that I wanted this to be an entirely collegial effort, there would be no, from my point of view, no secrets, nothing withheld. And I think everybody who was associated with this will probably attest to the fact that that's the way it was run.

BW: Were there any bumpy passages during the three months that you were in Jerusalem doing the field work, amongst this group?

FH: Within the group, no. I mean there were inevitable squabbles, some, a personality conflict here and there, but I think we all realized that we faced an enormous challenge that required a great deal of cooperation and trust. Our biggest challenge, frankly, was on the Israeli side, because of the deep-seated skepticism of the Barak government. The prime minister had given the Ministry of Defense the mission of overseeing our activities. I had to spend a great deal of my time working with the Israeli Ministry of Defense, with the Israel defense forces, to try to build up a sense of credibility, a sense of trust, that we were adults, that we were going to be pursuing our mission in a very sober and effective way.

What I found out early in this mission, in coordinating with the Israeli Ministry of Defense, was that there was a, a lack of understanding as to what our mission actually was. I recall my first meeting with Israeli officials at the Ministry of Defense, when I was told point blank, they were concerned that one of our missions was to develop evidence of potential Israeli war crimes, evidence that would make it possible to indict Israeli soldiers and have them extradited for some sort of international trial. And my response to that was, "Well have you seen President Clinton's letters to Senator Mitchell, defining the mission?" And their response was, "No, we haven't even heard of such letters." And I said, "Well, here are copies, they're unclassified, there's nothing secret about any of this, you can satisfy yourself as to the scope of our inquiry here."

So that was a big challenge, and ironically, the character of that challenge did not change until the aftermath of the Israeli general election, which took place in February, 2001. Ariel Sharon was elected prime minister; he selected Shimon Peres as his foreign minister. Soon after the election, our ambassador in Israel, Martin Indyk, went in to see the prime minister designate and

asked him directly, about the fact-finding committee, what his, the prime minister's attitude toward this committee would be. And what Sharon told Indyk was, "Look, I'm really not crazy about this committee, I don't like the idea of foreigners coming in and asking questions about the activities of the Israeli military. Nevertheless, Israel is not a banana republic, my predecessor agreed, however reluctantly, to this fact-finding committee, I intend to cooperate with it fully."

And that's exactly what happened. In the fullness of time, the responsibility for coordinating with us was shifted from the Ministry of Defense to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and then all of a sudden, on the Israeli side, anything we asked for, anybody we wished to, with whom we wished to speak, the answer was automatically, "Yes." So with the, in the final closing phases of the fact-finding committee, that problem was finally overcome.

BW: Interesting, I mean you would not necessarily have predicted that Sharon would have been appreciative of that, or have suggested that.

FH: Yeah, I must say, it came as a, it came as a bit of a surprise to me, when Ambassador Indyk called me and said, "I've just had the most extraordinary meeting with the prime minister designate and this is what he says." So, and it did make a big difference. Working on the Palestinian side, from the beginning, mainly because Mr. Arafat had requested this committee in the first place, we received nothing but cooperation. As a matter of fact, sometimes the cooperation was overwhelming, I mean we could have spent all of our time, literally, speaking with Palestinian academics and government officials.

On the Israeli side it had been very grudging, and we – as a matter of fact, we were told from the time Ambassador Pope was leaving, sometime in that month, in mid-January or so, the government of Israel had suspended its cooperation with us, so we had to figure out a series of creative work-arounds to go and speak, get ourselves invited to Israeli think tanks. There was no hesitation on the part of Israeli academics and sort of private strategic thinkers to interact with us, but it was impossible to get any kind of a formal sit-down with the Israel defense forces, the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I could get in informally to speak to people because I, for whatever reason, they trusted me, but in terms of official committee functions, those doors were not officially opened to us until Ariel Sharon became prime minister.

BW: And in the course of this work, how often did you as a working group meet with the principals on both sides, did you have meetings with Arafat, or was it always people at a lower level that you were meeting with or investigating?

FH: I – we did have meetings with Arafat, and I seem to recall I had two or three meetings with him. And I would bring the entire staff with me, it was a, I mean it would be a quasi public event at his headquarters. Arafat and I would sit at the head of the room, I would be sitting to his right, his staff would be lined up against one wall, our staff would be lined up against the other, and we would have a conversation. So there was nothing, there were no secret contacts at all.

And again, this stemmed from my determination that, from the point of view of our entire staff,

nobody would come away from this experience thinking that the American leadership of this staff had its own agenda, engaged in secret meetings, secret contacts. Everything was wide open, but the meetings with Arafat yielded very little in the way of substantial information having to do with our mission. They were more ceremonial in nature, and he would invariably hand over papers composed by various parties having to do with allegations of Israeli depredations against civilian populations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

BW: To what extent were you concentrating on investigating prior actions, like what you just mentioned, and to what extent were you, I think particularly with perhaps the academics, looking for, quote/unquote, 'solutions,' or ways to improve matters? How much forward looking, and how much backward looking?

FH: It was very much both. I don't know that I could assign a percentage to each.

BW: Hmm-hmm.

FH: Clearly, one part of our mission was to elucidate how it was the intifada got started. Now, if you look at the original mission statement handed to Senator Mitchell, it was, "How did it start, and what needs to be done to make sure something like this never happens again?"

Well, the "how did it start?" was kind of a fixed piece that we could look into, but the problem with the second element of the mission was, the violence never stopped. I mean, it would stop periodically and then pick up again. There were constant demonstrations, constant confrontations between Israeli defense forces and demonstrators and so forth. So in a sense, the mission changed a little bit into, instead of how to keep it from happening again, how to help it stop. So there was sort of the forward-looking element in the sense of how do we get this back into the box? How do we actually, what kind of recommendations can we come up with to actually encourage the parties to stop the violence and return to the situation that existed before the intifada broke out?

BW: Again, during your time in Jerusalem, what were the nature of your interactions with Senator Mitchell like over that period?

FH: I would say that they were, the relationship was not intense, in the sense of constant communication. He had, for better or worse, a great deal of confidence that we could do this mission efficiently and out of the glare of publicity, and basically set the stage for a visit he and the other members of the committee would make in late March, 2001. We would definitely keep him informed of developments, but he was, he was not in the business of giving us detailed rudder direction. I met him for the first time, I believe it was in late January, perhaps early February, 2001, met him at his offices here in Washington where he formally asked me to continue as the head of the committee out there, but it was not a terribly intense back-and-forth with him. He was content to let us do our jobs and set the stage for the eventual visit.

BW: But you were periodically making trips back to the States during that period.

FH: Yes, yes. I would say the length of our time in Jerusalem covered from the first of the year until almost the end of March, and there were perhaps three visits back where I would meet with the Senator during that time.

BW: The Senator, or the senators? Where was Warren Rudman in this?

FH: I recall meeting Senator Rudman, but I think not in an operational sense. This was basically considered Senator Mitchell's operation until all of the committee members would be convened in the end for a visit to the region, which in turn would set the stage for the drafting of the report.

BW: How much preparation was required for that second visit?

FH: It was a great deal of detailed preparation. Fortunately, at that point we had the full and enthusiastic cooperation of the government of Israel. I'm not sure how the visit would have been pulled off, or *if* it would have been pulled off if the official position of the government had been "no cooperation with the fact-finding committee."

But it was about, I would say, ten working days of intensive coordination between the parties. It all fell into place remarkably easily, from my point of view, and equally intense negotiations with the American embassy in Tel Aviv, particularly having to do with a prospective tour for the members of the committee through the Gaza Strip. The embassy took the position at the outset that this would not be possible, that security conditions were such that the embassy would oppose seeing Senator Mitchell and the others go into the Gaza Strip, and I was told that it was out of the question and that the embassy would not be able to provide security, so we might as well concentrate our efforts on Jerusalem, West Bank and Israel.

BW: Nowhere in the Gaza Strip?

FH: Nowhere in the Gaza Strip. The position I took with the embassy was, "We are going to the Gaza Strip, there's no question about this. Senator Mitchell wants to do it, the credibility of the eventual report rests on going everywhere, basically." I said, "If you, if you don't want to provide security, that's up to you, I'll go to the Norwegians or the E.U., whoever I have to go to, I'll get security." So the, after taking that on board, the embassy decided, "Okay, American security, we'll support it a hundred percent."

BW: Do you think there was a lot of back channel between the embassy there and State here, and maybe even the White House, or not?

FH: Well, I can imagine there was a lot of cable traffic and telephone conversations between the embassy and State on this, yeah. White House, I don't know. I mean, to me it is still, it's still a question to what extent the White House per se was even aware of our activity, until the very end. I know that the Office of the Vice President was aware of our activities.

One of my, one of the conversations I had with Senator Mitchell, he asked me if I knew anybody in the Office of the Vice President, and I said, "Yeah." I said, "There is a person I worked with briefly years ago at the Defense Department, a fellow named Scooter Libby," I said, "I know him." I said, "Why, is there a problem?" And the Senator said, "Well, I'm hearing rumors that the Office of the Vice President is not happy with the fact-finding committee. I'm not sure why, perhaps you could check it out with Mr. Libby."

So I did, and I wound up having a meeting with a fellow on Mr. Libby's staff during one of my trips here, and listened to his concerns about the fact-finding committee. And I told him, "Well look, I'm not in a position to discuss what's likely to be in the report, we haven't even started to draft it yet, but I appreciate hearing your concerns," and I reported back to Senator Mitchell. So I know the Office of the Vice President was aware of our activities. White House, I'm not sure.

BW: It's interesting that Senator Mitchell didn't undertake contacting the vice president's office himself.

FH: I don't know that he knew anybody there, and I think he had no -

BW: That's sort of my point.

FH: I meant at this point, I think – this may have even been our initial meeting, and the Senator may have been under the impression that I was in fact the Republican plant on the fact-finding committee staff and that obviously I would have some kind of a connection. But it was pure serendipity that Scooter Libby, a fellow I had known for a couple of months during my, the end of my tenure in the Pentagon, turned out to be the vice president's national security advisor, and somebody I could call and he would actually take my call.

BW: Other than the security issue involving the Gaza Strip, was the embassy in Tel Aviv a player in your activities, or were you independent of them?

FH: The embassy in Tel Aviv was extremely supportive of our activities. Ambassador Indyk had taken a strong interest in what we were doing, and the embassy, the embassy did its best to try to facilitate things with the Israelis, although I must say that as long as Prime Minister Barak was in the seat, there was really no prospect of any kind of active cooperation.

The consulate general in Jerusalem, and the CG at the time was a fellow named Ron Schlicher. The consulate general was even closer to our operation, in the sense of providing logistical support, in terms of when we needed the vehicles, so forth. So we maintained contacts with both U.S. diplomatic entities in Israel and the occupied territories, and we made sure that our foreign colleagues on the staff were aware of these contacts and what they were about.

BW: And what about a security detail, did you have a security detail for your travels?

FH: No, we had a couple of, I'm afraid I don't, I have the names somewhere, I don't recall the names off the top of my head. We did have a couple of retired regional security officers, former State Department security people, assigned to us, one at a time, while we were out there, and they were an excellent source of advice in terms of personal security as we drove around the occupied territories in particular.

BW: And you and the working group, you went into Gaza.

FH: Oh yes, yes, we went into Gaza several times. As a matter of fact, we went everywhere that the members of the committee would eventually go on their visit, sort of a dress rehearsal, visiting the various spots. One member of our committee staff, a British national who was serving as the E.U. representative in Israel and the occupied territories, had excellent contacts in the, with the Palestinian security services in Gaza, and he was instrumental in facilitating several visits to the Gaza Strip before the Senator and others came over in March.

BW: I would imagine that the development of the agenda for the March visit was a pretty complicated kind of thing, in a sense of who you chose for them to be exposed to, and how much time here and there and whatnot, am I right?

FH: Yeah, there were a lot of moving parts to it, but essentially our methodology was to give the parties themselves maximum flexibility, maximum leeway in deciding what they wanted, the senators, the Senator and the other members of the committee, to see. I mean, as I recall we had a few ideas of our own, which were readily accepted. One of the things that I insisted on, without any guidance from the Senator or anybody else, I just felt very strongly about it, is that on the Israeli side of the agenda the first stop should be the Holocaust Museum and the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. And as it happened, this had a, I think a profound impact on the Israelis, when they heard the proposal coming from us, rather than us waiting for them to make the proposal. I think it had a profound impact, and it set the tone on the Israeli side for a very cooperative visit in which there was a great deal of warmth communicated on both sides.

BW: Was it mainly ceremonial, or was it really a working visit?

FH: It had elements of both, but it was very intense, there was a lot of traveling around, there were a great many substantive meetings that actually helped guide the writing of the report. I would not, while the visit had its ceremonial aspects, I would say it was a working visit, and there was no shortage of hard work to be done under difficult circumstances and in environments where there were indeed some real security challenges.

BW: And during that, you say ten-day period, bombs were going off, too, or was there -?

FH: I don't recall any; I mean there was, there were shootings and confrontations on almost a daily basis throughout this program. I don't recall anything specific of a major consequence as happening in the security room during the visit of the Senator and the other members of the committee. But yeah, just driving through the Gaza Strip and noticing the Israeli military

security steps that had been taken, the various outposts along the way, the way traffic was directed, it was impossible not to realize that it was a very dicey security situation.

BW: Did you travel in an entourage with sirens blaring and so forth?

FH: I don't recall the sirens blaring, but there were security vehicles interspersed in the motorcade.

BW: Okay. So then shortly afterwards you all came back to this country and began your meeting at Meridian House actually, right?

FH: At Meridian House, and that was basically the month of April –

BW: Hmm-hmm.

FH: - was spent drafting the report. And the way we went about it was, I basically produced a first draft myself, beginning to end, gave it to the Senator. As I recall he said, "Fine, this is a good approach, give it to the other members of the staff, work through it." He said, "But I," he said, "I am going to compose on my own the section of the report having to do with Israeli settlements in the occupied territory." So that's what he did.

As I recall, he was on vacation in Florida, and he couriered to us some handwritten paragraphs about settlements, so what you see in the final report, in those passages, several pages on settlements, is directly from the Senator's hand.

BW: Then everything was brought together on the eve of your actually publishing this report.

FH: Yes, we convened with the members and the full staff in New York. We had, we had a document that was about, I don't know, ninety-five percent finalized, but the last five percent was tough. And the Senator presided over a meeting and what I remember specifically from that meeting was Senator George Mitchell getting his way in every detail, big and small. It was quite a performance, the likes of which I have never, in my life, witnessed before or since.

He had a remarkable way of getting consensus, basically formed around the direction *he* wanted to go, using the words *he* wanted to use. He did it in an entirely gentlemanly and collegial manner. The closest he would ever come to laying down the law on a disputed point would be to say something to the effect of, "Well look, at the end of the day, this report belongs to all of us, but it's *my* name that's going to be on it, so this is really the way I would like to phrase this particular passage." That's really the closest he ever came to a sort of 'take it or leave it, we're going to do it my way' formulation.

Other than that, it was just remarkable seeing him in action, and seeing how he could form a consensus around, oh, a half dozen, dozen passages that the staff had been arguing out for the previous three weeks.

BW: Wow. Who, I wonder, made the decision that it would be known as the Mitchell Report?

FH: I think that just happened informally. I mean the, I think the official designation is still Report of the Sharm el-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee. But as the Senator predicted, the shorthand in the media, would focus around him personally. So over time, and not too much time, the entire effort became known as the Mitchell Committee, and the Mitchell Report.

BW: So what were the steps of your disengaging from this project?

FH: Well, once the Senator presented the report publicly, in late May as I recall, 2001, that was the last act, the final act. I returned to my company, and we basically waited to see what was going to happen next. We had, I had personally delivered the report to the State Department I believe on the last day of April 2001, and there was a time where the State Department would have the report, consult with the parties, get their reactions to the report, and append those reactions to the report, and that would be the final product. What I had delivered was the text agreed upon by the committee members.

During that time Senator Mitchell had, I think, two, possibly three conversations with the secretary of state, and in those conversations, I believe, advised the secretary to the effect that, "You know, I hope the report is viewed positively by you and the president, but keep in mind that this report will not implement itself. There are some two dozen recommendations for the parties to consider, but at the end of the day, if we expect anything to be done about these recommendations, it's probably going to require a strong effort on the part of the United States to drive the implementation of the recommendations, to work on a plan of timing and sequencing, and then getting the parties to interact with one another through the good offices of the United States."

We had, I must say, we had every reason to believe at the time, given the reaction of Secretary Powell, given the reaction of the president, who called Senator Mitchell, thanked him for the report, and said something to the effect of, "Now Senator, don't retire your uniform just yet." We had reason to believe that the administration would make a serious effort at implementing the report. None of us had any idea whether or not we would be asked to do some subsequent work in that connection, but in the end none of that took place.

BW: And did you and Mitchell ever have a discussion about your disappointment? I'm putting words in your mouth now, but I mean your disappointment that things weren't followed up on? Or have you had subsequent contacts with the Senator?

FH: I have had subsequent contacts with the Senator. I don't, I know I've heard him mention his own sense of regret that there was no real follow up by the administration. In the drafting of the report, the staff had toyed with some language about implementation, and I recall Senator Mitchell specifically intervening and saying in effect, "No, no, we're going to present our report, we're going to reflect the facts as we found them, we're going to make some good faith

recommendations, but we are not going to tell the administration how to do its job, we're going to stop short of that."

You know, I do recall the Senator voicing his disappointment that there may have been a real opportunity missed. There were one or two times during President Bush's first term when I heard from my former business partner, Deputy Secretary Armitage, asking if, in principle, the Senator might be willing to do something in connection with the report in terms of a follow up, but it never came to anything. And my sense was that the White House and the Office of the Vice President really, really had not much interest in following up on any of this, whether or not it would have involved the Senator personally.

BW: What about follow ups with the people in the Middle East, or the Norwegians, the Europeans and the Turk and whatnot, did you have any, or did, everyone just sort of went their separate ways and that was it?

FH: Went their separate ways. I think the members, as a general matter, members of the committee staff have sort of stayed in touch over the years. It was, generally speaking, I think, a very positive experience for all of us, and there were some real friendships made that continue to this day.

BW: How do you see Mitchell's prior career preparing him for this kind of an assignment?

FH: I think, certainly in terms of the substance, the fact-finding committee experience was an excellent primer for him in the overall Arab-Israeli dispute, and specifically the Israel-Palestinian track thereof. I think his experience in Northern Ireland gave him a very, very strong sense of belief that these kinds of disputes, no matter how old they are, no matter how much violence has been associated with them over the years, these kinds of disputes are susceptible to settlement, given a modicum of good faith, given effective outside mediation, and given time.

I think the, from what I understand, the Senator is reasonably confident that he can make serious progress in this latest assignment, perhaps even leading to a series of settlements. But I think he's also aware that the complexity is daunting, and that the past eight years have not simplified the task. On the contrary, it's become greatly more difficult than it was eight years ago, where eight years ago you at least had the semblance of two relatively coherent parties in terms of internal unity, and that's definitely a thing of the past. So the task he's facing is infinitely more complex than it was eight years ago, but he remains a person of supreme self-confidence, albeit very sober self-confidence. I think he does recognize the challenge, but he's bringing to this task a basic sense of optimism that something positive can be accomplished, and I think that's, for anybody diving into this sort of thing, I think that's essential.

BW: Since he was appointed by President Obama to be the envoy to the Middle East, have you and he had conversations?

FH: We have. He, the day before he was appointed he called me, he told me that there was

going to be an announcement forthcoming about him being named as special envoy for Middle East peace, he told me that this was coming as something of a surprise, that he himself had not known about this development for very long. He asked if in principle, I'd be willing to join him in the effort. And I told him, "Sure," and, "in principle, I'd be honored." And he said, "Well," he said, "Fred, I'm sorry I can't say any more than that right now," he said, "but I really don't know all that much about what this is about and what it's going to entail." And then the next day, after the announcement, he called me at home at about nine thirty at night and he said, "Well, now I can actually ask you if you're, if you would be willing to do this," and I told him, "Yes." So there's a strong possibility I'll be officially supporting him. It's a matter of negotiating terms and conditions with the Department of State right now, which is something I'm in the middle of, as well as three hundred other, or several hundred other potential appointees to U.S. government positions.

BW: How large a team do you anticipate his having, Mitchell as having?

FH: It's hard, it's hard to assign a number to it right now. The Senator is not an empire builder. Whatever kind of a staff is put together I think will look quite modest in comparison with other staffs being built in the Department of State as we speak.

BW: I had just a couple of questions for you from your, I read the remarks that you made at the Palestinian Center.

FH: Yes, yes.

BW: Exactly a year ago –

FH: Yes, yes.

BW: - as a matter of fact, and I thought, well one of my questions was, any change in your thinking from then to now? That was such a thorough explanation of the process; it was so beneficial to me in preparing for this interview.

FH: Well thank you, thank you. No, I would say essentially no. I mean I have an open mind in terms of how the United States ought to proceed with these multiple challenges, and I'm looking forward to really having a chance to sit down with the special envoy and see how exactly he's processing things after two visits to the region. I think as a matter of American national security interests, we have to proceed on the assumption that the two-state solution between Israelis and Palestinians is still alive and that this should be the object of the priority of our efforts. And I think the Senator agrees with that entirely.

On the one hand, it's fine to be sort of intellectually agnostic on the question of whether or not the opportunity still exists. As an operational matter, I think as Americans we have no choice but to proceed on the assumption that it does exist, and that American, strong American diplomatic intervention is required to help make it happen.

BW: You made one remark, that I want you to explain, in that paper. You said that the one-state outcome would result in the end of Jewish democracy. Explain that to me.

FH: Essentially from an Israeli point of view, Jewish democracy requires that there be a state reflecting an overwhelming Jewish majority. If there were a one-state solution, eventually – essentially involving one secular state with Jewish and Palestinian members, in theory I suppose it could be a democracy like any other democracy on earth, but it would not be a Jewish democracy representing the traditions and the tenets of Zionism. And I think increasingly, Israelis are seized with this realization: that in order for there to be a real Jewish democracy, there has to be a viable two-state solution.

BW: You also made the remark that you thought that Palestine was likely to be the first real democracy in the Arab world.

FH: Yeah.

BW: Do you still feel that way?

FH: Yeah, I strongly believe that. Within the Palestinian territories, there has been a tremendous development of NGOs, dedicated to democratic governance. Palestinians, through all of the travails over the past decades have managed to maintain a decent educational system, and my sense is that if we can ever get to a stable, sustainable two-state solution, I think it is very probable, if not certain, that Palestine will be a functioning democracy.

BW: My typical last question is how you think George Mitchell ought to be remembered as time goes on?

FH: Obviously he'll be remembered for his tenure as majority leader of the United States Senate. I think serving in the Senate had a major impact on how his public persona was formed. I think though, in a broader sense, it's quite likely that he will be remembered as a person who, while embodying sort of traditional American sense of optimism, was able to bring to bear some very practical skills in the realm of international peacemaking. And I think that what has made him so effective, and what I would predict will make him effective in his current challenge, is his absolute mastery, understanding and love of politics, in the most creative and positive way that word is understood. He understands politics, he certainly understands American politics, but he is very much open to understanding the politics of others as well, and I think that kind of approach, that kind of predisposition, is essential for success in this business.

BW: Are we leaving anything unsaid here?

FH: I –

BW: Great.

FH: - can't think of anything.

BW: Good, thanks very much.

FH: It's my pleasure.

End of Interview