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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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William S. “Bill” Cohen
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

GMOH# 072
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Brien Williams: This is oral history interview with Secretary William S. “Bill” Cohen for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College in Maine. Secretary Cohen is founder, chairman, and chief executive officer of The Cohen Group, and we are in his Washington, D.C., office. Today is Thursday, March 12, 2009, and I’m Brien Williams. Both you and Senator Mitchell are alumni of Bowdoin College, and I imagine that has brought you together a few times over a period of years, and what’s it like, is that something you feel is important to share?

Bill Cohen: Well, it was important how we both had a great experience at Bowdoin, and anyone who’s looking to have their sons or daughters get a great liberal arts education, obviously Bowdoin College for both of us has been enormously important.

I did not know George before. I think the first I knew of George was 1974, when he was running for governor, so we were not together at Bowdoin, he was a bit ahead of me so I didn’t know him. I knew his brother, who was a basketball player, and George played I think as well; I don’t know if he started for Bowdoin but I think he played a little basketball as well, but his brother was pretty well known throughout the state, the one that was called “Swisher.”

I got to know him a little bit when he ran for governor, and that was the first I had become acquainted with him. And then he was not successful in that run, and he then was appointed to become a federal judge. I didn’t see him again until Senator Muskie was named secretary of state and gave up his seat and Senator Mitchell decided to step down from a lifetime job, which I thought was a pretty bold move on his part. He took the position and finished Senator Muskie’s term, and then ran for reelection. That’s when I got to know him, when he came to the Senate, because there are only two of us and we worked very closely together.

BW: Do you have any recollections of that gubernatorial race?

BC: You know, I don’t. I was more consumed with my own reelection at that point. I had just served – I believe my first term – in the House, and it was not great in the sense that I was on the committee that had to consider impeaching Richard Nixon, so I was going through a very rough time with my own party and so I wasn’t focused on the governorship. I was saying, “How do I get reelected?” So I didn’t pay much attention.

BW: When George Mitchell was appointed to succeed, or replace Senator Muskie, was that a

surprise?

BC: It was a surprise in the sense that – not that he was not extraordinarily qualified – the question, I was surprised that someone would take a position like a federal judge and, with all that security, and say, “I want to be a senator,” and run. After having lost back in ‘74, to say, “Now I’m going to get in the political game again.” But after having seen George in action I can see why he is so good at it, I mean he’s just a great political leader. And I was convinced from the time he started with me in the Senate that there was no question he was going to rise to the top.

BW: I was going to ask you about that, because for the first two years he called himself a senator with an asterisk, because he was *just* an appointee.

BC: Hmm-hmm.

BW: And, but he also, according to you, was making a mark even in that situation.

BC: Oh, I mean the things that stand out about George, number one obviously is intelligence, his integrity and his industry I think are the three ‘i’s’ when I think of George. I mean he works hard, he is extraordinarily smart and thoughtful, and you can trust him. There are people you say, “Okay, you trust somebody and they give you their word and then no matter how tough it’ll go he’ll be there,” and he’s one of them.

He’s also, he was quite partisan – and I say that in a complimentary sense – that he clearly was in the Democratic camp and he was going to be a party leader. But he was someone that could always work with Republicans, and he and I wrote a book together and we worked very closely on issues together. I understood that, what his political philosophy was and where we could find a middle ground and where we couldn’t. He was a joy to work with, because he was so smart and understood complex issues, could present them in a way that simplified them, in terms of making sure you take all this complexity and you articulate it in a way that makes sense. And he was very good at that.

BW: Was that a quality that he shared very widely with the Senate?

BC: I think everybody who came into contact with George understood that, yes, that this is a guy they wanted to take on tough issues and then to be able to articulate them for the rest of whatever group he was with, yes.

BW: But what I intended was: that talent he had, that sensitivity to take complex issues and analyze them down, was that widely spread among the Senate, were there lots of other senators that were as good as he?

BC: Well, there were, the Senate’s a very talented group of people. Ed Muskie was a master at it. You could take Ed Muskie, Jack Javits, Abe Ribicoff; there are, Howard Baker, he was in

that category. And there were those who were seen as the real leaders in the Senate who had that ability, and so I think it was pretty evident from the beginning that George did. And plus he was willing to go out and work hard on behalf of other candidates. You don't get to be majority leader just by being smart, or just by being articulate. You've got to go out and spend time and help your party and help every other member who's running. So that's what I meant about the industry; he was prepared to work hard during the week, then go to every event that he could to help other candidates.

BW: Did you watch him in the '82 election, when he stood for election for the first time, where he went from one percent to sixty-one I think is what the -?

BC: Well, I could see it coming. I think once given the opportunity and given the exposure and given the work ethic. We frequently attended the same events, going back to the state. If it was at the Potato Blossom Festival, or the Lobster Festival, or the Egg Festival, we had all of these festivals and events that were non-political in the sense that they weren't partisan, but the two of us had to get up and talk. And I could see right then, he had a great sense of humor, and we played off each other quite well and always kept it very professional between us but a good friendship. So I could see from the very beginning that he was not going to be beaten.

BW: You had established a relationship with Ed Muskie, as you indicated a moment ago, and I'd like to know how you would characterize that, and then how it changed when George Mitchell replaced him.

BC: Well, Ed Muskie was, he was kind of the revered leader. He was much older when I came. I had actually given thought to running against Ed in 1976, and I thought better of it. I was given quite a bit of exposure during the impeachment hearings, and my popularity ratings at the end of all of that were very high, and they were doing polling that said, gee, I could even win. And I thought long and hard about that, and I've written about this in terms of the things that influenced me, and there were many who urged me to run against Ed. And I finally came down to an analysis, I was up at Sugarloaf Mountain, and I said, "I'll make my decision after I come down from the mountain." Not like Moses or anything, but I wanted time to think about it.

And while I was there I read a book called *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and that book had perhaps more of a profound meaning for me, because it talked about ambition and about how people are always trying to get to the top of the mountain without realizing life is really on the side of the mountain, and that people who are always striving to get to another position are missing a great deal along the way, and they're always just one step out of step.

And I thought about that in terms of, yes, I was young, yes, I had a lot of popularity at the time, and Ed was older and perhaps didn't have the same fire in the belly, whatever. I came to the conclusion, even looking at the numbers, saying, even though the numbers say I could probably win, I said, (assuming that's the case, and I wasn't sure the numbers were right) I would not be a better senator than he. And I said, "You know, this is not worth it, it wouldn't be good for the state."

Now, had I been ahead by twenty points and saying, this is a slam-dunk, I might have thought about it differently, but it was very close and I thought, “Well, I can go out and run a really great campaign and I can do it,” but then I thought, “it wouldn’t be best for the state.” I think that, you know, “He’s at the peak of his career and he’s still better than I would be.” And I ran, I waited four years and ran against Bill Hathaway.

So we got to be close. You have a Maine delegation, four people, and we got together at least once a week, so you had two congressmen – when I first got to Washington there were three Democrats and me and – but the four of us had to meet every week or every other week about Maine issues. So it’s a very small little knit group and you try to maintain friendships and understand that there are going to come times around reelections when they won’t necessarily be that close, but I got to know Ed very well. He asked me to go on the Campobello Island Commission, which I did and I worked with him on that.

I think he appreciated the fact that I looked up to him. More like a father figure, and almost that way because the first time I ever saw Ed Muskie I was a Bowdoin student, and he came, he was governor of Maine at that time, that’s where I first saw him. So years later, he still was that kind of father figure.

BW: And his physical presence was pretty impressive too, right?

BC: His physical presence, and he had a temper that he could use with great calculation. You could never tell when Ed was really mad or whether he was just being mad to intimidate you, but he was known for that. With me it was always, we never had a harsh word, it was always very, very friendly, never had a bad moment with Ed.

BW: So –

BC: I take it back. There may have been a time on the Dickey-Lincoln Project, but that’s getting into the weeds on it but, where we fought on that. He wanted to build the Dickey-Lincoln, I was opposed to it, so that was the only one time I can think of.

BW: Where was George Mitchell on that issue?

BC: I don’t know that he had to deal with it. I think that we had, I’m not sure whether they had taken it out by that time or not. But I assume that George would have been in favor of it, because it was a Democratic issue, in terms of jobs creation. So I’d have to assume that, but I think the issue was resolved before he got there.

BW: It’s interesting, and I’d like you to explore it a little bit more, because it had such environmental repercussions, or issues involved, and it surprised me that Muskie at least was for the dam.

BC: Well, I think it was a situation [where] it was actually Bill Hathaway, who was then the congressman, who was really pushing it, but I think organized labor made this a key issue. And you're right, Ed was Mr. Environment, Mr. Clean, for all the work he had done about cleaning up the atmosphere, Clean Water, Clean Air. This was one of those local issues in which I think the Democratic Party saw this as creating jobs in an area that was pretty impoverished, and the job creation, I think, outweighed the environmental concerns.

BW: Did it become an issue in your campaign with Hathaway?

BC: Oh, it did. And it became an issue – I'm going back now – I was asked to manage the campaign of Howard Foley, and Howard ran in 1968 I guess it would have been 196-, '67, '68, it may have been '66, it goes that far back. But Howard Foley took the position that, he made some statement that he would stand and clink glasses of champagne with anyone who thought the Dickey-Lincoln dam was ever going to be built, and so he kind of ran against Hathaway on that issue, and he lost. And then when I ran, I also ran against creating the dam, and so it became an issue during the campaign.

BW: I would think it would be hard to defend environmental versus jobs.

BC: Oh, it was. There were other issues; there was the Indian Land Claims issue that, you probably don't remember that, but Bill took a principled position, he thought we ought to examine the issue, and I went after him on that, because they were claiming, Penobscots and the Passamaquoddys but primarily Penobscots, were claiming that they were entitled to two-thirds of the land mass of Maine, and of course I thought that was pretty outrageous, but in any event, that became the bigger issue than Dickey-Lincoln.

BW: Did that extend over into George Mitchell's period too, or not, the Indian lands?

BC: No, it didn't because I think Ed and I had worked out the compromise on that.

BW: So what was it like then to transition to being the colleague of George Mitchell at that time?

BC: Well George, you'll have to talk to him about it, but we used to joke about it. I gave him advice, I told him to spend the first six months just listening and not doing too much talking, and then he uses that as a, as part of the jokes, we used to have a routine where he said, "Cohen always told me just to keep quiet and then he used to get up and give all these speeches, so that's why I ran for majority leader, so I wouldn't have to listen to all of Cohen's speeches."

But George and I had a good friendship right from the beginning and we didn't have any difficulty working, but he was more of a peer. The irony was, he was the junior senator now, and I was a senior senator, even though he was slightly older, but I used to use that against him all the time, about the junior senator, and so we laughed a lot about it, had a good time about it, but we were pretty much co-equals from the beginning.

BW: And you continued to maintain those four-person meetings through -

BC: Hmm-hmm.

BW: And what were they like?

BC: Well, we all had agreed we were going to work together. In any state you have competition about who's going to get the credit for something. I mean everybody wants to say, "Hey, I did this," or, "I did this," or, "I saved this job," or, "I created this." And what we had resolved to do is, we would always put out any press release as the congressional delegation, not as individuals, so we wanted Maine people to know that we were working together for them.

Now, within that there was a sub-text of that, that there's still competition going on, and sometimes someone would get out front and put out a statement without it going through the delegation. But for the most part, it worked pretty well.

BW: Was that common?

BC: No. I think that we thought we were pretty unique, we could take four people and put aside differences and say, "The Maine congressional delegation announced today..." and then they would have quotes from each one of us, we would agree on a press statement going out. So that way the people of Maine, we wanted to put away this constant competition for who is getting what just in a small state like Maine, and Maine people wanted us to work together and not be trying to showboat and claim credit. So it worked pretty well.

And in other states, you've got New York, California, you know, [a delegation of] forty-five, it doesn't work well. So a small state, I think other states probably had the same experience if they were small, but I thought we were pretty unique.

BW: What about the Maine Republican Party itself being a little bit unique?

BC: Well, the party itself was, it's kind of divided. You have party moderates, you had real conservatives, some liberals, the line between liberal-moderate gets pretty blurred at times, but then you had those that were really strictly conservative, and so it became a challenge at times to put it all together.

BW: When I said Maine Republican Party, you went, "Oh."

BC: Well, you just have to wonder in terms of what's happened. It's been difficult because I think there's the conservative base and then you have the moderates, you have Olympia and Susan Collins – I put myself in that category – there was always kind of this tension that, we knew we had to appeal to a much broader segment. If the Republican Party was going to survive in Maine, we had to say, "We can't just be bean counters, you can't have the green eyeshade on,"

you've got to talk about social programs and things that people need as well as having a strict ideological position. So that's always been a challenge, and that's why I think we have been successful in going throughout the state.

I know when I first ran for office, number one, I was told with my name I'd never get elected to begin with, and I never gave that a second thought. I said, "That's moot, by that point, and I think if they have a Muskie they can have a Cohen." But within that context of how do you build a party, I was told to stay out of Lewiston. They said, "Don't even bother," they said, "it's ninety percent Democrat, they're never going to vote for you." I said, "Well then, I'll make some inroads and who knows, maybe they'll vote for me one day. But why would you give it up?" So I used to campaign in Lewiston, in fact I had my brochures printed, one side was in English, the other side was in French, just to say that I know it's Franco-American heavily, and they're an older generation that don't speak English, or speak it well, and I'm going to make a dedicated effort to reach out and stay with people in Lewiston, different families, which I did on my walks, et cetera.

So I made a conscious effort to say, if there is – the Democratic Party in Maine, the core Democrats of Maine, the state of Maine, whether you're a Democrat or a Republican, you get pretty close to the center. Most of the values of those people in Lewiston-Auburn area, they weren't any different from those of the Republicans up in the northern part of the state. You talk about their family issues, the work ethic, the values that they have, there wasn't much difference. You just found that over the years that they were divided, and if you got below the perception of the parties, you go and talk to the people about what they really treasured and what their values were, you could find great crossover ability. Which is what I think we've been able to do, at least those of us who have been successful.

BW: You were quite an incubator for successful Republicans, too.

BC: Well, the walk helped. The walk was a major thing. And frankly, I had my doubts when it first was proposed. It was a Bowdoin student who said that he had been involved in a walk campaign, and then I read about Lawton Chiles. He didn't walk the complete state, and neither did the governor of Illinois, but I was intrigued by the concept. I said, "How do I make this work?" And once I started it, there was no doubt in my mind that it was going to be successful. I averaged about twenty-two miles a day, and I stopped and I shook hands with every person I met along the way, every store that I went into, every fruit stand or whatever it was, every shoe factory, I went in every place, I still maintained twenty-two-miles-a-day pace.

And I slept in different homes every night, picked at random. I'd send somebody up ahead and say, "Ask them if I can stay there," and most said, "yes." Some said, no, they didn't have a place that I could stay. I slept on couches, chairs, I slept wherever they could put me up and it was – in Lewiston I stayed with, on the third floor of a tenement building, slept out on the porch in a chair one night. So I got to know their families, and that personal connection, that you relate to them in their home, on their turf so to speak, and you listen to what the issues are that affect them. Boy, it gives you a whole different perspective other than this pontificating.

BW: Now, excuse my ignorance, was this when you were running for the House, or - ?

BC: That's when I ran for the House.

BW: The first time.

BC: Hmm-hmm. But that was kind of trail blazing because, in the sense that anyone who has run by walking has usually won. Olympia did some, Susan did some, David Emery did some as well, but the walk became a very important symbol. And I used to joke about it, saying I was out there during the rain and it didn't matter, I was out there doing that twenty-two miles, that, "Anyone who wants that job that bad and will do what he's doing, I guess we better vote for him." It was that kind of psychology, seeing the effort I would put into it, that they knew that I was going to work hard.

BW: Were there certain issues – I'm sort of breaking things up here, with you working with Mitchell since he arrived in '80 until Iran-Contra, because I want to stop with that, which was '87. Were there things in the early '80s that you and George worked on, or were really salient to the times or-?

BC: You know, I can't think of it. I'm trying to think what the issues would have been. Whatever they were, if they affected Maine we were together. I don't think we ever had an issue which we split on. I can't think of one.

BW: So then you did come together at Iran-Contra.

BC: We did. I was serving as the co-chair of the Intelligence Committee with David Boren, and George had been put on the Iran-Contra Committee, Bob Dole put me on, and the two of us, although we didn't talk much during the course of that, I was really impressed when George made a great examination of Oliver North in particular. I thought that that was a moment for George where I think his colleagues saw him in a light that said, "This is going to be our next leader." I think that was the moment. If you look at things that he had done, when they saw that, with all the pressure and the tension and the fact that Ollie North was such a captivating figure, I mean we were the bad guys in that, the committee, and George and I wrote about this in our book. But I mean how George handled the issue and what Ollie was saying about his lives, and I think that that really kind of separated George from the others who were going to compete for that position, I think that was a defining moment.

BW: I found his statement to Ollie North on the web.

BC: Hmm-hmm.

BW: And watched it with of course keen interest, having remembered it somewhat. Were you in the room when he delivered that?

BC: I was, and I slipped him a note saying that I was never more proud of him than I was that day because it was one of those moments that really brought into focus what the issues were, and I thought he did it better than anyone at the time.

BW: You and he wrote the book *Men of Zeal*, and that was published in '88.

BC: We wrote that in eleven weeks' time. We were approached shortly after the hearings, and it was an agent that I had used for some of my other writings, and he said, "Gee, it would be great if the two of you wrote a book," and he said, "but you'd have to finish it by January 15," and this was in November. I said, "We can't write a book in that short time," I said, "well, we will do it." So we sat down and we wrote the thing in eleven weeks.

BW: You hadn't learned your lesson, because one of the points you make is that you had to write the report on Iran-Contra under such a deadline, too.

BC: That's true. But we finished the report, and I think what we said is, here are the lessons, do not find yourself in this position. As far as the book was concerned, it was just the publisher. And here's the other side of this story – and I knew this at the time – but if we wrote the book, we finished it by January, they gave us January 15th to do some rewrite on it so a little bit of slippage, but usually it takes six months to get a book out. I mean usually it's a year, but once you finish the manuscript, most publishers take at least six months, so they were planning on a September pub date for the book.

Well, I was the co-chair of George's opponent in that race – David Emery was running for the Senate against George – so I also knew the book is going to come out in September and the two of us are going to be going around the state promoting the book, which is what happened.

The Republicans were really unhappy with me, and I said, "Look, we had this experience, this is a non-political book. Yes, I'm with George Mitchell, yes I'm the co-chair of David Emery's election bid, but I told David way back last year that this book is going to come out, and it's going to come out about this time, and just be prepared for it." Well, there were a lot of Republicans who were pretty upset and I think they took a vote, they wanted me to leave the party, and the vote was defeated. It was a serious issue.

BW: Looking back on the book and those times, are there any things that have occurred to you since to update or change or anything, or does it pretty much stand as it is?

BC: Well, I say modestly, I think it's the best book written about that experience in terms of trying to synthesize who the players were, what the issues were, how we looked at ourselves as critically as we could. I thought it was a good piece of writing, and it stands the test of time. I go back and read it today, I'd say pretty much on the mark.

BW: Did you imagine that Byrd and Dole conferred before they made the appointments to

that committee? Because it surprised me that two senators from the same state would have been on it.

BC: I think, they obviously had to, they conferred on the numbers, how many people were going to be on the committee, but whether they made judgments about who was going to be on it, I think they each left that for themselves. And I think what probably more than anything influenced it, was that David Boren was the chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, so it would be a little bit awkward to take the chair of the Intelligence Committee but not take the ranking member. He treated me as almost a co-chair of the committee with him. So I think that was a decisive factor, that we had actually done a preliminary investigation into the Iran-Contra event on the Senate Intelligence Committee, so Bob Dole no doubt took that into account saying, "Why wouldn't we put the guy that knows more about it than anybody else on our side?"

BW: So how do you explain George Mitchell's fast track to leader in the Democratic Party?

BC: I think from what I said earlier, that his obvious intellectual capability, the fact that he is such an industrious individual, and is so patient. Now frankly, I don't have his patience. Being a majority leader, the image of all the great things you're doing, most of the time is spent dealing with ninety-nine other egos, who have different schedules. And the job of majority leader, because of the Senate Rules, is basically to try to move legislation through an institution which is designed to slow things down. Everything has to be done by consent, so when you see somebody on the floor saying, "I ask unanimous consent," well if one person objects you don't get to do it.

So George would spend I would say probably seventy-five percent of his time negotiating consent agreements. He had to deal with Dole, he'd have to deal with his own party, you've got people who are out campaigning or trying to raise money for their campaigns saying, "Gee, I can't be there, can you postpone the vote until the next day?" And then constantly trying to put all that together. You have to have a lot of patience, and he has that, a reservoir of patience. I don't. I mean I have much, I think, "No, let's move ahead, let's not wait." That's why he's been successful.

BW: Some said that his start as leader was kind of slow, and he was a little bit quieter than they expected and whatnot. So he grew into the job?

BC: I don't think any of us really appreciate the dimensions of what the demands are for a majority leader. And as I said, most of it, you make these assumptions about you're just dealing with big picture legislation, when in fact it's the day in and day out nuts and bolts of dealing with making the institution function, and I think that obviously nothing quite prepares you for that. You get into the job and then you're dealing with someone like Dole and, who's been around a long time and is a master tactician as well, and you want to be sure that you don't do something which compromises your position without understanding the job. So I think he did it just right.

BW: You were probably in the position of going back to the Republican caucus and

explaining this fellow to some degree, would that be right?

BC: Well, there was no explanation. What was it, “The Song of Bernadette?” “... for those who understand there’s not need to explain, for those who don’t understand there is no explanation.” It’s one of those situations, and they all respected George Mitchell, had enormous respect for him. They didn’t like him, in the sense that, ‘Dammit, he’s too good.’ In other words, he’s too good at beating us, making a speech and taking an issue and being able to articulate it in a way that made us look bad and impotent.

And so there was resentment, but it wasn’t personal, it was, “Oh, he’s at it again, he’s so clever, he’s put us in a box, he’s done this, he brought about George Walker Bush’s defeat, getting Bush to go back on his pledge about no new taxes.” It was always an admiration and a resentment that he was as good as he was and as facile in terms of taking these issues and then putting the Democrats in the best light and the Republicans in a less good light. So it was admiration. I’m not saying it well. They admired him, but they said, “God, he’s a partisan Democrat.” And I’d say, “Well yes, he is partisan, and that’s kind of what this business is about.”

But they always said, “But you can deal with him, and you can trust him.” And that becomes important not only within your own party, but the other party. If you give your word to Dole, or to any of us, you had to rely on that, and no one ever had a question about it.

BW: I think it was David Emery who said that the press treated George Mitchell as being fairly bipartisan, but you all knew that he was very partisan.

BC: He’s very partisan. And I don’t think he would deny that.

BW: In fact he said, “Most partisan ever,” David Emery did.

BC: I don’t know if he’s the most partisan ever. I think that he was one of the most effective ever.

BW: Any comments about the George Mitchell-Bob Dole working relationship? Were there times when you saw them -?

BC: They really liked each other, they got along famously. And I think that’s maybe part of the resentment about, maybe they thought Dole was a little bit too accommodating, yes, if anything. I think Dole respected George, and Dole himself, conservative as he was, was pretty moderate to deal with behind the scenes and he could appreciate everybody had to deal with their own constituencies, all politics being local, and he was not someone who was going to slam you because you took a different position. So I think that Dole had obviously the support of the Republicans, but they thought maybe that he wasn’t tough enough in dealing with Mitchell, though.

BW: Now, when you came to the Senate, am I right, Mansfield was the leader and Hugh Scott

was the minority leader?

BC: I'm trying to think. Scott was not there long, when I came in. I'd have to go back, you know, I don't remember interacting with him at all.

BW: Right, but you were there over the course of a lot of leaders.

BC: Oh yes.

BW: Where would you rank Mitchell among them, or?

BC: I'd put him up at the top. I didn't know Mansfield well; he was very quiet, stoic, rarely said anything – I'd watch him on television and, "Yep, nope" – but highly respected by his colleagues. I would say that George, during the time that I was there, he'd have to be right up at the top, one or two.

BW: Baker?

BC: He, I put George in the same league as Baker, I do.

BW: Um, let's see -

BC: And Howard was one of our best; I'm really fond of Howard Baker.

BW: Legislation – I don't want to get deeply into these matters and whatnot, but we've mentioned Dickey-Lincoln, and what about the Loring Air Force Base, was that an issue?

BC: No, no, we both worked on that. That was never an issue. I mean again, on issues dealing with the people of Maine, we didn't differ.

BW: And what was your position on Clean Air and Water? You were with him.

BC: I didn't like it as much when I was on the city council of the mayor of Bangor, because I said, "My God, how do we go to secondary, tertiary clean-up facilities?" And Dow Air Force Base was moving out, we had very little in the way of revenue coming in, but from a philosophical point of view, I've always been over there.

BW: On military matters, one thinks of Scoop Jackson right away, and then Sam Nunn, sort of a pair, and yourself very much in there, where was George Mitchell on military issues?

BC: When it came to Maine he was with us. I can't recall his voting record on some of the other systems, but when you're dealing with Bath Iron Works, no one is ever going to be against that, so George and I worked very closely together on getting destroyers, and frigates initially, that was before George got there, we moved up to the destroyers when he was there. I'm trying

to think, I don't know what his position was on the other major weapons systems. I suspect he probably was less supportive of them.

BW: He announced his retirement. Was that a surprise to you?

BC: It was. He let me know he was going to be announcing it, but I was surprised that he was leaving. He left, Warren Rudman, another great senator, I mean outstanding, and he and George had worked together on a number of key issues, but both of them decided to leave [in] '94; I announced two years later. I can't recall now why George, what motivated him.

BW: You can't recreate that telephone conversation, or whatever it was when he told you?

BC: It wasn't on the phone; we talked in the Senate. He told me he was going to make an announcement, and I was surprised. I just can't recall now what his rationale was but maybe he felt the same thing that I was feeling two years later.

BW: And that's true, that was what motivated you to depart as well.

BC: I had become increasingly disenchanted with how politics was being played out. I kept looking, being half Irish I have a Gothic preoccupation with time, and I kept seeing the sand slip through the hourglass and I kept thinking, 'How much more time do I have? And do I want to find myself in the position where, okay, I can run and I can get reelected, and then what?' And then I'll be at an age where I'll have to run for reelection because I can't do anything else, and I never wanted to be in that position when I saw some of my older colleagues who, they're in their eighties and they were dysfunctional and they had no place to go. And I never wanted to be in that position, so I decided that if I was ever going to have one more shot at a different career, it was going to be, I had to retire. And so that's when I announced my retirement: '96-'97.

Plus it became, the partisanship, the fact that it took so long to do anything. Most of my time was spent in quorum calls, and I kept thinking, 'I've been here too long, it's been twenty-four years, and I can't do this anymore.' I didn't like fund-raising, I was not good at it, I didn't like having to go outside of the state to raise money, but you couldn't run a campaign on what you can raise in Maine. And then there were some other external factors, there was a two-term limitation that was voted on by the state legislature, or maybe on a state referendum, where the people of Maine had spoken that they wanted their politicians at no more than two terms. Well, I had already had my third and looking at a fourth, and I said, "Well, it doesn't apply to me," because they couldn't apply it to the Congress, that particular vote. And I said, "Well, if that's what they really feel, then what am I doing here? And I've had eighteen years in the Senate, six in the House, and maybe they're right, maybe it's time to have somebody else." And so I just decided that I was going to leave.

BW: And when did Bill Clinton come calling for -?

BC: Actually it was not until after he got reelected. I had had business cards printed up,

called The Cohen Group, oddly enough, I had just signed a lease agreement downtown, and my books were all packed and I mentally was on my way out, there was no more legislation to take care of, the session was over. And then I got a call from the White House and they said, "The president would like to have lunch with you, you want to come down?" I said, "Sure, absolutely." And I didn't know him, other than shaking his hand a couple times in very superficial settings.

We came in, we had lunch together, he just wanted to talk philosophically about things, about the world, and nothing in the way of DOD or anything else, and it was a good conversation. It lasted about an hour, an hour-and-a-half, and I guess we both felt better that we knew each other.

And then [the] next time I saw him I was over in Thailand giving a speech to the - The U.S.-Thai Business Council had invited me to give a speech over there, and it turns out that Bill Clinton was there at the celebration of the king's birthday. And I was in the audience and I had on a yellow tie with white elephants - it was a Jim Thompson tie, and famous for his silk. And President Clinton came down after one of the events and he looked at my tie, he said, "Are those Republican elephants or Thai elephants?" And I said, "Well today they're Thai elephants." And I didn't see him again, I went on to Malaysia, came back, and then I had another call and went down to the White House and had a more serious talk at that point, and then we had reached I think an understanding, and he said, "Well I'm not sure I'm going to offer you the job." And I said, "I'm not sure I can take it."

But I said there were a couple of things that we had to resolve. Number one, I wanted to reassure him, if he were to offer and if I were to accept, he would never have to worry about me going back door to my former colleagues up on the Hill. In other words, "Can you believe what these s.o.b.'s down here are talking about?" and putting a call in to Trent Lott or one of the leaders up there. I said, "You'll never have to worry about that, I would never do that. And so this is going to be tough for you, because you've got Democrats who are going to say, 'You got a Republican sitting in our meetings?' It's going to be hard for you." And I said, "You'll never have to worry about me, but what I need is a pledge by you that you'll never involve me in any political discussion, under any circumstances. I don't want to be there, I don't want to be invited there, I don't want to sit in any meeting where it's going on, just let me run the Defense Department."

So that was what I was going to ask for. So nothing more was said. Time went by, and one night my wife and I were at the White House for a Christmas party and I was standing in line, and Al Gore came over, just came up, stood next to me, and not making any kind of display he said, "Can you take a call from the president tomorrow between eight and eight thirty?" And I said, "Sure." Went home that night. My wife and I talked about it, and I was still a little not sure what this all meant, because I had promised her, I said, "Once I leave the Senate we're going to have a whole different life." And she said, "Are you crazy, this is a chance of a lifetime." I said, "Yes, but I promised you." She said, "Don't worry about it, we'll put that off for four years." So she was very supportive and she let me off the hook in terms of the pledge.

Then I said, "This is not going to be easy, and by the way, the phone call tomorrow could be just

as well saying, ‘Look, I thought about it, this is not going to work, I’ve got too much opposition in the Democratic Party, you’ll be in a tougher position and this just won’t work.’” So I said, “It could go either way.”

Anyway, the next day came, eight, eight fifteen, eight thirty, no phone call, so I took our dog out, I said, “I’m going out for a walk.” And she says, “You can’t go, the White House is going to call you.” I said, “Well, they’ll call back.” So I went outside, and sure enough, they called while I was gone. And I came back in the house with Lucky and she said, “The White House called.” I said, “Fine, we can call them back”. Called them back, and it was a very short conversation. President Clinton said, “I want you as secretary of defense.” And I said, “I accept, but don’t forget the condition on which I accept.” He said, “You got it.”

So I hung up the phone and my wife said, “What condition are you talking about?” And I told her what the condition was. To his word, he never once involved me in anything, it was just a great relationship.

BW: When did you start incubating the idea of The Cohen Group?

BC: My last year in office. I had become increasingly unhappy with what was going on with the Senate, and I was going through the motions of raising funds, and I did, I made one trip out west, I went to Chicago, I was in St. Louis, then I went to Los Angeles, and I stopped in Colorado on the way back. By the time I finished the last fund raiser, they were all successful, I said, “I can’t do this any more, I don’t want to do this any more.” And I landed back in Washington, a day went by, I picked up the phone, I called everybody, I said, “Look, I’ve reconsidered,” and all the money that I had raised, I sent it back to everybody.

BW: And what kind of vision did you have for The Cohen Group?

BC: What I thought was I would, I had been doing a lot of traveling into the Asia region in particular, and I thought, “Well, I’ll start a consulting group and take advantage of all the trips I’ve made to various parts of the world and see if it works.” And Sam Nunn and I were also talking. Senator Nunn left the same year, there were thirteen of us who left, and Sam I knew was going to go with King and Spalding one third of his time, then he was going to devote one third of his time to public issues, and then we were going to work out an arrangement where one third of his time and my time we would be working together on issues. And so, that didn’t come to pass.

BW: But in ‘01 I guess you then started The Cohen Group.

BC: I finished up on, at noon on January 20, 2001, I took off Sunday and we started on Monday.

BW: You’re a workaholic.

BC: Well, yes, one day of rest, and started off, and there were just three of us at the time and now there are some forty, I think, last count probably forty-three, forty-five or so now.

BW: I read parts of *Roll Call*, your diary of your first year in the Senate where you spoke about peacocks and egos of majestic proportions and so forth.

BC: Some of the language is a little bit inflated, but that's what I felt at the time.

BW: Right, but I'm wondering how different your diary would have been in '94 or '95.

BC: I think there would have been much more a level of frustration, just the accumulation of it, to see all the big issues that weren't being addressed, and they said, "Well, we'll delay that, or we'll put that off 'til next year, there's always a next year to do it." And a lack of I thought courage in facing up to the issues. If you're talking about Social Security, we know what needs to be done. We're living longer, I will be sixty-nine this year, I intend to work for another five, ten years, whatever. So for the young people starting out, they should not think about retiring at sixty-five because their life span – I'm holding a conference on next Monday on wellness, and I've got experts coming in from various fields to talk about how we take better care of ourselves, how we extend life, quality of life. And I've got Ray Kurswell, who has written *The Singularity is Near*. Now, it won't be good for us perhaps, but he maintains, he's been writing about this for a long time, that if we could live another twenty years or twenty-five years, that there's such a confluence today of biotechnology and nanotechnology and medical science that we will be able to extend life almost indefinitely, quality of life. And it has all kinds of associated ramifications. Do you really want to live that long? Who can support you if you're living that long? I mean all of the other issues that are associated with it, but we are on the cusp of breakthroughs in medical technology which are astounding.

I'll give an example. I'm sitting here with two steel hips. I went to the hospital on a Thursday, had the surgery, came home on a Sunday, I went to work Monday and, on both occasions, without a cane or a crutch. And what I wanted to demonstrate, one time I went on television the day after I got out of the hospital and walked onto the set, I wanted to say, "This is what's possible with medical science. Twenty years ago this would not have been possible, today it is," and that's very elemental. And now you're looking at what Ray Kurswell talks about in terms of nanobots, robots basically the size of cells, into the body, repairing organs internally. All sorts of exciting things that are being developed.

Out in Silicon Valley they're creating something called the Singularity Center. You've got these brilliant physicists and medical doctors who are now converging these technologies to provide quality of life, dealing with Parkinson's, all these other things. It's exciting to think about.

So what I'm trying to do now – to deviate from our conversation – is I'm holding a conference on wellness. I've got Deepak Chopra coming in to talk about spirituality, because the mind-body connection is very real, and Dean Ornish and Michael Roysen, a bunch of experts coming together to say, "What do we do to take better care of ourselves, from diet and exercise? And

what are the obstacles? Why can't we do these things? Why are there no whole food stores in the inner cities? And what can we do?" I mean all the junk food. And look at the problem of diabetes. We've got an epidemic in this country, and it's caused by obesity. Well, why are we getting obese? You know, pretty simple answers, but how do you break it down?

So, I don't know what got me onto this, but to talk about things that can be done and need to be done, and we're not facing up to these. And on Social Security, yes, we're going to live to be in our eighties, and our children will live to be ninety and maybe even a hundred, and so we've got to change our institutional program structures. And we're not doing it; we're not facing up to it. And everybody, it's the third rail; no one wants to step on the third rail. Well, we need to start stepping on third rails. I think Obama, to his credit, is starting to take these issues on.

BW: How do you think George Mitchell ought to be remembered as time goes on?

BC: I think he'll be remembered as a great statesman, as a superior negotiator. If you had to take the movie, or a book, it would be called *The Negotiator*, it would be George. Yes, I think that's how he'll be seen, as somebody who obviously was a great public servant, and again, intelligence, integrity, industry, and I'd add patience on top of that, he had enormous patience.

BW: Good, are we done?

BC: Okay, great.

BW: Well, thanks so much.

End of Interview