

Bowdoin College

Bowdoin Digital Commons

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project


Special Collections and Archives

12-7-2009

Interview with Jason Grumet by Brien Williams

Jason S. Grumet

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/mitchelloralhistory>

 Part of the [Law and Politics Commons](#), [Oral History Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Grumet, Jason S., "Interview with Jason Grumet by Brien Williams" (2009). *George J. Mitchell Oral History Project*. 195.

<https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/mitchelloralhistory/195>

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Collections and Archives at Bowdoin Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in George J. Mitchell Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of Bowdoin Digital Commons. For more information, please contact mdoyle@bowdoin.edu.

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

Bowdoin College Library, 3000 College Sta., Brunswick, Maine 04011

© Bowdoin College

Jason Grumet

(Interviewer: Brien Williams)

GMOH# 178

December 7, 2009

Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College with Jason S. Grumet, founder and president of the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington, D.C.; we are in the Center's offices. Today is Monday, December 7, 2009, and I am Brien Williams. First a few preliminaries, would you give me your full name and the spelling of your name?

Jason Grumet: Yes, it is Jason S. Grumet, and it's G-R-U-M-E-T.

BW: And the date and place of your birth?

JG: February 25, 1967, in Rochester, New York.

BW: And this is primarily for Mainers, but your parents' names?

JG: My parents' names are Gerald and Madeleine Grumet.

BW: Give me a little bit of your own family background, where you grew up and where you were educated and so forth.

JG: I grew up in Rochester, New York, which is a nice place to live [p/o], and went to public school, took a year, left high school a year early and did a program for the National Audubon Society Expedition Institute, which was traveling around North America—I spent a fair deal of time in Maine, and doing kind of experiential education. Then went to Brown University where I did an environmental studies degree, and went to work for the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation for a few years, then got tired of a bunch of lawyers saying, “Well that's a legal question,” which of course everything is, and so I went to law school at Harvard, ran an organization that worked for the Northeast States Air Pollution Control officials, and then came down here to D.C. to start the Bipartisan Policy Center.

BW: So this was your first time in D.C.?

JG: Yes, as the story goes, met a nice girl, and so I was commuting back and forth for a couple of years before I moved down here full time, but I had not lived in D.C. before 2000.

BW: When you were with the Northeast States organization, did that bring you into contact

with Senator Mitchell at all?

JG: A bit, only obliquely, [through] the Clean Air Act of 1990, which he worked on a great deal. I was working in New York state at the time, and the head of the environmental agency in New York state was [] Tom Jorling, who had been on the Hill and been at EPA and knew Senator Mitchell some, so we were reasonably engaged in the Clean Air Act reauthorization. I was at the time a punk and so I didn't really get to talk to the Senator, but I spent some time interacting with Kate Kimball, who was his key staff person at the time. I didn't start up at the organization representing the northeast states, called NESCAUM [Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management], until 1994, and so was not having a direct interaction with the Senator at that point.

BW: And then you went to the National Commission on Energy Policy?

JG: Yes, that was really the inspiration for this larger entity, but we started up focused just on energy policy. The idea was to get a group together that was so diverse that it might not be able to agree to anything, but if it could, it would actually confuse Washington long enough to think about some new ideas, since energy policy has been quite polarized for a number of years. And when that process was supposed to be wrapping up, we of course became so impressed with our own influence that we started to violate our term limits and expand the organization.

And I can just tell you about my first discussion with Senator Mitchell and how we got him involved. We had started a project on agriculture and energy. This was an effort to broaden the energy discussion to new constituencies so that we could try to change the political tenor a bit. And Senators [Bob] Dole and [Tom] Daschle at the time were both at the same law firm, and both had a significant agriculture history, so we got them engaged in the project on agriculture. We then bumped into the fact that Senator [Howard] Baker was really making a number of speeches and quite intent upon the effort to diminish the partisanship and increase the civility in our political debate, and we had some connections to him and so he said that he'd be interested. We didn't really know what they would be doing yet, but be kind of supporting the founding of this organization. So we kind of had three out of four.

It became very clear to us that Senator Mitchell was the perfect, and in fact the only, way to square that triangle, and Senator Daschle had sent him a quick note []. And with some humiliation, I actually stalked him at the Clinton Global Initiative. We were both going to be there, this is a monstrous event, and I had never really had the experience before of literally trying to kind of hunt somebody down in a large crowd, but laid in wait in the room at which he was supposed to be speaking, and again, with some discomfort wandered into the Green Room hoping that I could find him. And then just out of great grace, the first person I saw, who was a lovely woman, whose name escapes me, happened to be his assistant, and brought us together and we had a quick conversation and then he later agreed to also become a member of the advisory board of the Bipartisan Policy Center.

BW: Where did that momentous meeting take place?

JG: The Clinton Global Initiative has been based out of some [massive] Sheraton Hotel in New York City, I can't remember exactly which one. But he was very, very gracious, as always.

BW: So the germ that led to this organization was those of you in that group, is that right, it's sort of a group?

JG: Yes, so we had brought the other commission of about eighteen, pretty high-profile energy experts, or people who had a lot of political involvement. The idea was not to assert nonpartisanship—because in Washington, if twenty people get together and put together a nonpartisan report, almost nobody cares—but to actually try to get people who reflected seventy or eighty percent of the actual political spectrum. And as I said, that project actually was quite successful. We managed to put out recommendations just as Congress was engaging in the 2005 Energy Bill and started to have some visible influence on that, at which point it had occurred to me that not only had we put together some nice energy ideas, but we actually had created a kind of conversation that everyone says they wished would happen more but didn't happen much, where you had people of good will and intelligence having an iterative, substantive conversation and then being willing to stick [together] to fight for their collective compromises.

And my hunch was that was a process that would be applicable in other areas, so we convinced our big energy funders to [] let us spend some of their money, trying to broaden the agenda. And then when the senators joined us, that obviously gave us a different kind of legitimacy and it only took about eight months to find a time when the four of them could be together so that we could actually launch the organization. I think it was Senator Dole, with his usual wit, who quipped at our founding that the only time the four of them had ever been together in the past—there was a casket in the room for State funerals—but while they had worked together a great deal in pairs, I think they even, three of them in a couple of different settings, the four of them had never worked together before, which I was pleasantly surprised by in some ways, that we were providing a somewhat new forum.

BW: So talk about the formation process, how you came here, your mission statement, and how involved these four were and so forth.

JG: Early on they, like just about everybody else, were passionately embracing of the idea in theory, and quite ambivalent about what the heck it actually would mean. In fact, this is the problem with bipartisanship, those great paeans that everyone says, of course we want to have more bipartisanship, but when it actually means potentially getting involved in an organization that might reach controversial positions, or positions that are not squarely within either of the party doctrine, there was some appropriate kind of hesitation. Not to mention that all four of the senators are involved in a variety of different things and there was a question of time consumed, but also just putting your name on something that's a little different. And we were priding ourselves on our uniqueness, which was both I think an attraction as well as a point of some anxiety.

So we spent the first months having monthly calls, and just trying to explain [] the basic contour of the organization. And they are an advisory board, so while they are in all ways the kind of public leadership and we wouldn't do anything that would ever make them uncomfortable from a policy standpoint, they're not the fiduciary board of the organization. So, we had an advisory board and we had our actual fiduciary board; trying to understand the different roles that they were playing, it took a little while. And what we started out to do was to try to help them give us some substantive direction, a kind of 'big picture' direction. What I think we agreed was that we were going to look to them like a good coach, who kind of puts the right team on the field and gives them the game plan, and then goes and reads a magazine until the ninth inning, since it wasn't realistic to think they'd be involved personally in every project.

And with some cajoling and staff support, got the means to put together a list of issues that they thought were issues of both prominence, but also issues that had the potential to generate a different kind of architecture for an agreement than was being proposed by either Democrats or Republicans. And unsurprisingly, health care was I think top of that list, homeland security, and Senator Mitchell I remember specifically expressing an interest in port security, which seems quite understandable. We already had some significant momentum in energy policy, and had agreed to kind of scope out a transportation project, as well as having started an effort on some national security issues. So they helped us steer those, but there was a reasonable amount momentum going in, in part because it frankly took so long to get the four of them together and scheduled, that we got to work.

BW: And at the same time, you were assembling the staff, I suppose.

JG: We were assembling the staff and funding and the office space and all the things one does in kind of a start-up. And we've grown the staff—I was going to say methodically, but quite quickly at the same time, around the different projects that we take on.

BW: So at no point, the focus was on how to be bipartisan, or how to combat what I hear from everyone is the current lack of bipartisanship. It's more bipartisanship on specific issues?

JG: It's an insightful question. We made the very conscious decision to start by focusing on subject matter, as opposed to the kind of larger ecosystem of partisanship, I think for two reasons. One is that there are a whole lot of 'can't we do better' kind of discussions, which would give an award to another fine Mainer like Olympia Snowe. Or David Boren, the president of [the University of] Oklahoma, held a really wonderful meeting, and nothing ever seems to come of those. So we were reluctant to start that way, just because there had been a history there of rather puffy exercises.

But also, the senators were very clear of mind that they didn't want to do a 'it was better when we were in charge' kind of historical reminiscence, and there was a way in which going after the larger questions of how the Congress and the executive branch function was prone to those kinds of implications, if not assertions. So for those reasons, we decided to really dive in on big, meaty public policy issues, hoping that we would credential ourselves as actually being able to come up

with some meaty substance with some edge, and then start to use a little bit of that capital to pivot to these larger questions.

What we're finding now, which is no suggestion it had anything to do with the senators but just the state of the world, is while we have quite thoughtful policy compromises moving forward in a number of key places, nothing's going anywhere. Because Congress, not only is health care occupying the terrain, but it's pretty locked down, it's not an easy place to go bring nuanced, substantive compromise, and that has led us to realize that now in fact is the time, while continuing to work on those policy projects, to start to pivot into these larger questions of how the democracy is functioning. We of course count on Senator Mitchell rejoining us, once he has solved that little issue [i.e., serving as special envoy for Palestinian-Israeli affairs], and I think he'll be a superb spokesperson for those ideas once we get them moving.

We have Dan Glickman and Dirk Kempthorne, former Democratic congressman, secretary of agriculture for a Republican governor, and Senator, secretary of interior, starting to work to scope out what our pragmatic approach is that could start to turn the tide back to something more constructive, so our hope is that within a year or so, just as the senator rejoins his colleagues, we'll have a platform to work from.

BW: Just as an aside, is it an assumption that that is a kind of one-year assignment?

JG: I wouldn't put a time limit on it, but when he informed us that he was going to have to resign, and my understanding is he was asked to pretty much clear the table quite broadly, I joked with him that we would, of course, keep the seat warm and plan on welcoming him back with open arms. And I can't remember exactly what he replied but there was some suggestion of enough affinity for the organization that if and when that occurred.

Now the one project that the senators really rolled up their sleeves and kind of took on in the first person was health care, so again, we had agreed that they would play an advisory role but that – when the four of them first came together it was, they sat around a small table like this and had a conversation which was so delightful, it was only more unrealistic than it was delightful, that the way the organization was going to work was, the four of them would get together and roll up their sleeves and hash out one of the tough issues of the day, which of course we could have sold tickets to, because it would have been such a fascinating discussion. But that has not proven to be, we've [] been able to do that once or twice, but that has not proven to be something that has really been the dominant engine of the organization.

But the aspiration was so lovely, that what we decided to try to do was to capture that intent and just address it towards one area, so the [] challenge of health care. And I mention this not only because it was the issue that really gave me the most contact with Senator Mitchell on a series of specific policies and the ability to kind of watch him operate among his colleagues, but he also had the challenging question of, as we were probably eighty percent done with the study, he then joined the administration. And so the question was, how could he acknowledge his efforts to date, but not be put in a position of working for the administration while seemingly trying to

advance a separate set of policy ideas? So I think we simply acknowledged that he had been a significant force throughout the bulk of the technical work but was not able to participate in the final negotiations.

But despite our effort to appropriately clarify his role, I do seem to remember that one rather untrained AP reporter wrote the first story which named him as one of the authors of the study, so he was probably given a little more credit at that moment than he was wishing for.

BW: So for quite a period of time, the four of them did work, and that report represents their thinking.

JG: They really dug in, more than I think we had even imagined they might. I think it is not uncommon for people of that stature to have their names appear on documents that they were loosely connected with and their staff told them were directionally correct. I don't know if it was fifteen or twenty times, but they met by phone and in person a lot, reviewed drafts, they all had different styles. I think Senator Daschle is a real health care policy wonk, and so he would dive in on a bunch of the specific technical, many beyond my appreciation. Senator Mitchell gave us kind of larger structural suggestions, ways in which he thought the document would be best received, and then he would always kind of gravitate towards the four or five most controversial key questions, and I seem to remember often would drive the discussion more by asking questions than by proposing solutions, which struck me at the time as an interesting form of negotiation.

BW: And what about the other two, how -?

JG: So, Senators Dole and Baker were also very involved. They both had, as did Senator Daschle, staff giving them some support. We also had two project directors, Democrat Chris Jennings and Republican Mark McClellan, who provided some direct support to Senators Baker and Dole. I think it's fair to say that Senator Dole, because he was here in D.C., was probably drawn a little more into the details. And they were actually reasonably tough negotiations, and this was at the point at which Senator Mitchell had already had to take his leave, which was really too bad because we had gotten to the point where someone with his particular skills, bringing people together and closing deals, would have been quite helpful. We managed to get it done, but three days before the press conference we still didn't have a total deal yet, we were printing the reports the night before. So we lamented on a couple of occasions that had we had Senator Mitchell still in the equation it would have probably moved the process forwards more quickly.

BW: Did Senator Daschle feel seriously outnumbered?

JG: I think he did, I think that he felt that there was some equalizing factor just in the fact, you know, he had recently published a book on health care reform, and so I think he certainly felt that he could hold his own [] intellectually, but there's always a dynamic where you have kind of two against one that put him a little bit in a awkward position at times.

BW: You will appreciate, in the course of doing this oral history project I've had occasion to ask a lot of people about the '93-'94 health care, Clinton health care plan, and its devolution over time. Was there a lot of reference made to that, and did it sort of become part of what you were either, mistakes were made, or how did that play? Maybe not at all.

JG: No, it did. (*aside omitted*) It was certainly the reference point I think for any discussion, because so much of what was ultimately criticized about the Clinton effort was the process. And most of the complaints you hear was process, as opposed to substance. And since we were not putting together a political exercise, we didn't have that kind of strategic question that obviously the administration currently has struggled with.

The two project co-directors, in addition to the senators, were very much in the middle of that experience, so I think that they [were] only in the room probably about half the time, we had a health care project director who was doing a lot of it, [p/o] but [] the people doing actually the real work of the report had lived that experience to the point that I think it was part of almost everything that they were trying to do.

BW: And the report was issued when? Just vaguely.

JG: About six months ago.

BW: And what has its life been since?

JG: So the report was issued, and the process leading up to it was really trying to engage and support the only real bipartisan exercise in the Congress, which had been the Senate Finance, Baucus, Grassley and the other four, and I think we had a reasonable amount of influence on their legislative thinking, and we certainly paid attention to where we thought they were heading on some issues. The senators had had a reasonable number of conversations, Baucus and Grassley, and they'd also met with Senate leadership, and there was an effort to make sure that we weren't catching anybody by surprise.

There was not a full sort of enthusiasm from all quarters, as would you expect from a bipartisan exercise, since it was not playing explicitly to orthodoxy and left or right. We put it out with a good deal of fanfare and a series of press and supportive statements from key senators, the White House put out a friendly statement. Everybody was being, as I think we would have been expecting, a little bit cautious. What we tend to do as an organization is put out what we perceive to be an equitable version of the deal, before everyone else has done the fighting, which tends to annoy everybody, because there's no one really—and especially if they know you're really right, that's even more infuriating, to see somebody kind of telling you where you have to go. We think on balance it does accelerate the process of good policy [p/o].

I guess it was a miscalculation, but what was happening I think, was everyone was playing by the traditional rules, which was that the White House was basically staying kind of true to the

campaign themes and the kind of base constituency, as was happening with the Republican Party, and it was quite clear to me that as soon as Baucus and Grassley and that group of six came out with something, the White House was going to express its fealty to the inevitable and say, ‘well, it’s not everything we wanted, but this is clearly the possible....’ And so they didn’t want to go there too fast, and had anybody really come out and said about our report, ‘that’s the answer,’ no one [] wanted to be dragged there, nobody wanted to leap. And what people hadn’t anticipated was [], the middle is so weak that things got so hostile that it basically melted the middle.

Mr. Grassley and others said, “Sorry, not going to have any part of this,” at which point Baucus was basically by himself, made it harder for the White House to pivot, because then they were somewhat negotiating against themselves. And at that moment, in the absolute vacuum of what seemed to be Republican support, Dole and Baker then became in some ways quite popular. And in many ways more, I mean Senator Daschle was involved every week in the debate and going to the White House and really engaged in the inner workings of the policy, but from a political standpoint, Senators Dole and Baker, and in particular Senator Dole, became quite unique as prominent Republicans who, while not endorsing the Baucus bill or any particular piece of the legislation, were willing to stand up and say that they thought that reform was necessary and that Republicans needed to be part of that process and shouldn’t sit on the sidelines.

I think the DNC put Senator Dole in one of their commercials in a way that he found somewhat underwhelming and complained quickly and it was taken off the air. But there was a healthy focus, and it looks like what’s going to ultimately come out of the Senate is going to look quite a bit like our proposal, and the hot button issue of the public option—this is a little more detailed than the good people of Maine might be looking for, but we had proposed a state-based approach where states could opt in to the public option. In the current legislation, there’s a state-based approach where it’s presumed states opt out, and you’re missing a couple of key senators on that one, Senator [Tom] Carper has just been asked to see if he can come up with a new approach and it wouldn’t shock me if we switch from ‘opt out’ to ‘opt in.’

As a matter of legislative theory, had the White House and others leapt for joy and said “Eureka! That’s the compromise!” Might the summer have been less toxic? Might some more Republicans have affiliated with it? It’s always easy to do the ‘what could have been,’ but it does seem that the old strategy of holding your position and cutting a deal at the end isn’t working at the moment. And so it’s something we’re starting to ask ourselves about, if there’s a different way to encourage just the energetics of the political negotiation.

BW: The report, did it only cover what ought to be in health care legislation, or did it also cover how to negotiate bipartisan position on health care?

JG: It was not a how-to discussion in any kind of explicit tenor, so I mean it was a policy document. It certainly framed the urgency for action, the rationale for that action to be bipartisan. While we are certainly supportive of the health care bill moving forward, it is in fact

quite similar to what the four of them proposed. [] Many have a real concern that while it might pass, the ability to implement something that affects that much of the economy and that many people without some modicum of bipartisan support may be pretty fragile. So I think the report does speak to the desire and need for the country to come together around something of that magnitude.

And having of course, we're down to our last eighteen thousand copies, so I'm happy to give you one as you walk out, but they each wrote personal letters that opens it up, and we really did of course try to take appropriate advantage of their experience. And obviously Senators Mitchell, Daschle and Dole all had very significant legislative efforts on health care, Senator Baker had some but not quite to the same extent.

BW: How much does the report reflect the work of Chris Jennings and Mark McClellan?

JG: They were certainly key to the initial frame and much of the writing; they were very engaged. We had a staff here that had the wonderful job of sending something out, having eight people tell them what's imperfect in all kinds of ways, and then have to try to rehash into something. But Chris and Mark, especially in the last month, spent more time on this effort than they probably could have ever anticipated when they signed up and we told them it would just be modest amount of time. And they also did a very good job in working with each senator when necessary, one-on-one. Very often, the senators actually didn't negotiate directly with each other, they would kind of do it, they would each call a person who they felt was their most appropriate intimate and say, 'this is what I got,' 'this is as far as I can go.' And then we'd have a secondary negotiation.

One other thing about Senator Mitchell is, he is remarkably self-contained. He didn't staff himself, I mean he obviously had terrific support at his law firm, but very frequently the phone would ring and: "This is George," did his own e-mail, shockingly seemed to keep much of his own calendar. And so as we were trying to set things up, we would work through three or four levels of people in most of these other offices, and you'd tell him you were thinking about a meeting, he's like, "Hang on a second," and he'd fiddle with his Blackberry. So he has managed to evolve into modern communications and technology in ways that not everybody of his generation, especially upon leaving an institution like the Senate, where you're surrounded by a coterie of supporters.

BW: I'm curious, what kind of an arrangement in a situation like this is made with the law firms that these gentlemen are part of?

JG: We did agree on a couple of things. First of all, we had no concerns about conflicts, they were all working with us as individuals, their connections and interests in these issues is why we wanted their participation, and we feel that way broadly. There's a slightly precious attitude in this town, and I'm a [] fan of the president but this, you know, 'ooh, I see a lobbyist, run away.' I certainly understand the desire to get more people involved in the public discourse, but I think as long as people are transparent about their relationships, I kind of think the more relationships,

the better.

We also did, in order to give them comfort, except for the health care project, indicate that while they had contributed in different ways in these different studies, it shouldn't be presumed that each of these sentences was something that they would - So we had the kind of generic disclaimer that we have for our fiduciary board as well. And we provided each of the senators with a modestly respectful honorarium, just for engaging with the organization, but didn't have a financial relationship with the firms or weren't treated like a client.

BW: Is it your impression that these firms who hire these former senators, and in this case former majority leaders, look upon them as doing this kind of work as just sort of *pro bono*, or for the betterment of mankind?

JG: I would say *pro bono* for the betterment of mankind, and to sustain the very high profile of the firm as a beacon of policy insight and public goodwill. So I don't think you hire a former Senate majority leader honestly because you want him to go do a lot of legal research. I seem to remember at one point Senator Mitchell, as I was asking him to do one too many things, reminded me of the nineteen other nonprofit affiliations, you know better than I, but a broad array of activities.

BW: Looking, just going back to health care for a moment, looking at what is temporarily almost an impasse in that, and you as—I've forgotten quite how you said it—that the middle sort of evaporated, does the lack of bipartisan energy on that, does that energize you, or discourage you? How do you look upon that?

JG: One of my friends the other day told me that it seems that our effect on bipartisanship was subtle at the moment, which I thought was a nice way to put it. Certainly not energized by the partisanship, the Bipartisan Policy Center does not have a lot of competition right now, but that's more of an unfortunate reality than a sense of pride. I think that this is a cyclical process, we've certainly had many experiences of great partisanship in the past, they tend to exhaust themselves, and occasionally the public will in fact tell a bunch of incumbents to go get new jobs, which is always a motivating factor.

I think the stimulus package, the process of having to spend a trillion dollars during a transition, was unfortunate. The purpose of transitions are job fairs and they're cooling off periods, to kind of let people work through the necessary antagonisms of an election. And to be thrown into a mass of legislative effort that early, it was for many different reasons, but very difficult to get any kind of bipartisan collaboration there, and I think that just threw us off on the wrong foot. And the president has had such an ambitious agenda that there really hasn't been, still hasn't been that moment to kind of exhale from the election. So we're hoping that that starts to change.

And we certainly find that almost every legislator we talk to on an individual basis laments the situation, and I think with sincerity wishes it were different, but seems to feel that they no longer have the ability to change the system. There's a kind of resignation to it which is, I mean it's

encouraging that there's a will and a desire for it to be like it used to be, but obviously discouraging that they've all come to take it as now a given for the time being.

BW: Is the Obama administration aware of what you're doing here, and looking maybe upon you to bring them back on that bipartisan path?

JG: They are aware of us. I was involved in the campaign some and have a number of friends who are now working inside the administration, so there's some acknowledgment there. They were quite aware of the health care effort. In fact, Senator Dole had more than a few conversations with Rahm Emanuel, which I just smile at because it just seems like a slightly unexpected pairing. They're very smart, and one of the things that I think was unique about the campaign was, and maybe they just got very lucky, but it seems that they had a very good sense of policy and political rhythm, and not to overreact too soon. And there were a number of moments in the campaign where all of the mid-level political apparatchiks, like myself, were freaking out that everything was going down, and there was a different kind of Zen approach.

So I have some hope that that's the case. I also think that any time you have a change election you have kind of a victory lap by the incoming administration, and so bipartisanship is usually not the rage in the first eighteen months, and then traditionally you have a mid-term election which chops down the enthusiasm of the recent president and then there's efforts to do things, like welfare reform. So it wouldn't surprise me if we were somewhat more prominent in years three and four than one and two, but lots can happen.

BW: Did one or more of the four senators invest themselves in another issue, or was it pretty much concentrated on health care?

JG: Senators Dole and Daschle continued to work on agriculture issues together, particularly how agriculture connects with energy policy and climate change. Senator Mitchell got involved and hosted a couple of meetings for us on financial sector reform, actually specifically looking at the kind of credit rating agencies and the role that they played, or should have played in overseeing the financial instruments.

BW: At a time when already our economy was in dire straits.

JG: Yes. And Senator Baker had expressed an interest and we started working on a project on natural resource issues, but were not able, we just didn't kind of get the spark or the funding to make a bigger deal out of it. But yes, the idea was that there would be the kind of collective engagement over health care, and then as much as possible we would take advantage of particular interests where we could.

BW: Talk about the panel chairs then, and how they're involved and their relationship and the sort of hierarchy and so forth. And I notice that there's some pretty prominent names among them, for sure.

JG: So the basic organizational theory here is that we have a handful of projects, they are all largely autonomous from a policy standpoint, so we don't have the four senators or a board looking over the shoulders of the individual project co-chairs. And they're each structured a little bit differently. Our transportation project has four former elected officials. We really wanted to focus there because transportation bills have become such a political morass with the bridge to nowhere and all the kind of public resentment that - You tend to have two approaches: you kind of have the status quo, 'let's build roads' team, and then the wouldn't it be a perfect world if' team, and since the perfect-world team [is] never speaking to the real issues, then they will go with the build-roads team.

And so we were trying to find kind of an agenda for reform that was also politically pragmatic, and so Senator Slade Gorton, former Congressman Sherwood Boehlert, Martin Sabo, and initially, now Senator Mark Warner, were our four co-chairs. Senator Warner got a day job and so Dennis Archer, the former mayor of Detroit stepped in. And then we have around the table twenty or so people who are either policy experts or have a lot at stake in the transportation system working.

In our energy project we have former EPA Administrator Bill Reilly, John Rowe, the head of the largest power company in the country, and recently John Holdren, who's now the president's science advisor, and Sue Tierney has taken his place, who was at DOE and secretary of energy and environment in Massachusetts. And on Iran we have Senator [John] Danforth, Senator [Chuck] Robb, and General Chuck Wald, they've been stepping up quite thoughtfully and taking positions that were seen as somewhat hawkish six months ago and are now seeming to be pretty on the money, sadly. And we have Lee Hamilton and Tom Kean doing our homeland security project, who as you know were the 9/11 leads.

And if schedules in time allow, we would try and have more interaction between the four senators and the project leaders. It's just been hard to pull off. There's one, we're trying something new, and again, hope that Senator Mitchell's back in time, which is, they have all expressed interest in the debt and deficit issue of crisis proportion. Not quite ready to roll up their sleeves and get in at the level they did in the health care project, but Senator Pete Domenici and Dr. Alice Rivlin have agreed that they're going to run a task force with the three senators now, and Congressman [Dick] Gephardt actually just recently joined us to take what we call the Mitchell seat, so the four of them will launch that project, and then say how thrilled they are to have Pete Domenici and Alice Rivlin doing the bulk of the work.

BW: So you obviously have magnetism as an organization.

JG: Well, yes, I think without question, the four senators' work was what gave us the gravity to have that magnetic pull. And as I've said, we do great with former legislators, which may say something about the times.

BW: So you're into your third year now, I suppose?

JG: Yes, we're into our third year as the Bipartisan Policy Center, and our eighth year as an institution, so we have a little more momentum from the history of working the energy project. We've basically been in the midst of institutional retrofit, you know, how to move from a one topic operation to a larger multi-topic effort.

BW: I was not aware of how integrated those two entities are, I mean one mutated into the other.

JG: So the energy project is now a project of the larger, yes.

BW: Insofar as living up to your expectations?

JG: I haven't really reflected. It's, yes, I think it's working actually quite well. We have the good fortune and challenge that our first project was really very successful and had discrete, noticeable impacts on national policy, so that's a pretty high bar. I don't expect that all of our projects will have that same impact. We are at the point now with our projects that most of the new ones are in their kind of eighteen months to two years old, so they're just at the moment where the recommendations are crisp enough that they should start to have that effect, if things go according to plan. So it's a little bit early to give you proof of mission, but it feels good. We've got a staff that's incredibly diverse, people who used to work for NRA and the Sierra Club, and they all, everyone likes each other, so I think we're kind of an existence proof that bipartisanship is possible, and we'll see what kind of ultimate influence we have.

BW: Would you call Senator Mitchell kind of the embodiment of the bipartisan legislator that is appropriate, called for?

JG: Yes, I think it's important that—we don't necessarily look for bipartisanship within a single individual, in that I think a lot of times, and I think this is a mistake, people who call for bipartisanship confuse it with nonpartisanship and essentially say, wouldn't it be better if we could all just agree. And I think it's our view, my view, that partisanship is in fact the engine of a democracy, it's just, there's a way for it to be constructive. And all four senators, but I think certainly particularly Senator Mitchell, is remarkably good at, kind of like Senator Kennedy, at having a clear sense of his own values and interests and goals, but having the kind of political intelligence and empathy to realize that not everyone else has the exact same agenda, and then figuring out how, without violating those principles, you can make public policy.

And so what I think we are lacking right now, when I say the center is weak, is not so much just centrists, but people who are capable of frankly putting deals together. And in business, putting a deal together is an aspirational thing; right now in Congress it implies a lack of moral fortitude. So those kinds of leaders, and I think Senator Mitchell certainly epitomizes the kind of person who can figure out a situation and understand what the interests are and the bottom lines of the people he's working with. We could certainly use a couple more of those in the U.S. Senate.

BW: So you would regard his years as majority leader as very successful ones along those

lines, is that correct?

JG: I think, and it's easy to, you look back at the major accomplishments, and yes, I do think that his years as majority leader saw some major pieces of legislation pass, and you had a division between the White House and Congress and those relationships seemed to function pretty well. I think a lot of Republicans remember Senator Mitchell as being quite partisan in certain moments, but always able to then set that down and just go be George Mitchell, and I think that's what people have lost, is that kind of fabric of connection that allows them to disagree without being disagreeable, I think is the way Senator Baker often puts it.

BW: As history looks back on George Mitchell, how do you think he ought to be remembered?

JG: Well, he will certainly be remembered, if history were to begin today, as I think the person who solved the crisis in Ireland. [p/o] And I think he'll be remembered as being one of the more publicly successful majority leaders. He was, I think, rightly seen as someone who, when you kind of think iconically of a majority leader, and I think he embodies that kind of presence and gravitas, and I think was more of a public force than some others have been.

BW: What words would you use to describe just being in his presence?

JG: He's a generous and easy going person, so he does not come with any airs that one of his achievements and stature certainly could justify. He's very deliberate, and [he's] kind of lawyerly; you can sometimes see him screening ideas in his own head before he'll speak them. And I think he very much also lives in the moment, which is not a romantic idea, but I found that he's very good at being focused on what you're talking about when you're talking about it, and then that'll close and he'll be doing something else. On a number of occasions we got—and I think I should say he's very fast—we would get very good input by handing him something that he had never seen before, and in seven minutes he would give you a really kind of - So I mean his focus is quite unique.

BW: What would he give you?

JG: I'm saying he would mark up a document in ways that were both specific to substance but also structural, so there's a different kind of cognition that enables somebody in a short period of time to read some body of, understand it such that they can actually refashion it, not just quibble around the margins. And I can remember a couple of times when he did that in ways that we were impressed with. He gave us a lot more work to do, but it was an impressive moment.

BW: Anything we're leaving unsaid here?

JG: Well, I hope you come back in ten or fifteen years and do it again. But no, he's been a tremendous asset to the organization, and one of the high points of just doing this job has been

the ability to work with Senator Mitchell. So glad you're recording some of this for posterity.

BW: Great, thanks very much.

End of Interview