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Interview with Samuel D. “Sandy” Berger by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Berger, Samuel D. “Sandy”

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

January 29, 2003

Place

Washington, DC

ID Number

MOH 392

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Biographical Note

Samuel R. “Sandy” Berger is a native of New York, a graduate of Cornell University (1967) and Harvard Law School (1971). He served as a special assistant to Mayor John Lindsay of New York, legislative assistant to Senator Harold Hughes (D-IA), deputy director of the Policy Planning Staff, Department of State (1977-1980), deputy national security advisor (1993-1996) and national security advisor (1997-2000). He is now president of Stonebridge, an international affairs consulting firm.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: early impressions of Senator Muskie; observations of the State Department during Muskie’s term as Secretary of State; speech writing for Muskie; and post-1980 relationship as lawyers and friends.

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Don Nicoll: It is the 29th of January, 2003, we are in the offices of Samuel R. Berger, Stonebridge, in Washington, D.C. Mr. Berger, you were in the State Department as deputy director of policy and planning for the State Department when Senator Muskie became secretary of state. He came from the Senate to a very different institution. What was your observation of him coming into that setting?

Samuel Berger: Well, first of all, it's worth remembering that this was a surprise selection by President Carter, and a rather traumatic time for those of us at the State Department. Secretary Vance, who we had worked for and come to the State Department to work with from 1977, had resigned over a disagreement with President Carter on the rescue attempt in Iran. And the question then would be who President Carter would select to replace him. There were a number of possibilities speculated about, none of which included Senator Muskie.

There was a three or four-day period while President Carter was making that judgment. My good friend Arnie Miller was the director of personnel at the White House. I would speak to him each day saying, "What do you know? What can you tell me?" And after about four days he said, "I'll tell you this, it's not announced yet, but the president has asked Senator Muskie to come to the State, to be secretary of state."

I always had a very high regard of Senator Muskie from having watched him in the Senate and watched his leadership in the Senate. We were in an unusual position, because I worked for Tony Lake, who was director of policy planning. Tony had worked for Senator Muskie in the campaign of 1972. Tony was really the only person that knew Muskie, so we quickly became kind of the transition team for the secretary. And I think because of Tony's preexisting relationship, very quickly became part of Secretary Muskie's team of close advisers.

I think it was a transition for him from being an elected official for thirty-five years as governor and as senator, to being a Cabinet member, albeit the number one Cabinet member working for President Carter. I think that he realized that there was a learning curve because there were a lot of issues he hadn't dealt with before. But he was a very quick learner, he listened very well, and he was a very wise man.

I think there are certain things that were hardest for him in that transition. Number one, I remember he once told me that he'd never talked to the press except on the record. In thirty-five years of politics he had a practice of never talking on background. If he couldn't talk on the record, he said, I shouldn't talk to them. Well, as secretary of state sometimes that's a dangerous thing. You want to keep a line of communication to the press, but you can't come out of a meeting and be on the record, talking about what happened in the meeting, but you want the press to have some idea.

It took us a couple of weeks to convince him that, in certain circumstances, he would have to, it would be advisable for him to talk on background. But he bristled under that. And about a week into this, we were coming back from some trip abroad and we said, Mr. Secretary, (he actually still liked to be called Senator when he was secretary, by his team) the press would like a little briefing on background. And so he did it almost grudgingly.

Next day, the lead story in the *New York Times*, based on that interview said, Senior State Department official briefing the press said, "I felt the meeting was a little like sticking my toe in the ocean in Maine on a cold winter's day." It was a typical Muskie, he said, "Yeah, well, okay I'll do it on background, but I think the public has a right to know who's talking," and he certainly identified himself. I thought that was kind of vintage Muskie. From that point on he very infrequently did anything on background.

I think the second thing that was the adjustment for him, in addition to the subject matter, since he'd been his own boss as governor and as senator. Now he worked for President Carter. He was very loyal to Carter, I think understood he was part of the team, a very important part of the team. It was a delicate period, we had the hostage crisis in Iran and many other things going on. There was a little bit of friction, not so much at his level but at the lower level, as Carter was challenged in 1980 by Senator Kennedy, for the nomination.

Lots of reporters speculated that Secretary Muskie might be a compromise candidate who might satisfy everybody. He let that speculation run for a couple of weeks, but he never could quite get to a Shermanesque statement. I think that irritated the White House a bit, until one point I think finally Hamilton Jordan called Leon Billings, Muskie's top aide he'd brought with him, and said, you know, "You got to shut this down." And, of course, Muskie did.

What struck me about him, and why I wish he'd had a second term as secretary of state, or full term, was his wisdom. He faced a lot of very difficult issues, but he brought to them a tremendous judgment that came from his own experience, that came from his own intellect, that came from his own instincts. He would listen to everybody and come to his view, I think in the beginning a little more tentatively, because he realized that he hadn't dealt with some of these issues before. He was a methodical man, he liked to understand what he was doing. But he was a very, very wise man, a man with very good judgment, obviously with tremendous presence and command. I think had Carter won, he would have stayed on as secretary of state. I think he was beginning to like it after a while. He would have been a great secretary of state in a second Carter term.

DN: What was it like briefing him, as I assume you did from time to time?

SB: Well, I'd heard all the Muskie stories from my friends from '72, Bob Shrum--- the throwing of the ashtray--- and I guess I expected a lot more volatility. I think perhaps he'd mellowed a bit by the time he came to State. He could be a bit sour in a private setting, I mean, he wasn't a back slapper, but I never saw that temper.

One story that I remembered with great affection. He arrived in April and it got to be about June and he had not yet given a major foreign policy speech, he was still trying to get his feet on the ground. And, one of my responsibilities as deputy director of policy planning, along with Director Tony Lake, was speech writing. We went to him and said, "We think it's time for you to kind of give your maiden speech. Do you have any thought as to what you'd like to talk about?" Without hesitation, he said, "I want to talk about foreign assistance." He said, "When I ran for the Senate for the first time in Maine," he said, "I campaigned for greater foreign assistance. I've always been proud of that, I've always supported it, and we don't do enough in this country, and that's what I want to talk about." I thought that was a brave and admirable thing.

So I went off and I drafted a speech to be given on July 5th, right after the long July 4th weekend. It was probably ready two weeks in advance. I drafted the speech and I gave it to Leon Billings, again, the doorkeeper and someone who had a culturally different style than the State Department. If the State Department was diplomacy, Leon was politician, straightforward, and rather saucy in his language. I gave him the speech, and I thought it was a pretty good speech. Leon called me back in after a few hours and said, "This is terrible." He said, "This is a, this is such pablum," he said, "and it's got no backbone at all." He said, "Let's go after Goldwater, let's go after these Republicans on the Hill for holding up this money." I said, "Well, Leon, you know, he's now secretary of state, it's different than being a senator, and secretaries of state generally are not as partisan, as you know, as senators are. Are you sure you want to do that?" "Oh, absolutely."

So, I went back, I rewrote the speech, I toughened it up and I gave it back to Leon. And he said, "I mean, this is still milk toast to me. Go write a real speech, Berger." So I went off and I wrote a real tub thumping speech, which I thought was thoroughly inappropriate for a secretary of state. I gave it to Leon and he said, "That's terrific," and he sent it into the Secretary, and the Secretary left that Thursday for a long weekend in Maine. I called on Wednesday, "Have you heard anything?" He said, "No." I called on Thursday, Leon said, "No, it's fine, it's great, it's a great speech, terrific."

On Sunday I got a call from Leon. He said, "We're going up on Monday, to Kennebunk. We're going to pick up Secretary Muskie and fly him to New York," where the speech was. "Do you want to come with me in case he's got any last minute edits?" I said, "Sure." So we left that Monday morning. We flew a little Air Force One jet up to Kennebunk and, we drove to the house. Mrs. Muskie was very gracious, I'd never been to the house before, and she took me on a tour. She said Senator Muskie was getting dressed.

We got in the car, it was now ten o'clock. The speech was at twelve-thirty, and we have to get to

New York. Leon said, "Is the speech all right?" I will not use exactly the language that Muskie said, but he said [in essence], "The speech is crap. I'm not running, I'm not the sheriff of Chicago," he said, "I'm the secretary of state. I can't give a speech that sounds like I'm running for Democratic national chairman." They had a back and forth that was rather brisk.

I was in the awkward position of not really still knowing Secretary Muskie terribly well, although agreeing with him a hundred percent. I realized that in two hours he was going to stand up in front of fifteen hundred people at the Hilton in New York and say something, and that I was probably going to have to rewrite this thing in an hour. He made it clear that he thought this speech was inappropriate for the secretary of state. I luckily had all my old drafts. On the plane (these were the days before word processors) I cut, pasted, stapled and did transition sentences. I called up the folks who were waiting for us in New York, said, "Get four typewriters ready, we're going to retype the speech." That was the speech he gave.

Of course he ad-libbed a bit, added to it, he was a great person to write for because he's somebody who made the words, however good they were, sound a lot better. And the next day there was a lead editorial in the *New York Times* saying, "Courageous Speech By Secretary Muskie, his first speech talked about foreign assistance". But it was a speech that was almost not given.

DN: Now, did you write any other speeches for him?

SB: I did, I wrote a number of speeches for him. As deputy director of policy planning, I had both a policy role and a speech writing role. And, as I say, he was generally very good to work with, because he cared about words. He cared about, he understood that for a secretary of state, a speech was a declaration of policy, and the process of writing a speech was a process of making policy. We'd seen that time and again. And so he took it seriously.

Even in 1980 when President Carter was running for reelection, we'd go to Chicago, let's say, and give a speech at the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. And then he'd sneak out at night, because secretary of states are not supposed to be political, and he'd go to the Roman Posinski restaurant in Chicago, the largest Polish community in the world, excuse me, in the United States, I think. And of course I'd never seen anything like it. He was an extraordinary hero in the Polish community. And I remember going to him one night and hearing him speak and he told the story of his life, and his father, and his father coming to this country and dying, I think, if I recall the story, just right before he became governor. And the poignancy of this first generation son of a Polish immigrant being sworn in as governor and not having his father there, there was not a dry eye in the house. So he did a little campaigning for Carter on the side. We snuck out, the press didn't quite know where we were going. He obviously did it under the cover of giving a serious foreign policy speech during the day.

DN: Now, in the subsequent speeches that you wrote for him, were you dealing directly with him from the beginning, or was it still filtered through Leon?

SB: Well, a little bit of both. As time went on I developed a relationship with Senator Muskie, which I value greatly and which I maintained with him after he left State and I left government.

He was practicing law, and I was too, and we'd get together from time to time for lunch. I became very fond of him, and after I had a little more confidence in the relationship, there was more direct dealing.

But Leon was always there, and Leon took a particular pride in driving the stiffest Foreign Service people crazy. I think that he thought there was an awful lot of superciliousness among some of the career people, and a little bit of self-inflated stiffness. To get to Muskie they had to go through Leon. The more stiff that they'd get, the more foul Leon would get. And some of those interactions were wonderful, because diplomats are trained, of course, to be stoic, smile and never to show that they're shocked. I think it was a little game that Leon played to see if he could ever provoke these guys into saying, "Well that's just disgusting, Leon." But I dealt more with Muskie and Leon together, and Tony of course.

Tony Lake really was Muskie's Sherpa at the State Department. He helped him build the relationships with people like Peter Tarnoff, (who later went on to become under secretary of state in the Clinton administration) who then was the executive secretary. Others that were part of the Vance team, were obviously very close to Lake and I think Tony did an extraordinary job of giving them the opportunity to build a loyalty to Muskie. I think that was important again to his sense of confidence in dealing on a global stage in matters of war and peace. Again, we had these hostages in Iran. Literally there were lives at stake in terms of what he would say, and what he would do.

I also think that he came to rely quite heavily on Deputy Secretary Warren Christopher, who subsequently became secretary of state. He had been Secretary Vance's deputy, and an extraordinarily talented, bright, wise man himself, and I think they became a good team.

DN: One final question. Were there, outside of your circle in the Policy Planning Office, were there resentments from folks who had been obviously devoted to Secretary Vance at, directed toward Senator Muskie?

SB: No, I don't think so. I think that, if you look at the State Department, ninety-five percent of the people there are career people. They're very dedicated, they're used to working for a secretary very loyally and intensely, and then the party may change, the secretary may change, and they've gone through those transitions. They're very good at it, and I think we should be grateful that we have a high quality career Foreign Service that we do. Then you have the political, or assistant secretary level people, who were Vance's people. Only, when Vance resigned, on principle I think many of them wanted to resign en masse. Vance was very explicit, and he insisted that we stay. He didn't know at that point who his successor would be, but he wanted there to be continuity. The only person who went with him was Hodding Carter, who was his spokesman, and all the rest of us stayed. And I think there might have been a little bit of resentment of President Carter, because of the circumstances under which Secretary Vance was placed in that episode involving the rescue. He was out of town when the decision was made, he was not informed of it. But I don't think it was directed to Muskie.

I think as time went on, Muskie grew in confidence. This is somebody who had dominated the Senate, or been a dominant and powerful force in the Senate, been a governor, but now was

working on a global stage with a new brief. As he gained confidence in his own instincts, by the last six or eight months of his tenure, which was less than two years, he really was feeling very comfortable in that position. He was a very good emissary for the United States around the world because as he went abroad he represented America's strength as well as its wisdom.

I really do think it's unfortunate that he didn't have a full term because I think that he would have been a great secretary of state in several respects. Number one, he had enough self-confidence that he would have voiced his own views, and tried to shape the policy in a second term. Number two, I think he would have, not necessarily accepted everything in the State Department the way it was. I think he probably would have made some reforms and changes, which are always necessary in any bureaucratic institution. But I think that there was a good deal of affection for him by the end of that period.

DN: Thank you very much.

End of Interview