INTERVIEW II

DATE: February 3, 2011

INTERVIEWEE: GEORGE McGOVERN

INTERVIEWER: Mark K. Updegrove

PLACE: Senator McGovern's home, St. Augustine, Florida

U: Well, I thought we'd start chronologically, start talking about your career, which began with the 85th and 86th Congresses, beginning in 1957. Can you talk about what that was like for you?

M: Well it seemed to me that, in terms of the political situation, that [Dwight] Eisenhower and Sam Rayburn, the speaker of the house, and Lyndon Johnson, the majority leader of the South[Senate], had an informal understanding that the Congress would run domestic policy, and the White House would be basically responsible for foreign policy and national defense. I don't know that there was ever any agreement quite that type, but that's the way it functioned. Eisenhower was not particularly interested in domestic problems, had very little experience with it, but he knew a lot about defense and foreign policy, and he had some of his strongest people in those two areas. And if that was the understanding, it worked out very well. There was none of this negative--very little of this negative stuff that is going on now with the Congress, especially the Republicans, trying to block what the administration is doing. I know some of the right wingers on the Republican side have said publically they'd like to see Barack Obama fail. There was no

hint of that the first four years I was in the Congress. Everybody wanted Eisenhower to succeed and seemed to rather like him. I mean there was a certain amount of . . . a few shots about his murdering the English language. (Laughter)

U: Which was justified. (Laughter)

M: Yes, but there was no bitterness between the Congress and the White House and . . . .

U: Why is that, do you think? What was different (inaudible)?

M: I think it was, first and foremost, the love of country, which was stronger than the love of making political points. You know, we made political points, but they were secondary to the wellbeing of the country. Fresh in our minds was the memory of World War II, and the Great Depression, and the fact that we got through both of those things successfully, and emerged even stronger. The United States was never more the undisputed and admirable country in the eyes of the international community, but it did seem to me there was less partisanship, and as I say, I think it was partly the memory of going through that Depression and then World War II and doing them both successfully.

U: Is that the difference, do you think, between that generation and this generation? We didn't have a conflict that brought us all together like the Great Depression or World War II? Is that the difference, do you think?

M: I think that's partly it, and also you do not have the G.I. Bill of Rights. Fourteen million young men, mostly men, some few girls, but mostly young men. I would say that a surprising percentage of the people that I served with in the Congress at that time were products of the G.I. Bill of Rights, including myself. I went all the way through to a Ph.D. in history at Northwestern University, one of the most expensive colleges in America, still is. I couldn't have even thought about going to Northwestern at a time when I had a wife and one child, and then later two children before I got through, except

for the G.I. Bill. That was so much a part of the lives of my generation that I think that gave us an appreciation. We were all better educated than we would have been.

Tom Brokaw said that my generation was the greatest generation. If, in fact, we were--and I have to add I thought Thomas Jefferson, [George] Washington and [James] Madison, that generation did pretty well--but let's say we were the greatest generation. The G.I. Bill had a lot to do with that, because 14 million guys, many of whom could never have gotten a college education, were pretty well educated by the time we were adults and then ready to take over. And that created a good atmosphere in the country, too, that program. So I think that we came into government. We had just won World War II. We had that G.I. Bill. The Congress began to attract people who were very grateful to this country for what it [had] done, and very proud of it. Proud we stopped [Adolf] Hitler and [Benito] Mussolini and [Hideki] Tōjō and won those conflicts. I have to tell you, in my case, it's the last war I believed in.

U: World War II?

M: Yes, I believed in it all the way, and I still do to this day. We had to fight that war and we had to win. So there were those factors that I think it made it very pleasant to be working for the United States Government as a congressman. You know Eisenhower was the supreme commander of all Allied Forces in World War II, so it wasn't bad having him as president. And we had this brilliant Adlai Stevenson challenging him as well as anybody could. Nobody could have beaten Eisenhower but Stevenson talked sense, and he was a brilliant man. So I think that we had some pretty good things going for us in that period.

I loved being in Congress. Of course, I loved the Senate, too. I never had a day when I wasn't glad I was a part of the Congress.

U: You talked about Lyndon Johnson reigning supreme over the Senate. What was your first exposure to LBJ?

M: It was when I was in the House of Representatives. [To] Hubert Humphrey I said, "You know, I would like to meet Lyndon Johnson." And Hubert was my next door neighbor in Washington. Also Hubert was a native South Dakotan, growing up there. Hubert said to me, "You're going to meet one of the most remarkable men you'll ever meet in your life." I was impressed with him, impressed with his capacity to get his arms around that whole Washington network, the Congress, the White House, the whole thing. He had a--seemed to me he had a very thorough grasp, especially of the Congress, and especially the Senate, but Sam Rayburn, his fellow Texan, was presiding over the House, and the two of them ran a pretty good show. (Laughter) We got a lot done in that period. Johnson was a doer; he wanted get things done. He sweated out the civil rights issue, but in the end he came down on the side of the Hubert Humphreys of this world, you know. I admired Johnson. I thought he was a very capable, unusually capable, man, very talented man in terms of understanding our political process. From the very first, I was impressed with him. I didn't walk away thinking he was a blowhard politician. I saw a first rate mind and somebody that loved government, loved politics. I was favorably impressed with him.

U: How would you characterize your early relationship with him?

M: Good. Yes, I had no problems with him.

U: Yes. JFK [John F. Kennedy] made you the director of the Food for Peace program--

M: Yes.

U: --upon his election as president in 1960. Can you describe that experience?

M: JFK knew that in the House I had talked a great deal about the need to feed the hungry and utilize our farm surpluses to reduce hunger in the world. Hubert was my

counterpart--not the counterpart; he was my partner on the Senate side. And he was in my office one day, Hubert was, and he read a newsletter that I was sending out to South Dakota. He said, "Can I have a copy of that? That's about the best statement on what we should do with these farm surpluses I've seen anywhere, George." And I said, "Well sure." After that, he stayed close to me in that issue, and he picked up the ball in the Senate, and Hubert was very good on that issue and was on it before I was, because he was in the Congress before I was. But he and I worked together on that, and that was the one aspect of agriculture that JFK liked. He was kind of bored with farm price supports and parity and all that stuff. He didn't know much about agriculture and he wasn't particular interested in finding out, any more than I might have been deeply involved with slum clearance or something like that, coming from South Dakota.

So I talked with Jack about the idea of Food for Peace, and he came to South Dakota to speak at the National Corn Picking Contest outside of Sioux Falls, about 70,000 farmers out there, big field, loud speakers, and everything. It was a cold October day. It was raining a little, and the wind was blowing, and somebody had written a speech for him. He had it lying down on the podium, but the wind kept flapping it up and he is trying to hold it down and speak to these farmers. It wasn't a very good speech anyway, and he didn't know really what he was reading. (Laughter) So we got in the car to see--no, we got into his airplane--to fly to my hometown where the Corn Palace was jammed with about 6000 people, drove the fire marshal mad. Anyway, as we are flying over, he said, "George, I really blew that speech. What do you think I ought to do at Mitchell? I hear that Corn Palace is jammed." I said, "Well, Jack, the first thing you ought to do is throw that speech away. It is no good anyway." "Well, what should I say?" he said. "I would just get up there, I'd say that farmers of South Dakota can do

more than any other Americans to promote peace in the world if we remember that food is health, food is strength, food is hope, food is peace in a hungry world, and if I'm elected president, I'm going to appoint a full time Food for Peace director, put him in the White House, and ask him to utilize our farm surpluses, not to depress farm prices here at home, but to use them to reduce hunger in the world." That's what he did. He got up--he was a quick study, as you know; he delivered those lines, and they just gave him thunderous applause.

And he lost South Dakota two to one. I lost it by a half of one point. I ended up as the Food for Peace director. (Laughter)

U: Not a bad compromise.

M: No. He called me on Thursday after the Tuesday election. I couldn't believe it. I was having dinner with some of my friends of mine in South Dakota, and he says, "George, I'm sorry I cost you that election out there in South Dakota. I said, "Listen Jack, you didn't cost me that election; the voters did. (Laughter) You had nothing to do with it." "Naw," he said, "Bobby told me what happened. Before you make any plans, come and see me." God, he lifted me right through the--you know, I was down in the dumps. Lost my Senate race, could've stayed in the House if I'd had any sense. (Laughter)

U: It worked out pretty well for you, though, didn't it?

M: It worked out. It was the best thing that could have happened to me, because it gave me a world view. I traveled all over the world. It was one time when I realized that when something bad happens to you in life, don't worry about it. It's going to change; sooner or later, it's going to change. And I've stayed with that philosophy ever since.

U: Tell me about Jack Kennedy.

M: Well, he wasn't nearly as well equipped for the presidency as Lyndon was, or Hubert, because he hadn't been around all that much. He'd come to the House and gone to the Senate, but he hadn't really been a leader in either place, except in labor relations; he took on that labor reform bill. But he was highly intelligent. He was a big reader, and I came to admire his leadership abilities. I thought that he understood the American people. He knew how to win an election against tough odds--Richard Nixon, who was a smart clever man. I came to appreciate both his leadership style and even the content of what he was doing.

I thought, in later years, that once elected, he made a series of mistakes: increasing our military involvement in Vietnam; the Bay of Pigs, which was a disaster; the beefing up of the military, which I didn't think was necessary. Right after Ike told the country in his farewell address about the dangers of the mounting power of the military industrial complex, Jack increased military spending about 10 billion in his first couple of years in office, right after that warning about [it].

U: Was it partly, do you think, because of the missile gap that he had warned about in the 1960s . . . to fulfill that promise more or less to the American people?

M: Partly, and, "We've got to get this country moving again." He kept saying that. "We've got to get this country . . . ." But it was the lack of missile strength, which turned out to be a myth. There was a missile gap, but it was in our favor. (Laughter)

U: Right.

M: So I think that he did make a series of mistakes in his early movements, and I think, if he were sitting here, he'd agree those were--particularly deepening our involvement in Vietnam.

U: Did you get a sense of the relationship between President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson?

M: Well, I think they both made an effort to make it work. And Jack invited him to sit in on cabinet meetings, and he used him internationally. I think it was a pretty good relationship.

U: Despite what you might read in books to the contrary, do you think that's overstated, the dissention between the two men?

M: It must have been awfully tough on Lyndon in that he had been telling Jack what to do when he was majority leader of the Senate and Jack was a freshman senator. It must have been tough, you know, ego-wise. All of us in politics have big egos or we wouldn't be there. And I think that must've been very hard on him.

U: I would imagine. Where were you when President Kennedy was assassinated?

M: Well, I was in the Senate. There weren't very many people there; there were just a few, and Teddy [Kennedy] was presiding. As you know, freshmen senators have to do the presiding. Teddy came to the Senate the same day I did. He was presiding, and Mike Mansfield, the majority leader, came in and he said, "George, would you take over for Teddy? We've got some bad news there." I said, "Well, sure." As I remember it, as soon as I took the seat and Mansfield had told Teddy what had happened, he moved to adjourn. I don't think I presided more than a few minutes, and they adjourned the Senate. I don't believe he announced to the Senate what happened; he just told Teddy. That's the way I remember it. God, I just thought it was awful. My secretary was on the way over by then to tell me what had happened, and she was just crying her eyes out, just sobbing. And she was a pretty tough little gal, but everybody was grief stricken. This young, he seemed so young, and he was young--42 years old as I recall, or something like that. So

it was a devastating blow. Everybody was proud of Jack Kennedy and the whole world was proud of this young leader and so on. It was a terrible day.

U: What was going though your mind on that day?

M: I just couldn't believe it. I just found that it was too much to take. You know I had worked for him for two years in the Food for Peace days, and been in his office many times. I knew Bobby very well, too. It just seemed unbelievable how this could have happened. If he had been seventy-five, it would have been easier to take, you know. With this young family and beautiful wife, and two little kids, and . . . . I don't know; I can't remember a sadder day, unless it was when Bobby was killed a few years later. I was very close to him, too.

U: Talk about your relationship with him, if you would.

M: Well it began, let's see, I supported President Kennedy in 1960, and it began when I was narrowly defeated, just maybe 1 percent, I've forgotten exactly, or half a percent or something like that. He took an interest in me from then on. And he admired some of the speeches. He admired the way I campaigned. He came out and campaigned for me in that race that I lost. And then he always liked the Food for Peace program and kept in close touch with me. When they were describing my job prospectus in Food for Peace, he said, "Put in there that this is a cabinet level standing." That was purely Bobby that did that. I didn't ask for it, and I didn't really care, but I appreciate it that he did.

U: Did you get a sense of the relationship between Bobby and Lyndon Johnson? [It was] famously contentious.

M: I think that there was some of that. Bobby had too much power to suit Lyndon; he hadn't earned it. He earned it because he was the brother of the president, and I think that . . . . He also knew that Bobby played a key role in Jack winning the nomination in 1960 and

defeating Lyndon Johnson. Bobby was given the role being the tough guy, the guy to say no, and the guy to make the final decisions. And I think that Johnson kind of liked Jack Kennedy, but didn't like this little brat that was throwing his weight around. (Laughter)

U: Was that palpable to you--the feelings between two men--was it palpable?

M: Could they overcome it?

U: Well, could you feel it in their presence?

M: Oh yes! I think so.

U: You were a member of the 88th and 89th Congresses, the 89th perhaps being the most transformative in history. Can you talk a little bit about that experience?

M: You have to tell me what 89 refers to.

U: Sorry. The 89th Congress was 1965-1966. That was at the time when you had, well the 88th was Civil Rights Act, 89th was the Voting Rights Act. The 89th was also Medicare and Higher Education and Elementary and Secondary Education.

M: Yes, it was an exciting time to be in the Senate, I'll tell you that. The filibusters and yet the final victory on all those counts you've just mentioned, it seemed like we took on everything in those years. But the passage of those two landmark civil rights bills is an enormous importance. I think it changed this country for the better, and it was just a very creative time in the life of the country, a very--and your word is right--transformative times in the life of the country. I remember being very proud that I was a United States senator during that period. It was very satisfying to see those victories rolled out. Let's see, at that time Johnson would have been the president.

U: Elected in his own right, yes. He took over for Jack Kennedy in 1963, and was elected in 1964.

M: Well he had a hand in all of that, very definitely. I remember when we went down there to the White House on the signing ceremonies and so on, he was very proud of that. And that's when he made that famous statement, "There goes the South for the next fifty years." He hit that right on the head. The solid South suddenly became the solid Republican South.

U: Was there one legislative triumph in that period that stands out above all the others?

M: I think it was the two civil rights measures equally valued. Boy, those were battles, too. I remember one night I was presiding, and Hubert Humphrey and John Stennis were debating. A filibuster was on, but those filibusters weren't entirely empty of content. The southerners made rather thoughtful statements against civil rights, and why they were opposed to it, and why they didn't want to extend the long arm of Washington into every relationship, [and] so on.

Stennis was making a rather eloquent defense, and it was Hubert's turn to be on the floor in a leadership role; he was the logical person. It was about three o'clock in the morning, and I'm presiding. Stennis said, "I was to say to the Senator from Minnesota, we had an old Negro mammy that worked in our home. She reared our children as much as their mother and I did, and I loved that old black lady. So did my wife; so did my children. When she got cancer, I myself went down to Mississippi and I took her to the Mayo Clinic in the Senators home state in Minnesota, and I stayed with that old lady until I was assured that she had the best doctors in the Mayo clinic. I loved her like I did a member of my family."

Tears came down, and he said, "Excuse me," and he dabbed at his eyes. And Hubert says, "Well, if the Senator will yield to me, I want to say that that's a very moving story that he's just told that shows the big heart that the Senator from Mississippi has. I

know he loved that old black la[dy]--I know that; we all know that here in this chamber. We know that he's a kind and decent man. But that old black lady can't go to a restaurant and have a cup of coffee with the Senator. She can't drink out of the same drinking fountain. She can't take her grandchildren to the public park. She can't see her children enrolled in the University of Mississippi--no blacks allowed. And that is what we are trying to change. We love that old lady too, but we want her treated like a human being."

Those two men, you know, a couple of old political jocks, it was so touching to see the two of them there. I would take anything for that experience, to see two men so opposite, you know, and yet both of them warm-hearted patriotic Americans. It was quite a lesson to me. And Hubert kept paying tribute to John Stennis, "I know he has done this, and I know he has done that. He is one of the kindest men in the United States Senate. When I came here as a freshman senator, nobody greeted me with open arms more warmly than the Senator from Mississi[ppi]. I know what a wonderful human being he is, and I just want these black people to get the same treatment that he and I get." It was a very dramatic thing. Humphrey was very good with that sort of thing.

U: It seems that there was a spirit of civility--

M: Absolutely.

U: --that aided in senators with very different points of views coming to compromise on certain issues.

M: Exactly.

U: We can certainly talk about it later, but that spirit is lacking--

M: It is. I don't know why, but it really is. I blame the Republicans a little more than the Democrats for the disappearance of this, because they seem to be more interested in defeating Democrats and getting control of the committee chairmanships then they are in

maintaining that civility inside the Senate. The Senate was frequently described as a club, and it really was that when I was there.

U: Based in collegialities.

M: Yes, based on that, and decency and civility. I remember one day [Anwar] Sadat was addressing a joint session of the Congress, the Egyptian leader. And you know the Senate would fall in, two by two, to go from the Senate over to the House Chambers because that was big enough to hold both things. And I just happened to fall in with Jim Eastland of Mississippi, and we were walking along there. And after Sadat finished speaking, I fell in with Jim again to go back to the Senate. I said to Jim, "Well, Jim, that was quite a speech." He said, "It sure was." But he said, "I didn't know that fellow was a nigger"--Sadat--"I didn't know he was a nigger. Did you know that?" And I said, "Well, I guess I did, Jim, because I had been to see him a while back." "By god, it just shows you can't believe everything you see in the press. He didn't look like a nigger to me." Anyway, he didn't think there was anything wrong with that. So I said good bye to him, and I went over to my office, and about a half of an hour [later] the phone rang. It was Jim Eastland. He said, "George, there's this guy from the *New York Times* there. He says I called that fellow Sadat a nigger. I want you to call him up and tell him that ain't so." I said, "But why don't you tell him that, Jim?" He said, "I did, but he doesn't believe me, but he will believe you. You're one of these big liberals that they all love. They like you liberal fellows. Call him up and tell him I didn't say that." And I said, "Well Jim, I am afraid that you did say something like that." "Well, I didn't mean anything by that. I got nothing against that guy. He gave a hell of a speech over there. I don't have anything against him. Tell that *Times* guy to lay off." I said, "Well, let me see, Jim, what I can do."

So I did call the *Times* and I said, "[I] understand my friend, Jim, has got a difference of opinion with you." And he said, "Well, he hasn't got a difference of opinion. He's just lying." (Laughter) I was standing three feet from you two guys. I heard what he said." I said, "Well, why stir it up? That was a private conversation. It wasn't something that he wanted in the press; it was a private conversation with me, and I'd hate to implicate my colleague here." They didn't use it.

U: Did they?

M They didn't.

U: That's remarkable. It shows some restraint on the part of the *New York Times*, not characteristic.

Had you occasion during those years in the Senate, when President Johnson was in the Oval Office, to deal with the President?

M: When he was president?

U: Yes, did you have occasion to deal directly with Lyndon Johnson?

M: Just indirectly. He sent Hubert to talk to Frank Church and me about laying off of our critiques of Vietnam. Hubert made a good show of it and he called us into the vice president's office, and he said, "You know, Lyndon's doing the best he knows how to preside over this country, and he has done a lot of good things; you guys know that. You know that we wouldn't have a lot of these programs if it weren't for Lyndon." Frank and I said, "You know, we are not trying to criticize him as such; we are trying to stop that war, and he is just wrong about Vietnam. Yes, he has done some great things, but we can't--" He said, "Well, I've got copies of these speeches you two guys are going to deliver here either today or tomorrow. I wish you would hold back on that." We said, "We can't do it, Hubert. We will do anything for you within reason, but we cannot go

against our conviction that this war is a disaster, and we just have to speak out. We should have spoken out before we did." I was the first person in the Senate to speak against the war. That was in September of 1963, when I said that this involvement is going to haunt us in every corner of the developing world if we don't get out of there. Anyway, this would have been 1965, and both of us went ahead and delivered those speeches. God, I wish I'd have known that Johnson secretly knew the war was a mistake.

U: Well, let's talk about . . . .

M: I'm going on the Johnson tapes.

U: Oh course, yes, but I look at the statement that you made to the Senate in 1963. You *were* the first to vocalize your belief that it was an unwinnable campaign, and that's, of course, prescient. What led you to believe, against an army of folks who supported the war, that we were not going (inaudible)?

M: Well, as a graduate student at Northwestern, and since then, I had been a great reader, and I read Owen Lattimore's book, *The Situation in Asia.* It's a very prophetic book in which he said pretty much what I said, that Asia is out of--I think that is the opening line: "Asia is out of control, from the Suez to Hong Kong," or something like that. There is a twin revolution going, a revolution of expectations for a better life and the revolt against imperial power all across Asia. We got out of the Philippines, the Dutch got out of their hold in Asia, and the French were under fire in French Indochina, and that we'll fare no better; that was pretty much the prediction. It's a very good book. Owen Lattimore was then a professor at Johns Hopkins University. And that book of his, *The Situation in Asia*, if our policymakers had read that book and understood it--I think it came out in 1949--they would not have gone into Vietnam, and there were other things that led me to believe that this was a no-win proposition.

U: What were the other things?

M: Other books?

U: Other books that led you to that same conclusion

M: Yeah, that was the first one. There was a book written by Howard K. Smith, *The State of Europe*, that had similar themes in it. There was a book by a journalist by the name of Leland Stowe, S-T-O-W-E, that had similar warnings. There was a professor I had at Northwestern who is now deceased by the name of Leften Stavrianos. He was a Greek, grew up as a Greek, and he himself wrote a book, *The Greek Dilemma* [*Greece: American Dilemma and Opportunity*?] on a revolt that took place in Greece against the royalty. And his lectures, which I listened to in the late 1940s, clued me in on some of these revolutionary forces that were taking place in the--against European Imperialism. And I remember thinking we were wise to get out of the Philippians, which we did, keeping a previous agreement. And that, you know, Indonesia was in revolt, Malaysia, all those areas. And I had read about those. I do not know that I can reconstruct all the bibliography for you accurately, but I know that I was convinced in my own reading that the Vietnam thing wouldn't work.

U: Despite the conventional wisdom that it was all part of the domino theory that if we lost one country in southeast Asia, that other countries would continue to fall, do you think other congressmen were willing to support Vietnam policy because they were sort of lemmings, or because there was great pressure against them? Why were you the only one at a certain point speaking out against this?

M: They were afraid of being pro-Communist. The red scare in this country had a lot to do with politicians going along with the war. In other words, if the Vietnamese had been fascists instead of Communists, they might have felt differently about it. The idea that

communism might triumph in Southeast Asia and then spread to Thailand and the so-called domino effect, that was very well accepted by a great many people in Congress, maybe most of them.

U: Yes, the "Who lost China?"

M: Yes, "Who lost China?" as though China was ours to lose.

U: Yes. Talk a little bit about the dissent against Vietnam and how that evolved in the Senate. And you were the forerunner [of] that movement. Can you talk about how that evolved throughout the mid- and late-1960s?

M: Well, when Jack was killed, and Lyndon took over, I thought, you know, this new administration is entitled to be free of criticism on any point until they get their feet on the ground. So I quit talking against Vietnam in late 1963-1964. And I thought when Johnson was reelected in 1964, he would get us out of there overnight. I remember telling people, "I'll tell you this, when Lyndon Johnson, once he is reelected, he'll terminate that thing overnight." I really believed it, that Johnson was too shrewd to continue that, but that he did not want to go into the 1964 campaign by repudiating a military involvement that his predecessor had thought was important.

U: But what led you to that belief beyond just his intrinsic shrewdness?

M: It wasn't beyond--it was his intrinsic--I just thought he'd see that as a place where we ought to get out of. It was his political shrewdness that led me to that view rather than anything he said. That's what I based it on. So I didn't say anything during the Johnson administration until after he was re-elected. Frank Church took the same course. He and I talked together; he said, "Lyndon will pull us out of there." So then after the election when he started to escalate the war, that's when Frank Church and I both opened up.

Up until then, the ball on descent was carried by Morse [Senator Wayne Morse] and [Ernest Henry] Gruening because they *did* think that we were going to get in deeper. I don't know why. The reason I think, what I was told, is that Morse had a former staff member in the administration at the State Department who they never would identify. They never would even admit that he was leaking them information, but I am sure that was true. Now, neither one of them ever told me that, but it was a strong belief in the Senate that they had a pipeline. And those speeches that they gave were brilliant all during the Johnson--in fact, they liked Lyndon, so they kept talking about "McNamara's war." Especially Wayne Morse, who Lyndon had done a number of favors to. "Mr. McNamara's war, Mr. McNamara's war," and they never mentioned Lyndon.

The same with Gruening, who liked Lyndon, too, so it was all McNamara's war. Isn't it amazing that it was McNamara in the administration that first turned against it?

U: Yes.

M: Anyway, they went after him hard, and they kept a drumbeat almost daily in the Senate. They led the dissent movement in 1963 and 1964. Then I think it's fair to say that beginning in early 1965, Frank Church, Bill Fulbright, myself maybe, were the big three going after the war. And we did it feeling we'd almost been betrayed by Johnson, who said, "We are not going north; we are not doing south. It's their war; they are the ones that have to win or lose it." He assured the country we're not putting in any additional forces there. So we felt somewhat betrayed.

U: When did the tide turn, do you think, in the United States, around the war?

M: You mean when a sizable number of people . . . .

U: Yes, when did that momentum really start to build?

M: I think it turned partly when Fulbright conducted those hearings fairly early in 1965, maybe in the spring, and they were carried on television around the clock. I think that was a turning point and then others chimed in: Albert Gore, Gaylord Nelson, Church and I, of course, and Mark Hatfield from the Republican side, this young senator from New York--I can't think of his name right now. His son is the football commissioner. No, the baseball commissioner [Charles Goodell became a senator in 1968, and he is the father of Roger Goodell, the National Football League commissioner.]. I think you then had twenty senators by the spring of 1965, at least twenty senators, who were against the war, and most of whom were speaking out against it. Morse and Gruening were awfully good in carrying that torch during the Johnson Administration until the rest of us decided that--I mean both Church and I laid off during Johnson's first term before he was elected. I was fully convinced, and so was Frank, that once he got reelected in his own right, he'd end the war. I wish he had. I bet he does, too.

U: You talked about those tapes revealing another side of Lyndon Johnson you didn't know existed at the time. In retrospect, knowing what you know now, knowing how the war turned out, how do you think LBJ handled the war?

M: He became a war president, I think. I think it became an obsession with him. That great mind of his was pretty well preoccupied with Vietnam. I think it broke his heart, and I felt very sorry for Johnson in the end.

I went to see him after I announced for president, and I took Sarge [Sargent Shriver] with me.

U: So August of 1972 you went to the Ranch?

M: Yes. I went down to the Ranch, and he met our plane there at the Ranch. He drove me in his golf cart, and Lady Bird drove Sarge in her golf cart, and we went to the Ranch house. I had genuine compassion for him.

He said, "You guys think I am crazy over Vietnam, and I think you are crazy to take the positions you have on that war, so let's not talk about that. Let's talk about other things. How can I help raise . . . .?" That made sense to us.

You know, I remember over lunch that day--Lady Bird got a nice lunch for us, little miniature steaks and she had cut his up into little bite-size [pieces]. He'd stick a fork in there, and he'd put that in his mouth, and before he was quite through chewing it, he'd light another cigarette. And Lady Bird, if there's such a thing as a sad smile, that's what she had. Poor Lyndon, smoking one cigarette after the other; it's going to kill him. But that's what he did all through that meal, take a little bite, before he even finished chewing he had to have a cigarette.

And he gave me a lot of good advice on that campaign I wish I had followed.

U: What did he say to you?

M: He said, "George, when you're campaigning, don't criticize this country so much. This is the greatest country on earth. Tell the people of this country that, that you think it's the greatest country on earth, but that we can do better, and don't come across so critically of American policy." I should have done that. It was good advice.

U: Yes. You talked about his appearance when you saw him; were you startled by that? Can you tell me a little about the man you saw at that time and how different he looked from the man you had known in Washington?

M: He looked so kind of resigned to the fact that he was on the side lines, that he no longer was a great power. But I think he appreciated I came to see him very early in the

campaign, and that I brought Sarge with me, who had worked for him. When I asked him if he would be willing to speak for me in Texas, he said, "Yes." He said, "I am not feeling too good right now, but I'll be okay. We'll get that big field house at--" let's see, would that have been in Dallas or--the huge stadium.

U: Probably in Dallas, yes.

M: And he said, "We'll fill that place, and I'll get up and tell them why you should be president of the United States." Maybe you know all of this?

U: I know a bit about it. Do you wish he had more heartily endorsed your candidacy?

M: Well he was willing to do that.

U: That was his willingness to do it?

M: That was his willingness to do it, but then his illness kind of--he couldn't do it, and he died, very . . . .

U: Two days after Richard Nixon took office, or sorry, after his second inauguration.

M: That's right. No, I think that would've helped a lot. Now he said to me, "George, some of my people want the word to be passed that I'm not for you. You tell them to go to hell." He said, "I am for you. Don't believe--they don't like the fact that a long-time critic of me is the Democratic nominee for president," something like that is the way he [said it]. And he said, "I am for you. Don't let any of my people tell the press otherwise. I can speak for myself, and we'll have that rally, and the national press will cover it. That's what I would like to do." And I think that is what he did want to do.

U: Just wasn't able to do it physically.

M: Yes.

U: Yes.

U: I wanted to digress for just one moment and talk about the young man who was helping to run your efforts in Texas in 1972 named Bill Clinton.

M: Bill Clinton.

U: I wonder, at the time, when you were exposed to that young man, did you see any great political potential?

M: My staff did. They spent more time with him one on one than I did. John Holum, my long time legislative [director], he said, "Senator, you ought to keep your eye on Bill Clinton. He is a talented, shrewd, capable guy," and I said, "Well, I don't doubt that." I didn't really have a lot of time with Bill, but I know this: he worked his head off to carry Texas and so did Hilary; she was down there with him. They weren't married yet, but they worked their hearts out for me.

U: Let me go back to the events at the end of the Johnson administration, just to get your reflections on a couple of things. 1968 was called by Lyndon Johnson "the nightmare year." Of course, we had the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, and we had Tet and the US (inaudible). Do you have recollections of that very turbulent time?

M: I didn't think it was a nightmare. I thought there were positive things happening. Of course, I mourned the loss of Martin Luther King and Bob Kennedy. But I didn't think that was reflecting the mood of the country. It was a couple of nutcases that wanted to go down in history as killing a prominent attractive leader.

It was a year when we turned the tide on Vietnam; it was a year when we demonstrated that politics can make a difference. Bobby Kennedy emerging as a believable presidential candidate. I think even I had some impact as a brief candidate. I only ran for eighteen days just before the convention, but that not only didn't hurt me in

South Dakota when most people thought--you know, I was in the middle of a race for reelection to the Senate; all of the sudden I announced for president. A lot of people thought I was all done. It was the easiest race I ever had because South Dakotans were kind of proud of the way I handled myself at the 1988 [1968?] convention.

I wasn't in opposition to Hubert Humphrey, even though he was for the war. I was kind to Robert Kennedy, even though he announced against us at native South Dakotan[?]. I came out of that with renewed stature, so 1968 has a certain of favorable ring with me. And I thought it was a time when young people really came into their own in politics. They didn't get registered to vote, but still. Their attitudes were right. (Laughter)

U: In light of what historians have revealed about LBJ and your own political experiences, how would you characterize Lyndon Johnson's presidency today?

M: Superb on practically all domestic issues, including civil rights. It was one of the most productive presidencies of our time in what was achieved. One major piece of legislation after another that was passed. And you know the White House always has something to say about the legislative agenda and how successful it is. Johnson was a highly successful president on every issue with the possible exception, well, not the possible, with the exception, of Vietnam. He didn't get us into Vietnam, but he did not know how to get out in a way that he felt was acceptable.

We now know that he hated that war, that he came out against it privately with Senator [Richard] Russell in his first few weeks in office. And it's just too bad he didn't follow his own instincts on the war and put an end to it. He could have done that.

U: Do you have a hunch as to what was at the root of that? We got to this a little before. I'm just wondering, what . . . .? Clearly, he wanted to extricate himself from the war and didn't do so. What was that compelling factor in your view that . . . .

M: Well, I take him at his word. He didn't want to be the first president to lose a war. That's what he said, and I take him at his word on that, that he . . . . I think he was saying exactly what was in his head, that he did not want to say we cannot prevail against these little dinks out in Southeast Asia. And that he's going to hold the line, but then he discovered to hold the line, he had to keep putting in more people all the time. I think every time he did that, it hurt him, I mean hurt him personally. And then he finally realized that we weren't going to prevail out there, and that's when he decided not to run again.

I was very surprised when Johnson decided not to run, because here's a guy that had just scored four years earlier one of the biggest landslides in American history. I think he' have been reelected again if he had run.

(Interruption)

U: Sure, we are almost done.

M: You know, I like Lyndon Johnson, even his kind of rough-spoken humor. Just, I don't know, something about him; I think he'd of been a lot of fun to be around.

U: Tell me, as historians evaluate his presidency, where should they rank him in your view?

M: I think he'd be in the top four or five in the twentieth century. I think he and FDR and [Woodrow] Wilson all belonged in the top three. I don't think there's anybody between [Abraham] Lincoln and Wilson that rivaled Johnson. He was the most productive president on the domestic front of anybody other than Roosevelt in the twentieth century, I think. You know, you can't rate Jack Kennedy because he was cut down so early in his

career. I've always thought that Jack Kennedy would be one of those presidents who achieved more in his second term than he did in the first.

When you win by 120,000 popular votes, you're going to be pretty cautious about what you do in the first term. But I think that Johnson . . . . I can't think of anybody in the twentieth century that outdid him, other than maybe Franklin Roosevelt, possibly Wilson. Wilson had a good domestic and foreign policy.

U: We are about to redo the permanent exhibit at the LBJ Library, and we think it's important to see Lyndon Johnson through the lens of 2011 as opposed to when the exhibit was last updated, which was the early 1990s. But since that time, it seems like the shadow of Vietnam has receded a bit as we've gone into conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan (inaudible). How should Vietnam be balanced against the broader record of Lyndon Johnson in the presidency, in view of what we know now.

M: Well, I would reduce that somewhat from where, I believe, it has been since President Johnson's death. First of all, because he didn't get us into Vietnam; he inherited that. And he had what is understandable, not wanting to be the first president to lose a war. He grew up in the shadow of the Alamo, where people fought until the last man.

I would say that his greatness is largely rooted in domestic policy, but through much of our history that would be fine, you know, that people would rate a president primarily on domestic policy, including some of the really great ones. I think you could say the same thing about Abraham Lincoln, or George Washington, or Thomas Jefferson. They were primarily people oriented around the domestic scene. Maybe not so much Jefferson since he was an international statesman, too, but I'm very high on Lyndon Johnson.

U: You have been enormously generous with your time. I certainly appreciate this. I know that many historians will look at this conversation and derive a great deal from it. Thank you so much.

M: Well, thanks. I hope I made sense to you.

U: You sure did.

M: Lady Bird deserves a big mention--

End of Interview

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of

GEORGE McGOVERN

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, George McGovern, of Mitchell, South Dakota, do hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted with me on February 3, 2011, in St. Augustine, Florida, and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recording may be made available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Donor — Date

Assistant Archivist for Presidential Libraries — 5-05-2011 Date